

“A journey undertaken under peculiar circumstances” The Perilous Escape of William Lyon Mackenzie December 7 to 11, 1837

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Article abstract

When his 1837 Upper Canada Rebellion came to a sudden end with the routing of rebels at Montgomery's Tavern on 7 December, William Lyon Mackenzie was forced to run for his life. With a price on his head, travelling mostly by night—west toward the Niagara Escarpment, south around the end of Lake Ontario and then east across the Niagara peninsula—the rebel leader made his way from a village north of Toronto to safety across the Niagara River in the United States. His journey of more than 150 miles took five days (four nights) on foot, on horseback, and on wagon or sleigh, was aided by more than thirty different individuals and families. At great personal risk, they fed him, nursed him, hid him, advised him, accompanied him. This article maps Mackenzie's exact route, identifies those who helped him, and reflects on the natural hazards and human perils he encountered.

**“A journey undertaken under
peculiar circumstances”**

The Perilous Escape of William Lyon Mackenzie

December 7 to 11, 1837

by Christopher Raible

Prologue

From the day he arrived in Canada in 1820, William Lyon Mackenzie was a man on the move: seeking work, visiting friends and family, meeting customers and suppliers, observing important events, conferring with political associates, speaking at public gatherings, circulating petitions, canvassing voters, talking with constituents, experiencing the province first hand. Three times he travelled across New York State to New York City (the second time, continuing on to Washington; the third, on to England and Scotland). He made annual visits to Kingston; half a dozen or more trips to Montreal; multiple treks to Queenston and/or Dundas. There was nothing clandestine or covert about these journeys. Indeed, he filled the columns of his newspapers with details of the places he visited and the persons he met.¹ The purpose of his touring was to know—and know about—his fellow inhabitants of Upper Canada and for them to know—



William Lyon Mackenzie flees in the night (plaster stage for a bronze statuette) Ralph Mackern Sketch, ca. 1980

and know about—him. By nature and by chosen occupation, Mackenzie was a public personality. By the mid 1830s, he was perhaps the most famous and most familiar figure in the province.

But his 1837 flight—7 December to 11 December—was a journey of a very different nature.

¹ Many travel reports were “letters” from “Peter Russell,” one of several Mackenzie editorial pseudonyms.

Abstract

When his 1837 Upper Canada Rebellion came to a sudden end with the routing of rebels at Montgomery's Tavern on 7 December, William Lyon Mackenzie was forced to run for his life. With a price on his head, travelling mostly by night—west toward the Niagara Escarpment, south around the end of Lake Ontario and then east across the Niagara peninsula—the rebel leader made his way from a village north of Toronto to safety across the Niagara River in the United States. His journey of more than 150 miles took five days (four nights) on foot, on horseback, and on wagon or sleigh, was aided by more than thirty different individuals and families. At great personal risk, they fed him, nursed him, hid him, advised him, accompanied him. This article maps Mackenzie's exact route, identifies those who helped him, and reflects on the natural hazards and human perils he encountered.

Résumé: William Lyon Mackenzie a dû fuir lorsque sa révolte s'était terminée par la défaite des rebelles près de la Taverne Montgomery le 7 décembre 1837. Avec sa tête mise à prix, il a été forcé de se déplacer surtout la nuit – à l'Ouest vers l'escarpement du Niagara, au Sud autour du bout du lac Ontario et à l'Est à travers la péninsule du Niagara. En partant d'un village au Nord de Toronto, le chef rebelle s'est frayé un chemin vers la sécurité de l'autre bord de la rivière du Niagara aux États-Unis. Son parcours de plus de 150 miles dura cinq jours (quatre nuits) à pied, à cheval, dans un wagon ou sur un traîneau et fut aidé par plus de trente individus et familles qui l'ont nourri, secouru, caché, conseillé et accompagné dans sa fuite. Dans cet article nous allons retracer le plan exact du chemin de Mackenzie, identifier ceux qui l'ont aidé et nous pencher sur les aléas de son voyage.

The Story of Mackenzie's Escape, 7 to 11 December 1837²

Thursday afternoon

The Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837 was over: ill-conceived, ill-timed, ill-equipped, ill-led, ill-fated. An armed insurrection, this attempted *coup d'état* dissolved into disaster. For a few final minutes on the afternoon of Thursday, 7 December, at John Montgomery's Tavern on Yonge Street, a remnant rebel force of

² This account of the escape relies heavily, but by no means exclusively, on Mackenzie's two published narratives. The two are similar, but not identical.

The first (hereafter M-1847): *Winter Wanderings Ten Years Since; Being a Narrative of Remarkable Adventures during a Five Days' Journey between the Cities of Toronto and Buffalo, undertaken under peculiar circumstances in the month of December, 1837*; by William L. Mackenzie, formerly Mayor of Toronto, and member of the Legislature of Upper Canada.⁷ First printed in the *New York Daily Tribune*, 29 September 1847; reprinted, [Toronto] *Examiner*, 6 October 1847; reprinted, [Toronto] *Globe*, later the same month. Condensed versions were published: *London Express*, 2 November 1847; *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*, 14 December 1847; *Littell's Living Age*, No. 96, (12 February 1848); Charles Lindsey, *The Life and Times of Wm. Lyon Mackenzie and the Rebellion of 1837-38, Vol. 2* (Toronto: P. R. Randall, 1862), 102-122; *The Italian's Child and Other Tales* (London & Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1870); and very likely elsewhere in the United States and Great Britain in 1847 and 1848. The second (hereafter M-1853): *Winter Wanderings Sixteen Years Since; Being A Narrative of Remarkable Adventures during a Five Days' Journey between Toronto and Buffalo undertaken under peculiar circumstances in December, 1837* was published in *Mackenzie's Toronto Weekly Message*, 8 & 15 September 1853.

recall. At full speed, the rebel leader galloped north on Yonge Street. He looked back, no one was in pursuit, but a rising cloud of smoke and flame told him the tavern had been torched.

In the vicinity of Hogg's Hollow, he encountered Newmarket doctor John McCormack, who boasted another "sixty armed friends" were on their way. Too late! "Tell them to scatter,"⁵ Mackenzie advised. Continuing to ride hard, he continued north to the Golden Lion Tavern, at the southwest corner of Yonge and the concession road (today's Sheppard Avenue). There he met, perhaps by pre-arrangement, fellow rebellion leaders Silas Fletcher and Anthony Van Egmond.⁶ The three quickly agreed that all was lost; each must find his own route to flee the country.

It was not snowing, but it was cold. As they parted, Fletcher gave Mackenzie an overcoat. Accompanied by another rebel, William Reid, the fleeing fugitive galloped west.

Soon after their victory at the tavern, a small band of mounted militia led by Colonel James Fitzgibbon⁷ galloped northward on Yonge Street in pursuit of escaping rebels. Arriving at Sheppard Av-

enue, alerted by someone, they quickly turned westward, riding hard and firing repeatedly, "like fox hunters in pursuit of the brush"⁸ they chased the fleeing pair. As Mackenzie neared the Don River ravine—an area known as "Chuckle Hollow" and the site of Shepard's⁹ Mills—he abruptly abandoned his horse and rushed into the woods. The most swift of his pursuers, a young officer named Maitland, arrived moments too late.

Mackenzie soon reached the mill-works where, at the top of the ravine cliff that rose from the river, he could see a group of men. The mill's operator assured him that they were rebels. The slope was "all but perpendicular," but nevertheless, barely escaping his pursuers, up the fugitive scrambled to join Samuel Lount¹⁰ and many others. They all soon found respite at the nearby farm of fellow insurgent Jacob Shepard.¹¹ And welcomed they were, with "a hearty dinner of new bread and milk."

Thursday evening and night

By then the sun had set and it was rapidly getting darker—and safer for them to move on. There was no snow.

⁵ M-1847 & M-1853.

⁶ Both were named in M-1847 and M-1853.

⁷ James Fitzgibbon, *An Appeal to the People of the Late Province of Upper Canada* (Montreal: Lovell and Gibson, 1847).

⁸ William Copland, *Narrative of the Early Events of the Rebellion in Upper Canada, with Observations on the Political State of America* (London: Holt, 1838), 141.

⁹ In 1837 the name was commonly spelled "Shepard," but "Sheppard" was also used and later became the street name for the concession road.

