

**Temperance, Prohibition, And Morality As A Driving Force**

**Student: Eric McAlister**

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**Prof: Dan Heidt**

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In the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century Canada, there was a considerable movement advocating for the prohibition of alcohol and, more broadly, temperance within society. These movements were by no means new or unique to Canadian society, but the success they achieved in advocating their position was unmatched to this point. What was it that allowed this success to occur? Some would point to education initiatives or political action and others could potentially point to the arguments formulated around economic benefits, overall though, the strongest arguments and the driving forces of these movements were moral in nature. Even where economic were made there is research that discredits their content and idealistic moral sentiment can be uncovered in those arguments. Regarding educational initiatives and political action, the main proponents of these programs were organizations that were concerned with and driven by the moral state of society, particularly groups like the Christian church (specifically Protestant denominations) and the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).

The moral focus of temperance is simply unavoidable. Perhaps this can be most effectively seen in F.S. Spence, referred to as “Canada's greatest prohibition leader”<sup>1</sup> who in a 1908 address, quoted at length by B.H. Spence, stated:

The story of the fight against the liquor power is the same in Canada...as it is throughout all Christendom. It is a story of stern effort and steady progress...That movement is not a mere human intervention or fake, created by novelty-seeking cranks. It is the inevitable result of great universal conditions and forces. Wherever you find an evil of any kind, something that curses and hurts humanity, and into contact with that evil you bring men and women of Christian character, unselfish thought, and earnest purpose, there you have the elements of a moral reform...This is the origin of this great

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1 B.H. Spence, “Prohibitory Legislation in Canada,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 109 (Sept., 1923): 230.

reform; the awful curse of intemperance and the God-given desire to be rid of it.<sup>2</sup>

It is hard to describe the links Spence makes between Christianity, moral reform, and a society of temperance as anything but blatant.

Spence was not the only person to make this link. John Rennie, a minister with the Presbyterian Church, is known to have given a sermon in 1895 where he “emphasized how important a role the church had, amidst a population of 'mixed and motley' character...[and] the main danger facing the country was not external aggression but sin itself.”<sup>3</sup> He even went as far to state that “It was necessary for 'the whole army of the living God' to battle against this destructive power so that eventually 'our beloved country is purified and saved.’”<sup>4</sup>

The WCTU's primary motivation for their advocacy can also be seen to be a moral concern for society. Nancy Sheehan observed that “Common to all the research on the WCTU is the conclusion that the underlying philosophy...was the belief that the innocent victims of the traffic in alcoholic beverages were women and children and family life.”<sup>5</sup> By using terms such as 'innocent victims' to describe women and children, the WCTU was clearly attempting to paint an image of alcohol as an evil that preyed on the low and vulnerable of society, an image with very clear cut moral implications.

Moral sentiment does not arise spontaneously though. Advocates for prohibition and temperance still needed to create a need for a moral society by displaying the effects of an immoral society. An interesting case study of this is the story of John Rennie, the pastor mentioned earlier who preached prohibition, and the effects drinking had on his immediate family. John's story includes, among other things, one of his sons, Jack, dealing with constant financial difficulty despite being a

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2 Spence, “Prohibitory Legislation in Canada,” 230.

3 Cheryl Lynn Krasnick Warsh, *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 119.

4 Warsh, *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays*, 119.

5 Nancy M. Sheehan, “The WCTU and Educational Strategies on the Canadian Prairie,” *History of Education Quarterly* 24 (Spring, 1984): 102.

doctor<sup>6</sup> and eventually passing away with his death being attributed to “consumption and exhaustion,”<sup>7</sup> as well as details of another son, Will, who eventually passed away after repeatedly struggling with an addiction to alcohol and multiple attempts to reform himself.<sup>8</sup> Will's tale ends on a note that seemingly emphasizes how far alcohol was seen to bring a man down as one friend attested “he had never met a more 'kindhearted' or 'generous & sensitive' person...”<sup>9</sup> While introducing John Rennie's story it is noted “temperance literature abounded with its own moral tales and object lessons, but usually they were anonymous and glamorized, if not actually apocryphal.”<sup>10</sup> This observation clearly demonstrates the use of allegory to warn of the perceived dangers of intemperance and create a climate that desired moral betterment of society through the means of temperance. The latter half of this observation also shows why Rennie's story is so interesting, it put a name and face to the struggles alcohol created for one family. There is also a chance that because Rennie's family struggles were so authentic they could easily be related to and reinforce preexisting moral sentiment within an individual. The story could even have caused an emotional reaction for others and instilled a strengthened moral resolve as a result.

