

# The Bunker Mentality, All in the Woodsworth Family Tradition



By Richard Sanders

**J**ames Shaver (JS) Woodsworth's racist nativism was typical of his class and heritage. By artfully expressing and justifying the biases of Canadian culture, he captured the support of many progressives. His was a compassionate elitism, deeply rooted in a religious and political faith that preached love and loathing for those who were scorned as inferior.

Although J.S. Woodsworth was a patronising ethnocentric xenophobe, at least he came by it honestly. His mother and father both came from prestigious lineages that were deeply ensconced in the traditions of Anglo-Saxon superiority. The particularly virulent form of cultural narcissism that was passed down to him, promoted class loyalties to conserve the ancient powers of both church and state.

## The Shavers

J.S. Woodsworth's middle name, Shaver, is the anglicised version of his mother's maiden name, Schaeffer, meaning "shepherd." His mother, Josephine Shaver, was descended from Wilhelm Schaeffer, who came from Germany to the US in the 1700s. His son, John Shaver, was a loyal supporter of the British empire and fought with either the King's Royal Regiment of New York,<sup>1</sup> or Butler's Rangers, a loyalist regiment. After the empire loyalists were defeated in the American revolution, John Shaver fled to Upper Canada's Niagara region where he soon received a large grant of land from the colonial government.

John's son William became an affluent farmer with "patriarchal habits and demeanor." Amassing 1,600 acres, he was

"one step below the 'squirearchy' on the social ladder." As an "exemplary" Wesleyan,<sup>2</sup> he welcomed local Methodists to meet in his home and he willed enough land and money to build a new church.<sup>3</sup>

In 1830, William's son Peter, at the tender age of 21, was able to buy a 100-acre farm called Applewood, in what is now downtown Etobicoke, in Toronto's west end. The local historical society says "it is believed Peter was a magistrate for the Home District in 1843."<sup>4</sup> On July 14, 1843, the Governor of Upper Canada appointed Peter Shaver as magistrate for this district,<sup>5</sup> which included all of what is now greater Toronto. Untrained in law, these Justices of the Peace were a law unto themselves. They "set tax rates, appointed county officials, paid salaries, enforced local regulations, held court," and "were, in effect, the local...government."<sup>6</sup>

As Tories, magistrates were loyal servants of the corrupt Family Compact which dominated the social, political and economic life of Upper Canada. As such, they were thoroughly despised by such rabble-rousers as William Lyon Mackenzie, leader of the 1837-1838 uprising. In 1833, he wrote that Magistrates "are frequently proved guilty of the most criminal outrages against the peace of the community" and "are encouraged in their disgraceful career—advanced and promoted to places of greater power and trust."<sup>7</sup>

During the Upper Canada Rebellion, over 400 radicals were arrested and charged with insurrection and/or treason in the Home District alone.<sup>8</sup> In sentencing, Magistrates mixed politics with absurd religious beliefs. Charges against Home-

District rebels said they did not have "the fear of God" in their "heart but...[were] moved and seduced by the instigation of the Devil."<sup>9</sup> This old chestnut was thrown at Louis Riel almost five decades later.<sup>10</sup>

None would dare impute such charges against devout Methodists like the Shavers. Peter and his brother George were trustees of Etobicoke's first Methodist church.<sup>11</sup> Peter also allowed a young Methodist circuit rider to board at his farm. This is how Peter's daughter Josephine met a certain, young "saddle-bag" preacher named James Woodsworth. They married in 1868 and their first child, J.S. Woodsworth, was born at the Applewood estate in 1874.<sup>12</sup> He grew up there, a captive of the Loyalist myths and religious narratives spun by both parents and their families.