¹⁰ M-1847 & M-1853.

¹¹ William Reid found his own way to the farm: Edward Kennedy, "Lount's Companion in Adversity" in William Lyon Mackenzie, *Head's Flag of Truce*, pamphlet extra, *Mackenzie's Weekly Message* (7 April 1854).

Despite Mackenzie's urging them to go on together as one body—most were unarmed—they decided to form smaller groups and travel by different routes.

Mackenzie and sixteen others headed west on foot, making for the Humber Bridge at Weston. Learning from a scout sent ahead that the bridge was guarded, they turned north and followed the river bank for three miles to the farm of Isaac Devine. There they found a warm welcome and modest refreshment. "I was so hungry," Mackenzie would recall, "that I yet remember how sweet Devine's supper tasted." Soon the party pushed on, crossing the Humber River on a log footbridge.

Led through the dark by one of their number, Allan Wilcox, the group hiked west and south, heading for the Toronto Township farm of Allan's father, Absalom Wilcox. They arrived at 2 o'clock Friday morning, "utterly exhausted with cold and fatigue."¹² Blankets were quickly hung over the windows to blackout light and avoid neighbours' suspicions. The fugitives were fed, bedded and soon sleeping soundly. But they could not rest for long—sanctuary across the border was many miles away.

Friday morning and afternoon

Next morning, in pairs, the fugitives proceeded on their various ways. But first, the few who were armed buried

their rifles. Mackenzie, however, held on to his pistol. (During a skirmish earlier in the week, a small rebel band had captured a government militia captain, George Duggan. Mackenzie had disarmed him and thereby had obtained a loaded, single-barrel pistol.)¹³

Young Allan Wilcox and Mackenzie hurried west, following "the Concession parallel... to Dundas Street"¹⁴ (today's Burnhamthorpe Road). They saw and talked with a number of people; news of the failed uprising had travelled ahead of them. They met no opposition, but they were warned that "three hundred of the hottest Orangemen and other most violent partisans"¹⁵ were searching for them. By early afternoon they arrived at Comfort Mills, on the east bank of the Credit River south of Streetsville (an area today known as Barberton). William Comfort¹⁶ and his wife had heard nothing of the rebellion, but they happily harboured and fed the escaping pair, eagerly offered money (which was refused), and readily agreed to supply a horse, wagon and driver to speed them on their way.

They set off, with Comfort riding on horseback a little distance behind the wagon. They crossed the river and turned south on the Streetsville Road (today's Mississauga Road). From a "fat stout man of unfriendly politics," who was distributing printed copies of a Proclama-

¹² M-1847.

¹³ Edwin C. Guillet, *The Lives and Times of the Patriots* (Toronto: Thomas Nelson, 1938 – republished: Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), chapter 2; Charles Lindsey, *The Life and Times of William Lyon Mackenzie and the Rebellion of 1837-38* (Toronto: P. R. Randal, 1862), Vol. II, chapter 4.

¹⁴ M-1847 & M-1853.

¹⁵ M-1847.

¹⁶ M-1847 & M-1853.

tion, they learned that the government was offering £1,000 for Mackenzie's capture. The man apparently recognized the rebellion leader, but, despite the large reward, he made no immediate attempt to stop the fugitives.

The Proclamation, issued late the previous day, also offered rewards of £500 for the capture of Silas Fletcher, David Gibson, Jesse Lloyd and Samuel Lount. It promised that all others "who... return to their duty to their Sovereign... obey the Laws and... live henceforward as good and faithful Subjects... will find the Government of their Queen as indulgent as it is just." (This implied amnesty, however, was not honored—hundreds of men were arrested and jailed.)

The full text of the Proclamation, as written by Lieutenant Governor Francis Bond Head, included physical descriptions of each of the men most wanted—for Mackenzie: "He is a short man, wears a sandy-coloured wig, has small twinkling eyes that can look no man in the face—he is about five feet four or five inches in height." Ironically, the omission of this description from the printed copies may well have enabled Mackenzie to travel more safely.¹⁷

Reaching Dundas Street, somewhat west of Credit Village (subsequently, Smithville; today, Erindale), the wagon party turned west.¹⁸ In the daylight of



mid-afternoon, on a busy roadway, they proceeded. Printed Proclamations were prominently posted along the way, yet their journey was uninterrupted.

Mackenzie would later exult that no one stopped him though he was "known by everybody," having "been seven times chosen"¹⁹ by the area's voters as their rep-

¹⁷ For the full text: Colin Read and Ronald J. Stagg, *The Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press with the Champlain Society, 1988), 188-89.

¹⁸ In time, the tale of this journey may have grown in the telling. Ten years later (M-1847), Mackenzie insisted that they had openly travelled through Credit Village itself, contrary to his own description of their route: south on Streetsville road to Dundas Street, then west. That intersection is west of Credit Village.

¹⁹ M-1847 and M-1853.

representative in the Assembly. Within a very few days of his escape, tales began to circulate that he had donned women's clothes and thus escaped unrecognized.²⁰ But Mackenzie later insisted: "such was my confidence in the honesty and friendship of the country folks, Protestant and Catholic, European and American, that I went undisguised." Although known by many of those he passed, he may have been able to move on successfully because they deliberately ignored him.

Several miles further west, at the corner of Trafalgar Road, the wagon passed Post's Tavern. A patron at the doorstep thought he recognized Mackenzie and rushed in to tell his friends. Out came Squire James Appleby, Trafalgar postmaster,²¹ urged by his neighbours to attempt a capture. Mackenzie nodded to him, but the Squire, "less fond of blood money, humanely stept [back] into his house." The escapees rode on, Comfort still following on horseback some distance behind.

It was getting dark. Looking back, they could see that they were being chased by a party of mounted troops. "Our driver became alarmed and I took the reins and pushed onward at full speed over a rough, hard-frozen road without snow."²² As they neared the bridge at Sixteen-Mile Creek,²³ they could see ahead that

the bridge was guarded. Mackenzie and Wilcox jumped from the wagon, asked a labourer to point the way to Esquesing (to put their pursuers off the track), then plunged into "the thickest of the patch of woods" along the creek's deep ravine.

A frantic search for the fugitives began. Additional help was called in. For well over an hour searchers combed the area. Despite men shouting, guns firing, and dogs barking, the darkness and the density of the forest protected the cowering pair. Surrounded as they were, their only safe route was across the creek, swollen by November rains into a rapid, ice-filled river.

We accordingly stripped ourselves naked, and with the surface ice beating against us, and holding our garments over our heads, in a bitter cold December night, buffeted by the current, were soon up to our necks. I hit my foot against a stone, let fall some of my clothes, (which my companion caught) and cried aloud with pain. The cold in that stream caused me the most cruel and intense sensation of pain I ever endured, but we got through, though with a better chance for drowning, and the frozen sand on the bank seemed warm to our feet when we once more trod on it.²⁴

Friday night

The pair pressed on and, after an hour and a half of tramping west through

²⁰ The earliest known published accusation: *Kingston Whig*, 13 December 1837.

²¹ James Appleby, Trafalgar post master. See Trafalgar Township Historical Society, "Early Ward 5 History," *on-line* [accessed 14 January 2015]

²² M-1847 & M-1853.

²³ Creeks were early named according to their distance from Dundas, if on the north shore of Lake Ontario, and from Niagara, if on the south shore. Edwin C. Guillet, *Early Life in Upper Canada* (Toronto: Ontario Publishing, 1933 – republished: Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 665 note 37.

²⁴ M-1847 & M-1853.

woods, across fields and following secondary roads, they once more found a friendly sanctuary: the farm of Absalom Smith²⁵ of Palermo. There, “true and faithful friends” provided food and “dry flannels.” While Mackenzie and young Allan slept for an hour, the Smith sons and daughters kept watch in the cold outside. Suddenly, a search party arrived and entered the house. Tired and nearly frozen, these men eagerly sat down by the kitchen fire. Smith kindly provided refreshments, but encouraged his visitors not to wake his sleeping family. He finally coaxed them out of the house. Fearing the search party’s return, the escaping pair quickly departed.

In the dark, perhaps aided by the light of a waxing moon,²⁶ they hurried on, heading south and crossing Dundas Street at eleven. They dared not risk taking either Dundas Street or the road along the lakefront—those routes would likely be well guarded. They therefore turned on “the middle road,”²⁷ crossed Twelve Mile Creek at midnight, and four hours later, arrived at Wellington Square (part of today’s Burlington). Hearing the bark of a dog and the sound of horses, they ducked into the woods and watched a search party ride by. Continuing on, in the early morning twilight they arrived at the home of “an upright magistrate,”²⁸ Asahel Davis.

A small boy, James Pegg, answered their knock and showed the fugitives upstairs. They had barely settled when they were forced to leave. The house had already been searched twice that night; yet another band of troops arrived. As the search party entered one side of the house, young James had the presence of mind to lead the two escaping men round the opposite side and into the protection of a thicket.

Allan Wilcox was thoroughly chilled and totally exhausted—he, too, had been part of the final skirmish at Montgomery’s Tavern and had been pushing himself ever since. After thirty-six hours, he could continue no further. Unlike Mackenzie, he was not well known; he was helped to find the safe shelter of a nearby neighbour. It was Mackenzie the troops were after.

Saturday morning and afternoon

Alone, the rebel leader proceeded on foot. The day was dawning and it had started to snow—soon he would leave footprints whichever way he went. Fortunately, he was in familiar territory; he knew the country well. The prosperous farm of David Ghent was nearby. Mackenzie refused his host’s offer of hiding in the barn, but chose instead a pearrick²⁹ with pigs rooting all round. There

²⁵ Unnamed in M-1848; mistakenly identified as “Absalom Willcox” in M-1853.

²⁶ The moon was full on 11 December 1837: “Moon Phases and Lunar Calendar for Toronto, Ontario” *on-line* (accessed 20 October 2014).

²⁷ M-1847. Due to changes over the last century and a half—improved roads, railroads, major highways (including the Queen Elizabeth Way), industrial and residential developments—it is impossible to identify with certainty which, if any, of today’s roads were travelled by the escaping pair.

²⁸ M-184729

²⁹ Pea vines densely stacked and thatched, like a haystack.

he would be safe, but he would also be miserable.

For ten or twelve days I had slept, when I could get any sleep, in my clothes, and my limbs had swelled so that I had to leave my boots and wear a pair of slippers; my feet were wet, I was very weary, and the cold and drift annoyed me much. Breakfast I had had none.³⁰

Soon Gore District Sheriff Allan McDonell and a posse arrived. Thoroughly they searched “house, barns, cellars and a garret.”³¹ From the relatively dry retreat of his peas-rick on a high knoll, Mackenzie watched the whole proceeding. When at last the coast was clear, Ghent, pretending to be looking after his pigs, brought tea, bread and butter, and bottles of hot water for bathing the man’s swollen feet. He could safely stay until dark, but what then?

Saturday evening and night

Near dark, stiff and cold—and still wearing slippers—he departed. At brother George Ghent’s house next door, Mackenzie was told that the house had been searched so often “the indwellers dreaded consequences” if they admitted him. However, their nephew, Elijah Barnes, volunteered to pilot Mackenzie along a by-path to the farm of Charles King.³² There he was warmly greeted, fed

supper, and given an hour’s rest.

With King at his side, Mackenzie set out on foot on roads north and west towards Dundas. They spotted a small party of armed men, but were not themselves seen. Several miles of walking took them to the West Flamborough dwelling of another old acquaintance, James Lafferty, who readily agreed to provide a horse. King walked back home while Mackenzie rode on toward Dundas.³³

It was late in the evening when he entered the village he knew so very well—and where he was so very well known. When someone hailed him, he ignored the call and kept moving. Avoiding a guard in front of the hotel, he crossed the creek near his former home and headed up the “mountain road.” His goal was the dwelling of an old Ancaster friend, Lewis Horning.³⁴ Alas, strangers were living in Horning’s house, so Mackenzie rapidly continued along a road going west (today’s Mohawk and Old Mohawk Roads).³⁵

Past midnight, his horse nearly exhausted by climbing and galloping, Mackenzie reached the home of yet another friend, Jacob Rymal, who readily offered both refreshment and a fresh horse—“the best I have.”³⁶ Soon the rebel leader was riding on, following a route “parallel to the Mountain road,”³⁷ that is, somewhat

³⁰ M-1847 & M-1853.

³¹ M-1847 & M-1853.

³² M-1847 & M-1853.

³³ For his probable route, see the “Geography of the Journey” section below

³⁴ M-1847 & M-1853.

³⁵ Modern express highways altered many roads,

³⁶ Lindsey, *Life and Times...*, 112, note.

³⁷ Possibly today’s Mohawk Road or Rymal Road.

south of the edge of the Escarpment. A mile or two along, spotting what he took to be a guard posted further ahead, he dismounted, pulled down part of a rail fence, and led his horse into the “Binbrook and Glanford woods.”

For the first time on his escape, he lost his way. The thick forest, and perhaps cloud cover, obscured the stars and moon. He became disoriented. For several weary hours he led his horse “through the primeval forest... unable to get out or find a path.”³⁸

Sunday morning and afternoon

Near daylight Sunday morning, Mackenzie found a solitary cottage inhabited by “a negro”³⁹ who readily directed the traveller to a fordable point on Twenty Mile Creek. After a mile or so, he reached a small hamlet and entered a house. “Instantly called by name,”⁴⁰ he exited immediately, remounted and rode off, very leisurely at first, but at the next crossroad he turned, galloped on, turned again, and galloped even faster.

After another ten miles, he reached a newly-cleared farm belonging to William McWatters, described by Mackenzie as “a

stout Hibernian farmer, an Orangeman from the North of Ireland, with a wife and five fine curly-headed children.” Mackenzie watered and fed his horse, took breakfast, paid “a dollar” (five shillings) but kept his identity to himself. He then asked his host to show the way to “the Mountain Road, opposite Stony Creek.”⁴¹

They set out through the woods, but soon McWatters came to an abrupt halt and announced that they were going to “Mr. McBride, the magistrate,”⁴² a man the escaping rebel had no interest in visiting. McWatters, further conversation revealed, was convinced that his guest was a horse thief. Horses had been stolen in the area. Mackenzie had arrived unannounced on a December Sunday morning, wearing “bonnet-rouge, sorry slippers... torn homespun... unshaven beard... face badly scratched... [and] riding one of the finest horses in Canada” along one of the “most unfrequented paths” and heading for the frontier. He had refused to say who he was and had overpaid for a simple breakfast. McWatters was thus simply doing his duty and taking the culprit to the nearest authority.

He was stout and burly; I am small and slight made.... To escape in that dense forest

³⁸ M-1847 & M-1853.

³⁹ No other reference to a Black resident of the Hamilton area at that time has been found.

⁴⁰ M-1847 & M-1853.

⁴¹ This whole encounter with McWatters is described in detail in both M-1847 & M-1853. Mackenzie identified this surname as “Waters” in 1847 and as “MacWaters” in 1853, but local records identify it as “McWatters.” See David Brown & Bessie Ptolemy Switzer and Mary (Ptolemy) Laidman, “McWatters” in Binbrook Historical Society, *History & Heritage of Binbrook 1792-1973* (Binbrook, Ontario: Binbrook Historical Society, 1973).

⁴² James McBride, Gore District Justice of the Peace residing in Hamilton: Frederick H. Armstrong, *Upper Canada Justices of the Peace and Association 1788-1841* (Toronto: Ontario Genealogical Society, 2007), 43.

was entirely hopeless.... Blow out his brains... I could have done... my pistol was loaded and sure fire. No matter; I could not do it, come what might... so I held a parley with my detainer.

Deep in the dense woods, they talked—about the hardships of settlement, about roads and schools and taxes, about politics and religion. Mackenzie discovered to his “great surprise and real delight” that McWatters “though averse to the object of the revolt,” thought highly of the reforming journalist who reportedly was leading it. Thus Mackenzie dared to trust him:

“I am an old magistrate,⁴³ at present in a situation of some difficulty. If I can satisfy you as to who I am, and why I am here, would you desire to gain the price of any man’s blood?” He seemed to shudder at the very idea of such a thing. I then administered an oath to him, he holding up his right hand, as we Irish and Scottish Presbyterians usually do.