## James Woodsworth Sr.

Rev. James Woodsworth Sr. had a powerful influence on the beliefs of his namesake. In fact, James Jr. was groomed from an early age to follow in his father's footsteps and to become a Methodist minister. After leading flocks in various Ontario churches, James Sr. was honoured to become the Superintendent of Methodist Missions for Canada's four western provinces. This made him a shepherd of shepherds, responsible for guiding Methodist efforts to aid the expansion of Britain's empire across the west. Holding this influential position for thirty years (1885-1915) made him "an enormously important figure in the history of the Canadian West."<sup>13</sup>

James Sr.'s autobiography proudly described the Methodist church's role in converting native peoples, who he vilified with epithets like "heathens" and "savage people." His crusade to shepherd missionaries began in what he called the "troubled times" of the Northwest Rebellion. He reported how "very gratifying" it was, "especially to the Methodist Church, that the Indians under her care were united in their loyalty to Queen and country."<sup>14</sup>

In describing the insurrection of 1885, James Sr. turned a blind eye to its real causes. Instead, his simple-minded, racist narrative laid all blame on the supposed propensity of Aboriginals to rely on senseless violence. "Many Indians and half-breeds," said James Sr., "took to the warpath and attacked the whites." Then, invoking sympathy for Canadian troops who faced such "great difficulty" and "much hardship" when crushing the Indian

rebellion, he noted that “[m]any lives were lost in this unfortunate disturbance.” But, he said, on “the other hand, much good resulted.” To J.S. Woodsworth’s father, the loss of lives was “good” because “disaffected half-breeds and rebellious Indians were taught a salutary lesson; they learned something of the strength of British rule, and likewise experienced something of its clemency and righteousness.”<sup>15</sup>

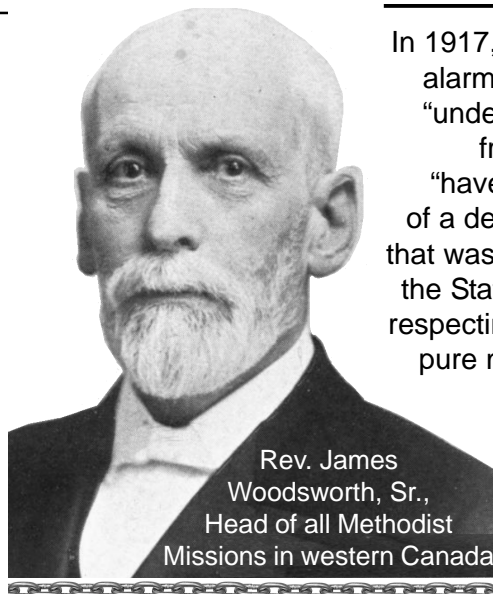
Canada’s ruthless military suppression of the uprising had other “salutary” results, he said. The “penetration of so many soldiers from the East into the heart of this great country served to advertise its resources.” When soldiers settled there, it meant “the North-West became better known and more highly appreciated.”<sup>16</sup>

The 1885 insurrection against Canada’s genocidal repression, land plunder and forced concentration of Indigenous peoples onto reservations, pitted Métis and Cree-Assiniboine First Nations not only against the imperial forces of Canadian troops and mounted police, but also against powerful civil-society institutions. Chief among these was the Methodist Church.

James Sr. also held extremely negative views of nonAnglos, especially Ukrainians. These prejudices were based in part on his extremist religious beliefs. In his 1917 memoirs, James Sr. warned that their “evil effects” were spreading. Ukrainians, he said, were “almost...destitute of any provision for their religious and spiritual training. The evil effects of this state of things are already being felt by other people in the vicinity.”<sup>17</sup>

J.S. Woodsworth was greatly influenced by his father’s righteous bigotry, especially towards aboriginals, Blacks and Ukrainians. This fact is noted in biographer Kenneth McNaught’s classic *A Prophet in Politics*, which commented on “the extent to which the nativism of the father had successfully rubbed off on the son. Although he would later moderate his views, J.S. Woodsworth never completely shed his early awkwardness and insensitivity towards blacks and Indians, and later, eastern Europeans. His stories...reveal a popular attitude at the time, that Indians were sinister, alien, and violent.”<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Allen Mills’ biography notes that “in his early beliefs, James Shaver Woodsworth was very much the son of his father.” Mills, a political scientist at the University of Winnipeg, observed that “Clearly the germ of the social gospel as well as the nativism of J.S. Woodsworth derived from his father.”<sup>19</sup>