Mackenzie then revealed his identity—confirmed by his initials on his watch, on his pocket-book, even on his underwear. Having pledged himself, McWatters was true to his word and kept silent long after the rebel leader was safely on his way.

But he was hardly out of danger. Mackenzie rode north, then east, and passed the houses of two men—Kerr and Sidey⁴⁴—who were about to go to church.

From them he confirmed his route, and continued on. Again he crossed Twenty-Mile Creek and re-entered “the mountain path” a little below a point where a military guard was stationed. Pretending that he also was “going to meeting,” Mackenzie moved slowly on, but soon quickened his speed. On the road he passed many persons on their way to “Mr. Eastman’s”⁴⁵ church, St. John’s Presbyterian in Grimsby. Some of these he knew, some not—but many evidently knew him. “Well it was that morning that I had a good name. I could have been arrested fifty times before I reached Smithville.”

But he was by no means safe. Kerr and Sidey alerted the guard who quickly took chase. The fleeing fugitive asked a man, David Clendinning, which house belonged to Thomas Hardy, a Smithville resident Mackenzie knew only by reputation, but felt could be trusted. He rode on into the village at full speed and, to put his “huntsmen on a false track,” turned sharply onto the road to St. Catharines. He then immediately turned into a laneway, quickly stabled his horse, and entered the Hardy house by the back way, much to the startled surprise of Mrs. Hardy—her husband was not yet home from church. From a window the two watched his pursuers ride furiously by, heading for St. Catharines. Utterly exhausted, Mackenzie collapsed on a bed

⁴³ As mayor of Toronto in 1834, Mackenzie served as magistrate of the police court.

⁴⁴ M-1847 & M-1853. Their full names and the locations of their farms have not been identified.

⁴⁵ The Rev. Daniel Ward Eastman. My thanks to Kim Arnold of the Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives and Records Office for identifying this minister and church. See also John S. Moir, *Enduring Witness: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Second Edition* (Hamilton: Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1987), chapter 1; John Banks, “American Presbyterians in the Niagara Peninsula 1800-1840,” *Ontario History*, 57:3 (September 1965).

and slept.

Several hours later, he awoke to find Samuel Chandler,⁴⁶ a wagon-maker totally unknown to him, yet ready and eager to guide him to safety. Mackenzie was given fresh clothes; Mrs. Hardy made sure the two men were both well fed; on their horses they departed. The frontier was another forty miles away.⁴⁷

Sunday night and Monday

It was fully dark. Their first lap, east for fourteen miles, took them to Chandler's home in St. John's. His family was still at church; the two men quickly supped and moved on. They crossed the Welland Canal at Allanburg and called in at the Black Horse Tavern, kept by Ira Stimson, a Mackenzie supporter. Turning south, on they rode to Crowland where, despite the late hour they were welcomed at the home of John Wilson. While their horses were stabled in Wilson's barn, Wilson sent a son to seek assistance from a sympathetic neighbour, William Current, three miles down the road.⁴⁸ He brought his two-horse sleigh, essential to travel in a region of heavy snow. The four men—Current, Wilson, Chandler and Mackenzie—drove off, avoiding the Welland River road as too dangerous. Another dozen miles and they reached the Niagara River. By then it was broad daylight. They hid the sleigh

and walked south to the farm of Samuel McAfee, yet another of Mackenzie's many friends and admirers. He would surely have a boat. An "excellent breakfast" prepared by Mrs. McAfee was, alas, left uneaten. Seen approaching along the river road were Colonel James Kerby and "his troop of mounted dragoons, in their green uniforms, and with their carbines ready." Hastily a boat was hauled across the road and launched. While McAfee's wife and daughters distracted the horsemen, Chandler and McAfee rapidly rowed; Mackenzie, exhausted, collapsed and passed out. Soon they were safe—if to be in a small boat on a rushing river can ever be called a place of safety.

One can only guess how long it took to row a mile or so, cross the boundary into the United States, and land on Grand Island. How, with whom, and by what route they travelled the final few miles to Buffalo is not recorded, but in that city Mackenzie found sanctuary under the "hospitable roof" of one of the city's most prominent citizens, Dr. Cyrenius Chapin.

Reflections on the Escape Story

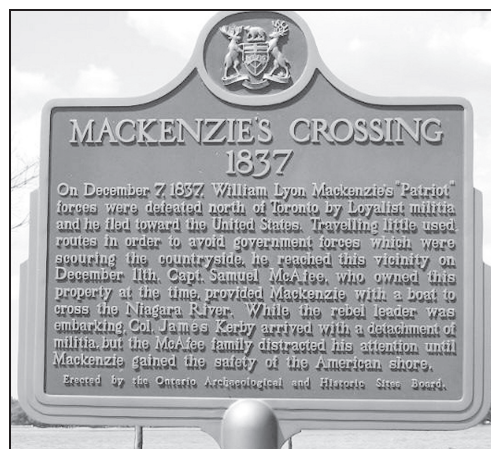
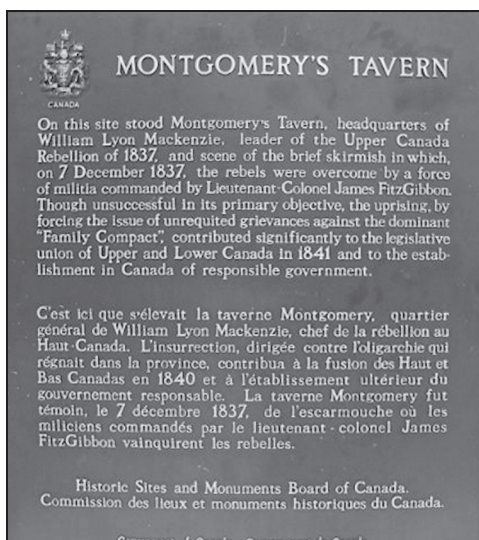
From a tavern in Eglinton village to a farm north of Fort Erie is perhaps sixty miles as a crow flies,⁴⁹ but more like a hundred and sixty miles as a rebel fled. Two publicly funded plaques bookend

⁴⁶ M-1847 & M-1853.

⁴⁷ Thanks to the research of local historian Lois Blake Duff ["Samuel Chandler of St. Johns," *Welland County Historical Society Papers and Records*, Vol. V (1938)], the remaining portion of this narrative considerably enlarges on Mackenzie's own accounts.

⁴⁸ Neither Ira Stimson nor John Wilson is referred to in Mackenzie's accounts.

⁴⁹ That is, a direct line from North Toronto across Lake Ontario to a point on the Upper Canadian shore of the Niagara River opposite the southern tip of Grand Island in New York.



Montgomery's Tavern Plaque and Mackenzie's Crossing 1837 plaque

the Upper Canadian story of Mackenzie's escape: "Montgomery's Tavern" on Yonge Street marks the beginning of the fugitive's journey; "Mackenzie's Crossing" on the Niagara River Parkway marks its Canadian end.⁵⁰ There is, however, no American plaque in Buffalo. As Mackenzie ran from the rout at Montgomery's Tavern, he made a quick decision: he must flee, not hide. In Upper Canada there could be no secure refuge. His only place of safety would be across the frontier in the United States.

*Geography of the journey*⁵¹

But how to get there? The chance of successfully running the gauntlet southward on Yonge Street to the lake-front, there boarding a steamboat for a quick trip across Lake Ontario, was next

to nil. To risk a winter crossing in a small craft was unthinkable. The only possible land route was around the head of the lake (today's Golden Horseshoe), a journey beset with irritating, although not insurmountable, obstacles that modern motorists are barely aware of.

Consider the physiography. It is a region of clay plains and lighter sandy soils around the rim of the lake. Two of its features are significant: its ravines and the Niagara Escarpment. Mackenzie's route would cross several steep-sided, heavily-wooded ravines, each with a fast-moving shallow stream tumbling off the Oak Ridges moraine or the Escarpment. Each crossing required his scrambling down one side, picking his way across the water on logs or stepping stones—or by wading—then clambering up the other bank.

⁵⁰ Erected by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada and by the Ontario Archaeological and Historic Sites Board. There are also two privately erected plaques along the route—at Jacob Rymal's farm in Ancaster and near the site of Samuel Chandler's house in St. John's.

⁵¹ University of Toronto Professor Thomas F. McIlwraith was especially helpful in the drafting of this section of commentary.

His narratives of the escape referred to several major ravines with streams flowing through them: the Don River at Hogg's Hollow and again at Chuckle Hollow near Shepard's Mills; the Humber River at Woodbridge; the Credit River at Comfort's Mills (Streetsville); the Sixteen Mile (Oakville) Creek west of Trafalgar; and the Twelve Mile (Bronte) Creek as he approached Wellington Square. The creeks, in early winter not frozen but ice cold, were rushing rivers. There were few bridges.

Also, few roads were fully cleared and properly maintained. Road allowances did not necessarily mean actual roads. Surveys made at different times, with different orientations, produced roads not always meeting at town boundaries. The result was a crazy quilt pattern with few corridor routes. Indeed, the lack of government expenditure on cleared roads and reliable bridges was a major political grievance, one of the causes of the Rebellion. Between West Flamborough, where he obtained a horse, and Ancaster (today both part of Hamilton), Mackenzie had to cross the Niagara Escarpment three times, all under cover of darkness. This limestone ridge, with its deep clefts and many small waterfalls, was a serious obstacle to man and horse alike. At one point in the vicinity of Brant Street, he and his horse climbed a 150-foot vertical, probably following the sinuous course of Snake Road. A few miles onward, he descended into Dundas village, probably by way of Rock Chapel as the easiest descent. After crossing the wide opening of the Niagara Escarpment (known today as

the Dundas re-entrant) he climbed once again to the top (near today's junction of Highway 403 and the Lincoln Alexander Parkway). These were demanding descents and climbs, but, as he fully recognized, it was a route far preferable to the conspicuous exposure of lake-level roads skirting around Hamilton Bay.

The last portion of his journey took him across the clay plains of the Niagara Peninsula, above the Escarpment. In winter, the route offered horses a firm footing, provided it was dry. The watercourses were smaller and less dramatic. The most substantial of these—Twenty-Mile Creek, the Welland River and the Welland Canal—were fairly easily traversed. The most treacherous moments of the entire escape may have been at the actual border, crossing the turbulent, ice-filled Niagara River as it flowed northward between Bertie Township and Grand Island in New York State.

The route of Mackenzie's journey, with its twenty-first-century population of millions, is difficult to imagine as it actually was that winter of 1837. The transformation of the vast, essentially vacant territory of Upper Canada from forests into farms had been proceeding for nearly half a century, but the process was by no means complete. Actively promoted by the colonial government, agricultural settlement was dramatically changing the landscape. But the land policies and practices—clergy and crown reserve lands withheld from settlement, large tracts awarded to prominent officials and left unoccupied, lots granted to reward military service but not farmed,

speculators buying up unsettled land and holding it for resale later when property values increased—all combined to create areas of scattered, often isolated settler farms. Farms separated from each other by vacant “waste” lands, as many were, made transportation and communication difficult. Indeed, the injustice of government land settlement policies was another of the grievances that prompted rebellion.⁵²

Mackenzie’s knowledge with the area

As Mackenzie journeyed, finding safe roads to travel and safe places to pause was difficult. Fortunately, he knew the territory very well. In the early 1820s he had operated a general store in Dundas and, for many years after, had continued to own a warehouse and operate a wholesale business there. Over the years he had travelled back and forth between Toronto and Dundas many times.⁵³ Nor was he unfamiliar with the eastern Niagara peninsula. He had lived in Queenston (where he launched his first newspaper)

in 1823-24,⁵⁴ and had since continued to maintain friendships and business contacts in the area.

Thus he could find his way because he knew the way. He quickly realized he must avoid some through roads. They would be the best-guarded, most dangerous roads, for the very reason that they offered the quickest, most direct passage. Far better, when possible, for him to travel at night and, if necessary, through the thick bush. In the dark he was less likely to be recognized. Even then, best to stay inland from the shoreline settlements.

He knew, before he reached them, what rivers and creeks he would have to cross. Each stream was a hazard, but also a barrier to any possible pursuers. He knew the hills and ridges he would have to climb. He knew the locations of the more populated, more dangerous towns, and of the villages through which he could pass through more safely. Thus he stayed clear of places where he knew *too many* people—Esquesing, Oakville, St Catharines, Queenston. Unable to avoid Dundas, he crept through it furtively

⁵² For detailed discussion of Upper Canada’s settlement policies, see John Clark, *Land, Power, and Economics on the Frontier of Upper Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001); Lillian F. Gates, *Land Policies in Upper Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968); Thomas F. McIlwraith, *Looking for Old Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), especially chapters 3, 4 and 15; Douglas McCalla, *Planting the Province: The Economic History of Upper Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for the Ontario Historical Studies Series for the Government of Ontario, 1993); Michelle Vosburgh, “Deserving of Favourable Consideration: Crown Land Agents, Surveyors, and Access to Crown Lands in Upper Canada,” in Nancy Christie, editor, *Transatlantic Subjects; Ideas, Institutions and Social Experience in Post Revolutionary British North America* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008); J. David Wood, *Making Ontario: Agricultural Colonization and Landscape Re-Creation Before the Railway* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000).

⁵³ See John Kaler, “William Lyon Mackenzie, The Dundas Connection,” *York Pioneer*, 99 (2003).

⁵⁴ See Chris Raible, *A Colonial Advocate: The Launching of his Newspaper and the Queenston Career of William Lyon Mackenzie* (Creemore, Ontario: Curiosity House, 1999).

and late at night. He chose the high land above the Niagara Escarpment, not the better guarded more level roads along the shore. Indeed, as we have seen, at several points along his way, his familiarity with specific geographical details probably saved his life. And the one time he did lose his way nearly resulted in his arrest and almost certain hanging.

A well-known figure

For nearly two decades in Upper Canada, Mackenzie had been a successful merchant, a prominent journalist/printer, and a popular politician. Commercial contacts and constituent concerns, as well as natural curiosity, had prompted him to travel through much of the province. He knew a great many people personally—especially in the geographical area through which he escaped. Such familiarity had its dangers—many who knew him sharply disagreed with him, despised or even hated him. Yet, as his journey proved, far more people admired him, supported him, trusted him. The success of his escape was, in a way, a test of public opinion.

As he travelled, he was constantly in need of help. Nearly everywhere he went, he found persons he could trust. For the first three days and nights, all those from whom he sought aid—Jacob Shepard, Isaac Devine, Absalom Wilcox, William Comfort—he had known and worked with for many years. Further along his way, other old acquaintances—Absalom Smith, Asahel Davis, David Ghent, Charles King—could be relied upon. Early in his flight, Stillwell Wilson, and

later two other old friends, Jacob Lafferty and Jacob Rymal, each provided a horse to speed his journey.

It is little short of astounding that Mackenzie was able successfully to locate these men. And it is equally amazing that each would unhesitatingly respond. Mackenzie was a man they already knew—indeed, a man they admired, even if not a man with whom they always agreed. The pattern continued through the last portion of his journey, even men he did not personally know knew about him. Thomas Hardy, Samuel Chandler, John Wilson, William Current, Samuel McAfee all interrupted their own lives and even risked their own lives to come to the aid of Mackenzie.

Other than Jacob Rymal, none of these men had before played a significant role in his public life. He sought their help out of desperation, without warning, often at night, but they were none of them total strangers. The only significant exception was William McWatters. When that honest farmer felt it his duty to apprehend a dishonest horse thief, Mackenzie responded by appealing to his better nature, challenging him and charming him. Fortunately, McWatters knew Mackenzie by reputation and could thus be convinced to assist him.

How many of the people the fleeing rebel passed by—or with whom he interacted briefly—actually recognized him can only be guessed. Mackenzie was convinced, and the evidence seems to confirm, that there must have been many. A number of them surely knew he was a wanted man with a large reward offered

for his capture. Nevertheless, whatever their political attitudes or religious convictions, Mackenzie was not a man they condemned. He was neither enemy nor personal threat. Farmers Kerr and Sidey were the only known exceptions—when he asked for directions, they recognized him (and he them) and soon thereafter raised an alarm.

Mackenzie not only knew many people, he knew them by name.

Is the story true?