Rev. James Woodsworth, Sr., Head of all Methodist Missions in western Canada

This influence between generations seems to have flowed both ways. J.S. Woodsworth was, for example, responsible for the “final edit” of his father’s autobiography in 1917. Mills says that J.S. “claimed to have altered” his father’s book “in ways that he believed improved it.”<sup>20</sup>

A core xenophobic belief shared by both father and son, was that Canada’s role as a beacon of Christian civilisation was threatened by the rapid influx of “undesirables.” These “strangers” could not, or would not, be assimilated fast enough. In discussing the flood of aliens entering Canada’s gates, James Sr. warned that:

“Christian people should watch this great movement, lest peoples of various nationalities, with various and conflicting moral and religious beliefs, and social sentiments, should come more rapidly than true assimilation can take place.”<sup>21</sup>

J.S. Woodsworth’s father saw Canada’s nation-building project as fundamentally religious. Canada, he said, is

“a nation whose foundations are laid in righteousness, whose people are the Lord’s, and whose pre-eminence because of righteous principles and conduct will ensure its prosperity and long-continued existence.”<sup>22</sup>

In sounding the alarm about aliens, James the elder told terrifying tales of “certain classes from Central Europe” who:

“have brought with them the elements of a *destructive, anti-Christian Socialism*, whose presence and operation are *threatening the very foundations of the State*. This is recognised as so great a *peril* that the authorities at Washington are taking steps to limit immigration, hoping to at least reduce the percentage of these *undesirables*. The streams of immigration which during the last century have been so freely flowing into the neighboring Republic have set to-

In 1917, J.S. Woodsworth’s father raised the alarm about the “great...peril” posed by “undesirable” aliens. “[C]ertain classes from Central Europe,” he said, “have brought with them the elements of a destructive, anti-Christian Socialism,” that was “threatening the very foundations of the State.... [W]e hear more than whispers respecting the menace to good government, pure morality, and Christian progress...”

wards our fair land, and we shall soon be confronted with problems similar to those which so far have baffled the wisdom and skill of our sister nation. Already we hear more than whispers respecting *the menace to good government, pure morality, and Christian progress* which exists in what is acknowledged to be the *unassimilated elements*....”<sup>23</sup> (Emphasis added.)

James Sr’s fear of a “destructive, *anti-Christian Socialism*” that was “*threatening the very foundations of the State*,” was also of grave concern to his son, J.S. But where did James Sr. acquire such a virulent animosity towards those who dared present a “*menace to good government*”? To answer this, we need to look back yet another generation to the powerful influence of James Sr’s father.

### Richard Woodsworth

In 1830, J.S. Woodsworth’s paternal grandfather, Richard Wood, changed his name to Woodsworth and emigrated from Yorkshire England to York,<sup>24</sup> the colonial capital of Upper Canada. Although never ordained—like his sons James and Richard W., and James’ son J.S.—Richard became well-known as a leader and lay minister in the Wesleyan Methodist church. An 1899 history of Toronto Methodism said of Richard Woodsworth that: “no man in the George Street church was more highly respected or wielded a greater influence.” And, Richard was listed first in this church’s “noble army of local preachers, class and prayer leaders.”<sup>25</sup>

In the late 1830s, when York’s Methodists split over the struggle between Reformers and Upper Canada’s elitist Family Compact, Richard remained a “staunch loyalist.” He supported the colony’s Governor and backed the British Wesleyan church. Meanwhile, the independent Methodist Episcopal Church joined forces with the Reformers. As McNaught noted, “Richard received a sword to assist in the defence of [Governor] Sir Francis Bond Head.”<sup>26</sup> On this, Mills remarked that “his grandfather’s sword, raised in an-