In the century and three-quarters since the event occurred, much has been written about the 1837 Rebellion in Upper Canada and William Lyon Mackenzie's role in instigating that insurrection. Sharp disagreements have been expressed about the events leading up to the first week in December 1837, and, indeed, about the events of the week of upheaval itself. But there has been no significant challenge to the truthfulness of Mackenzie's own published narratives of the events of his successful escape. They provide most of the details of his "remarkable adventure." These narratives were

undoubtedly biased and self-serving, but there is little evidence to suggest that are not reasonably reliable. Indeed, historians and biographers critical of Mackenzie himself—Dent, Read, LeSueur, Armstrong & Stagg⁵⁵—and those more sympathetic—Lindsey, Kilbourn, Gates, Sewell⁵⁶—as well as those less judgmental—Wallace, Guillet, Read & Stagg⁵⁷—have all accepted with little or no question the essential facts of the escape as Mackenzie himself described them.

Mackenzie published two detailed narratives of his escape.⁵⁸ The first was written ten years afterwards, in 1847 in New York State, when he was hoping to be pardoned (like so many other prominent Rebellion leaders) and allowed to return to Canada. The second, in 1853, when he was back home in Toronto, serving in parliament and editing another newspaper. This second narrative identified by name almost everyone he encountered during his escape,⁵⁹ and also recorded his personally meeting or visiting a number of them after his return home. His clear purpose was to document how broad had been public sympathy for the rebellion.

⁵⁵ Charles Dent, *The Story of the Upper Canada Rebellion*, Vol. 2 (Toronto: C. Blackett Robinson, 1885); D.B. Read, *The Canadian Rebellion of 1837* (Toronto: C. Blackett Robinson, 1896); William Dawson LeSueur, *William Lyon Mackenzie: A Reinterpretation* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1979); and Frederick A. Armstrong & Ronald J. Stagg, "William Lyon Mackenzie," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. VIII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

⁵⁶ Lindsey, *Life and Times...*; William Kilbourn, *The Firebrand: William Lyon Mackenzie and the Rebellion in Upper Canada* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1956); Lillian F. Gates, *After the Rebellion: The Later Years of William Lyon Mackenzie* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1988); and John Sewell, *Mackenzie: A Political Biography of William Lyon Mackenzie* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 2002).

⁵⁷ W. Stewart Wallace, *The Family Compact: A Chronicle of the Rebellion in Upper Canada* (Toronto: Glasgow Brook & Co., 1915); Guillet, *Life and Times...*; and Read and Stagg, *Rebellion..*

⁵⁸ See note 2 above.

⁵⁹ Twelve persons or families were named in 1847, 27 more in 1853; 4 can be identified from other sources, 8 remain unknown.

EN ROUTE POINT	address	DATE	esti- mated arrival time	section mileage from previous point	hours of stopping time	esti- mated departure time	transport means to next point	cumulative mileage (rounded)	cumulative time, in hours
Montgomery's Tavern	west side Yonge St, 1/4 mile north of Eglinton Avenue	Thu Dec 7				3pm	foot	0	
Castlefield farm	southwest corner, Yonge Street and Castlefield Avenue		3:15pm	0.25	0.25	3:30pm	horse	>0	0.25
Golden Lion Tavern	southwest corner, Yonge Street and Sheppard Avenue		3:45pm	3.75	0.25	4pm	horse	4	0.75
Shepard's Mills	on Don River at Sheppard Avenue, west of Yonge Street		4:15pm	1	nil	4:15pm	foot	5	1.25
Jacob Shepard farm	York Twp new survey, Con II W, lot 19		4:30pm	0.25	1	5:30pm	foot	>5	1.5
Isaac Devine farm	Vaughan Twp, Con VII, lot 6 (Woodbridge)		7pm	10	1	8pm	foot	15	4
Absalom Wilcox farm	Toronto Twp, Con I north of Dundas Street, lot 3 (Dixie)	Fri Dec 8	2am	12	6	8am	foot	27	11
Comfort's Mills	Toronto Twp, Con IV WHS, lot 3 (Barberton/Streetsville)		12:30pm	10	1	1:30pm	wagon	37	21.5
Post's Tavern	Trafalgar Twp, sw cor Dundas Street and Trafalgar Road		5pm	9	nil	5pm	wagon	46	26
Sixteen-mile Creek	Trafalgar Twp, lots 22 & 23, Dundas Street		6pm	3	2	8pm	foot	49	27
Absalom Smith farm	Trafalgar Twp, Con I N Dundas St, lot 27, e of Palermo		9:30pm	4	1	10:30pm	foot	53	30.5
Wellington Square	(downtown old Burlington)	Sat Dec 9	4am	14	0.25	4:15am	foot	67	37
Asahel Davis farm	(downtown old Burlington)		5am	1	0.5	5:30am	foot	68	38
David Ghent farm	near Nelson-Flamborough East town line (Waterdown)		6am	1	10.5	4:30pm	foot	69	39
George Ghent farm	near Nelson-Flamborough East town line (Waterdown)		5pm	1	nil	5pm	foot	70	50
Charles King farm	Flamborough East Twp, ca Con I or II, lot 2		5:30pm	1	1	6:30pm	foot	71	50.5
James Lafferty farm	Flamborough West Twp, north of Dundas village		9pm	8	1	10pm	horse	79	54
Dundas village	Flamborough West Twp		11pm	5	nil	11pm	horse	84	56
Lewis Horning house	at Hwy 403-Alexander Expwy interchange (Ancaster)	Sun Dec 10	midnight	4	nil	midnight	horse	88	57
Jacob Rymal farm	Barton Twp, Con VI, lot 20 or 21 (upper Hamilton)		1am	3	1	2am	horse	91	58
solitary cottage	(may be Eramosa Karst Cons Area, Rymal Rd e of Pritchard)		5am	3	nil	5am	foot, w/horse	94	62
house in small hamlet	(may be Binbrook village)		7am	6	nil	7am	horse	100	64
William McWatters farm	Binbrook Twp, Con IV, lots near Caistor Twp line		8am	7	2	10am	horse	107	65
Kerr and Sidey houses	(not identified; presumed northeast of McWatters)		11am	8	nil	11am	horse	115	68
Thomas Hardy house	Smithville: probably at St Catharines and Station Streets		11:30am	3	6.5	6pm	horse	118	68.5
Samuel Chandler house	Thorold Twp, Holland Road in St John's		8:30pm	16	0.5	9pm	horse	134	77.5
Black Horse Tavern	Allanburg		10pm	5	0.5	10:30pm	horse	139	79
Wilson and Curent farms	Crowland Twp: Con V, lot 8 and Con VII, lot 2	Mon Dec 11	1am	6	3	4am	sleigh	145	82
McAfee farm	Bertie Twp, Con VI or VII, at Niagara River		8:30am	16	0.5	9am	boat	161	89.5
BNA-USA Niag R border			10:30am	1	nil	10:30am	boat	162	91.5
Grand Island			11am	0.5	3	2pm	boat or wagon	163	92
Chapin home, BUFFALO			6pm	6				169	99

The two accounts differ considerably in their political commentary, but, apart from the names revealed, they are virtually identical in factual details. As far as can be ascertained, after publication, neither narrative was challenged as to its factual content.

Any historical account, especially any personal historical account, is, of course, inevitably coloured by its author's biases and memory limitations and by the author's purpose in writing it. Mackenzie's accounts are no exception. They reveal minor errors and confusions, but as nearly as can be ascertained, they are essentially correct. Virtually all the places referred to by Mackenzie have been geographically located. The identities of nearly all the persons he encountered—those who aided him and those who pursued him—have been corroborated from other sources.⁶⁰ Specific times and distances of travel have been also been largely confirmed. Indeed, the accounts are a testimony to the astonishing accuracy of his memory.

Granted that local histories and personal reminiscences—including, no doubt, those cited in this paper—are notoriously questionable as to their factual details. Nonetheless they provide useful, often essential, information unavailable elsewhere. Any and all records of events must, of course, be questioned, but without contrary evidence, they cannot be

dismissed.

There remains the larger question as to whether Mackenzie is ever to be trusted. Many historians judge Mackenzie as “notorious for twisting the truth to support his point of view.”⁶¹ A full assessment of Mackenzie's basic reliability or integrity is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, as noted, for all the harsh critiques of Mackenzie that have been made over the century and a half since his death, *not one has challenged the basic veracity of his escape accounts.*

Endurance

Mackenzie's flight was an extraordinary feat. From Thursday afternoon to Monday evening is 5 days, 4 nights: a total 99 hours. He was on the move for more than 56 hours, nearly 40 of them in the dark.⁶² He stopped more than 30 times, mostly only brief intervals for food or rest, finding perhaps a total of 12 hours for sleep. He travelled on foot nearly 24 hours (almost 70 miles), on horseback 15 hours (about 65 miles), in a wagon or sleigh another 10 hours (nearly 30 miles). After crossing to Grand Island by boat, he moved on to Buffalo by unknown conveyance. His average speed: 1.7 mph over the whole 99 hours; 3.0 mph while on the move. On foot his average speed was 2.6 mph, on horse 4.3 mph, by wagon 2.5 mph; by sleigh 4.5 mph.

⁶⁰ Of 39 persons or families named by Mackenzie, the identities of only 4 have yet to be verified from other sources: Kerr and Sidey (see note 44) who alerted government guards, Thomas Hardy who sheltered him in Smithfield, and David Clendinning who directed him to Hardy's house.

⁶¹ To quote the helpful anonymous review of an early draft of this paper.

⁶² For each of the four days of the journey, approximately 9 hours daylight and 15 hours darkness: 7 December 1837: sunrise 07:38, sunset 16:41; 10 December: 07:41 and 16:41.

For much of his flight, Mackenzie was accompanied by one or more friends, but he was often perilously alone. His life was constantly in danger. He had always to be on the alert, avoiding contact with strangers, watching for guards ahead, leaving the road to hide from pursuing government troops. Frightened at times as he must have been, he apparently never panicked, at least, not for long.

His feat is made even more remarkable because, for a week before his escape, he had been operating on nervous energy, actively (at times frantically) promoting, organizing, travelling, worrying—constantly on the move, with no regular schedule for rest or sleep, for eating or washing or changing clothes. When full rebellion prematurely erupted, its deficiencies were compounded by confused communications, personal rivalries, individual failures, and plain bad luck. However inept and unfortunate the whole endeavor, Mackenzie's continued physical and mental stamina were, quite literally, incredible.

Good fortune

The weather helped save him. The air was clear. There was no storm or blizzard—it barely snowed at all. It was cold enough for the ground to be hard and passable; frozen ground left no footprints. But it was not so bitterly cold as to freeze the fugitive. No winds whipped him to delay and discourage his movement onward.

The government helped save him. Despite obvious signs of wide public dis-

content, despite intelligence reports of rebel military training, despite the eruption of rebellion in the lower province, despite warnings and rumors, Governor Sir Francis Bond Head did little to prevent the insurgency. Indeed, Head sent what professional British troops he had to Lower Canada to help put down the uprising there. Toronto was unguarded and unprepared. Further, once the authorities knew that rebels were in arms, they dithered and delayed. Even though the failure of the rebellion was largely due to rebel mistakes and misjudgments, lack of planning and limited arms, confused communications and leadership errors, the immediate government response was grossly inadequate.

Once the rebels were routed at Montgomery's Tavern, government troops tried to catch the fleeing insurgents. But the authorities had no advance plans or preparations for preventing rebel escapes. They had no regular border patrols—no organized homeland security. The militia, in the decades since the War of 1812, had become weak and disorganized and once mobilized was a less than fully effective force. In time, after Head was replaced by Major General Sir George Arthur, the militia effectively rallied to put down further action. However, in the first few days after the Toronto uprising, no net was effectively drawn; hundreds of rebels and sympathizers made their way safely to the United States. Of the other rebellion leaders for whom large rewards were also offered—Charles Duncombe,⁶³ Si-

⁶³ A second proclamation offered a £500 reward for Duncombe, leader of a second uprising; see

las Fletcher, David Gibson, Jesse Lloyd, Samuel Lount—all but Lount successfully escaped.⁶⁴

True, once Government authorities realized that Mackenzie was, in fact, fleeing, they moved quickly to catch him. They offered a large reward, they sent out alarms, they rallied forces, they ordered guards to be posted at major ports, key bridges, and important road crossings. But the rushed response was ineffective. Government flaws were Mackenzie's good fortune.

As the foregoing narrative of his flight testifies, though Mackenzie found his way and felt sure of assistance, success was anything but certain. He might have been stopped; he might have been betrayed; he might have totally lost his way. Troops or search parties came perilously close to catching him. From the first few minutes' fleeing from the tavern to the final few minutes on the Niagara River, pure luck saved him. His flight could easily have failed.

Mackenzie was a profoundly religious man; he believed that men could and indeed should act, but that ultimately God determined the course of events. In his own accounts of his escape, there is no suggestion that on his journey he prayed for special divine assistance. He believed his cause was just, that his path was one of righteousness. He trusted Di-

vine Providence. But he did not believe success was foreordained. All he could do was to press onward, to not give up, to not lose hope. He made it to safety, and he was lucky to do so.

No wonder, a century later, closing a chapter describing the events, Canadian historian Edwin Guillet would comment: "Through ingenuity and dogged perseverance he had saved his life.... For sheer melodrama his adventures are unparalleled in Canadian history."⁶⁵

Epilogue

Most of the more than thirty persons or families who came to Mackenzie's assistance returned to their normal lives. But for a number of them, their lives were changed. They have their own stories:

Thursday

John McCormack was arrested and jailed for many months in Toronto. Many years later, a fellow prisoner remembered him as "a young, handsome, Irish Catholic doctor... recently come from Ireland... of quick temper, attached to his religion and eager for his country's rights; just such a man as would naturally become involved in this patriotic rising."⁶⁶ He was ultimately released and moved to Michigan.

Silas Fletcher, a one of the key rebel

Colin Read, *The Rising in Western in Western Upper Canada: The Duncombe Revolt and After* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

⁶⁴ Although no reward was offered for the capture of Peter Matthews, he also was convicted of high treason and hanged with Lount.

⁶⁵ Guillet, *Early Life...*, 670; repeated, Guillet, *Life and Times...*, 32.

⁶⁶ Charles Durand, *Reminiscences of Charles Durand* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose, 1897), 318-25.

leaders for whom a reward was offered, easily escaped to the United States. He settled successfully and lived many years in Chautauqua County, New York.⁶⁷

Anthony Van Egmond, a sixty-year-old retired Napoleonic general living in Huron County, had been recruited by Mackenzie to be the military leader of the Rebellion. He was captured, imprisoned, hospitalized, and died of pneumonia in early January 1838.⁶⁸

William Reid, a member of the Children of Peace religious society, was captured a week later and jailed for many months. In May he was released and allowed to return home to East Gwillimbury where he died in 1860.⁶⁹

Samuel Lount, second only to Mackenzie as a leader of the rebellion, headed west, hid for a period and in mid-January tried to reach the safety of the United States by crossing Lake Erie. Thanks more to a storm on the lake than to effective government action, he was captured, jailed, found guilty of high treason, and

hanged.⁷⁰

Jacob Shepard, one of four sons of Catherine and Joseph Shepard, (prominent reformer and owner of the Golden Lion Tavern) was arrested, jailed in Toronto, released in May 1838. Two brothers, Michael and Thomas, were sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's Land, but *en route* escaped from Fort Henry in Kingston.⁷¹

Friday

William Comfort hastily abandoned the scene near Sixteen Mile Creek, but two miles from home was arrested and jailed with no chance to see his wife. While he was in prison, a gang of Tory thugs went to his house, frightened his children, and abused his pregnant wife. She died and was buried months before Comfort was finally released. He soon thereafter sold his property to William and Robert Barber—the mill area is today known as Barberton.⁷²

Absalom Smith was jailed for three

⁶⁷ John Barnet, "Silas Fletcher, Instigator of the Upper Canadian Rebellion," *Ontario History*, 41:1 (March, 1949); Ronald J. Stagg, "Jesse Lloyd and Silas Fletcher: Two Well-known Unknowns," in R.B. Fleming, *Boswell's Children: The Art of the Biographer* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1992).

⁶⁸ E. Jayne Cardno, "The Commander in Chief from Huron," *Rebellion Remembered* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1986); Moira Hoogeveen, "A Huron Hero (Anthony Van Egmond)," *York Pioneer*, 82 (1987); G.G. Needler, *Colonel Anthony Van Egmond: From Napoleon and Waterloo to Mackenzie and Rebellion* (Toronto: Burns & MacEachern, 1956); Fred Van Egmond, *The Importance of Liberty* (Seaford, Ontario: Huron Expositor, 1975); W.J. Van Veen, "Anthony Van Egmond" *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. VII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

⁶⁹ "List of persons arrested for Insurrection of Treason, 1837 Rebellion," Toronto Branch Ontario Genealogical Society, arranged and adapted from government listings published in Lindsey, *Life and Times...*, Appendix I (in the list his name is spelled William Read); W. John McIntyre, *The Children of Peace* (Montreal & Kingston: Queen's University Press, 1994), 72, 234;

⁷⁰ Ronald J. Stagg, "Samuel Lount," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. VII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988). For his attempt to escape, see Kennedy, "Lount's Companion..."

⁷¹ Guillet, *Life and Times...* chapters 6 & 12; "List of persons..."; Read & Stagg, *Rebellion...*, 137.

⁷² H.V. Blake, "Part 1—History, Chapter 7—Mills of the Credit," *Credit Valley Conservation Report 1956* (Toronto: Province of Ontario, Department of Planning and Development, 1956); Lindsey, *Life*

months before being released without charge. He returned to his farm and died in Palermo in 1861.⁷³

Saturday

Asahel Davis and his son were arrested and jailed, but soon released. He also aided rebel sympathizers John Rolph and Charles Durand make their way to the United States.⁷⁴

James Pegg was reportedly arrested and jailed for a period in Hamilton, though his name appears on no official lists of prisoners. He grew up, married, and moved to Harwich Township near Blenheim.⁷⁵

Allan Wilcox was able to find his way safely across the border to New York State, but it would be more than four months before he was well again. In 1853, Mackenzie reported that he had visited Allan at the family farm on Dundas Street.⁷⁶

David Ghent was soon arrested, but,

Mackenzie reported, because he “had powerful friends,” the “wealthy farmer” was allowed to give bail and be released. At the time of his death in 1875 he was reputed to be the oldest resident of the township of Nelson.⁷⁷

Charles King was in his early 70s when he walked eight miles with Mackenzie and back home again. He died in 1847, a few months before being identified by name in Mackenzie’s first escape narrative.⁷⁸

Jacob Rymal, soon after helping Mackenzie, also fled to the United States. On Navy Island, Mackenzie named Rymal as a member of his “Provisional Government.” Rymal was formally indicted for treason, but later pardoned. His son Joseph became a prominent provincial politician.⁷⁹

Sunday

William McWatters, good to his word, waited a day before reporting his

and Times..., notes pages 105, 106 and 107; Matthew Wilkinson, “Barberton” Heritage Mississauga, *on-line* (accessed 13 December 2014); unnamed correspondent, *Mackenzie’s Gazette* (25 May 1838).

⁷³ Trafalgar Township Historical Society, “Absalom Smith,” *on-line* (accessed 11 December 2014); David Strang, letters to William Lyon Mackenzie, 23 July 1838 and 15 December 1841, Archives of Ontario, Mackenzie-Lindsey Papers, Correspondence.

⁷⁴ Read & Stagg, *Rebellion*, 312-13; Dorothy Turcotte, *Burlington: Memories of Pioneer Days* (Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1989), 12; Burlington Historical Society Digital Collections. “Asahel Davis” *on-line* (accessed 15 January 2015).

⁷⁵ Donna Cofell-Dickson & Mary Lou Little, “W.W. I Grave Markers,” *Roots, Branches, Twigs* (newsletter of the Kent Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society), 38:3 (2014); “List of persons...”

⁷⁶ M-1853.

⁷⁷ “Samson Howell Rose,” in George Maclean, editor. *A Cyclopaedia of Canadian Biography: Being Chiefly Men of the Time, volume 1* (Toronto: Rose Publishing, 1886). No record of his arrest has been located; his name is not on “List of persons...”

⁷⁸ Burlington Historical Society Digital Collections, “Charles King” *on-line* (accessed 20 February 2015).

⁷⁹ Guillet, *Life and Times...*, 73 and Appendix H; “List of persons...”; *Wikipedia* “Jacob Rymal”—*on line* (accessed 20 October 2014).

encounter with Mackenzie. The farmer was jailed for a time in Hamilton, but released with no charges. In the 1850s he subscribed to *Mackenzie's Weekly Message*. He lived on the farm until 1879 and died in Glanford in 1882.⁸⁰

Samuel Chandler's tale is perhaps the most dramatic. A key figure in the failed "Short Hills" invasion in June 1838, he was arrested, tried, sentenced to be hanged, but instead transported to Van Diemen's Land. From there he escaped and made his way back to North America and with his family settled in Iowa where he died in 1866.⁸¹

William Current and **John Wilson**, after helping the fugitives at the Niagara

River, managed to return to their farms and families in Crowland. Totally disenchanted with Upper Canada, the Current family soon thereafter pulled up stakes and moved to Iowa.⁸²

Samuel McAfee in time returned home from Buffalo, but he too abandoned his farm and pottery business and moved with his family to Illinois.⁸³

William Lyon Mackenzie's own career did not, of course, end with his arrival in Buffalo. In the course of the next year, he was involved in various failed attempts to invade Canada and reignite the flames of rebellion. In the spring of 1838, after being joined by his wife and family, he launched *Mackenzie's Gazette*, a news-

⁸⁰ M-1853; Switzer, "McWatters."

⁸¹ Duff, "Samuel Chandler"; Colin Read, "Samuel Chandler," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. IX (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976); Harvey Reid, *In the Shadow of the Gallows: The Story of Samuel Chandler* (Maquoketa, Iowa: Walter W. Wilcox, 1903).

⁸² "Biography for William Current," Information on the Loyalists, United Empire Loyalists' Association of Canada, *on-line* (accessed 20 February 2015); Marilyn Current, e-mail correspondence with Chris Raible, March 2015.

⁸³ Bryan Kerman, "Samuel McAfee" in "Democrats and Other Traitors," *on-line* (accessed 20 February 2015); Samuel McAfee, letter to William Lyon Mackenzie, 15 August 1847, Archives of Ontario, Mackenzie-Lindsey Papers, Correspondence.

⁸⁴ The only substantive biography of this later period in his life is Gates, *After the Rebellion....*

⁸⁵ The author is especially grateful to University of Toronto Professor Thomas F. McIlwraith not only for his designing the map of Mackenzie's flight, for his re-casting the Table, and, as noted, for his insights incorporated into the section on the geography of the journey, but especially for his wisdom and guidance throughout the process of researching and writing this paper. The anonymous reader of the text, as originally submitted, was most helpful in noting portions of it needing clarification. Among the many other persons who shared their knowledge and advice are: Heather Anderson, Ontario Historical Society; Kim Arnold, Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives and Records Office; John Carter, Canadian historian; Marilyn Current of Shelbyville, Indiana; Elysia DeLaurentis, Wellington County Museum and Archives; Joan Downey, volunteer archivist, Burlington Historical Society; Art French, Glanbrook Historical Society; Doug Grant, editor of "Loyalist Trails"; Jim Green, volunteer, Fieldcote Museum, Ancaster, Ontario; Heather Home, Queen's University Archives; Margaret Houghton, Local History & Archives, Hamilton Public Library; Paul Litt of Toronto; Mary Lou Little of Blenheim, Ontario; Lyn Lunstead, Flamborough Archives; Greg Marlett, Toronto; David Moore, member U.E.L.; Norm Spanos, Dundas area historian; Joanne Starbridge, Kingston Frontenac Public Library; Cynthia Van Ness, Buffalo Historical Society; Ken Weber, Caledon, historian and author; Robert Williamson, Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society; and Sylvia Wray, Flamborough Archives.

paper promoting the cause of Canadian liberty. He published it for three years, including the years spent in the Rochester jail for violating American neutrality laws (he was pardoned by President Van Buren). He became an American citizen, launched and closed two more newspapers, held various jobs in New York City, and eventually found more secure employ-

ment writing for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*. After ten years, as already noted, an amnesty allowed him to return to Canada, where he soon was re-elected to Parliament and again published a newspaper. He resigned his seat in 1858, gave up his paper in 1860, and died in Toronto in 1861.⁸⁴ He continues to be a figure of controversy in Canadian history.⁸⁵

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