Appeal through personal testimony was not the only means to create the moral climate necessary for temperance and prohibition to succeed. Critical observations of contemporary society were just as commonly used to further ones view. This can be seen through interactions with the Native community in British Columbia during the late 1800's. At the time, “White settlers and land speculators lobbied the authorities of British Columbia to transfer them lands which Natives occupied...describing the Natives as lazy and immoral members of an inferior, barbaric race,”<sup>11</sup> with consumption of alcohol by the natives being seen as a means of “unleashing deep-root immoral

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6 Warsh, *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays*, 125.

7 Warsh, *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays*, 124.

8 Warsh, *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays*, 133.

9 Warsh, *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays*, 135.

10 Warsh, *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays*, 115-116.

11 Mimi Ajzenstadt, “The Changing Image of the State: The Case of Alcohol Regulation in British Columbia, 1871-1925,” *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 19 (Autumn, 1994): 443.

behaviours of a pagan and primitive race...”<sup>12</sup> While it can be noted that prohibitory measures were not the initial goal of these observations they did end up serving a purpose in that regard as “The belief of the innate immorality of the Natives justified Christian moral intervention...[and] Federal and provincial laws were introduced prohibiting the sale of alcohol to Natives and punishing them for being intoxicated.”<sup>13</sup> It is easy to imagine how these frankly racist views of Natives, their morality, and the way they were directly connected to alcohol consumption would have played well with those who advocated temperance, especially in a predominately white, Christian society.

Crime statistics were also frequently cited by those advocating for reform and offered a seemingly practical example of how temperance was effective. B.H. Spence offers a very detailed report of crime statistics in Toronto covering the years 1914 to 1922, a time period that saw prohibitory legislation enacted with increasing strength.<sup>14</sup> Spence notes that the total number of cases processed by Toronto police did increase over this period but he attributes this to an increase in traffic/motor violations, a larger population, and (almost gleefully) points out that the number of cases for assault, cruelty to animals, disorderliness, drunkenness, child neglect, trespassing, vagrancy, and insanity, all of he claimed are closely related to drink, decreased by over 15,000 during this time.<sup>15</sup> The fact that arrests for drunkenness was down seems to be a logical consequence of alcohol being less readily available because of prohibitory measures (and thus seems a little silly to quote), and while the link between drink and the other charges could be debated (surely a sober person could also be guilty of assault) it is hard to deny the correlation between these actions, many of which are still deemed immoral today, and the availability of drink, a correlation advocates for temperance would surely have used at the ready.

With the need for a more moral society on display and hard links being made between

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12 Ajzenstadt, “The Changing Image of the State: The Case of Alcohol Regulation in British Columbia, 1871-1925,” 443.

13 Ajzenstadt, “The Changing Image of the State: The Case of Alcohol Regulation in British Columbia, 1871-1925,” 444.

14 Spence, “Prohibitory Legislation in Canada,” 261.

15 Spence, “Prohibitory Legislation in Canada,” 261.

intemperance and immorality, it becomes much easier to examine how morality was the driving force of reform and how it played into other arguments that favoured temperance and prohibition. One argument where morality implicitly came into play was economics of the day, both in regards to personal finance and the economy as a whole.

There are many ways to demonstrate how prohibitory legislation would not be of economic benefit. Louis Kribs showed one such way by highlighting statistics from the city of Montreal in 1892 where he observed there were:

...458 licensed hotels and restaurants...the value of the property in these hotels [is estimated] to be \$8,817,075; the estimated depreciation thereof in the event of the passage of a prohibitory law to be \$4,743,392...[and] the number of persons who would be thrown out of employment...be 3,996, and the yearly amount of their wages \$1,073,906.<sup>16</sup>

Other observers noted that when government regulation came into effect in Quebec in 1921 a result was “Profits [were] devoted to education, charity, good roads and for the redemption of provincial debt...There accrues to the province of Quebec five million dollars profit on this system.”<sup>17</sup> Prohibition would not just have affected government revenues, but the revenues of the establishments were it was served. The financial burden of prohibition on businesses can be seen when in 1916, after Saskatchewan passed prohibitory legislation, the province offered “financial assistance during the period of readjustment,”<sup>18</sup> to some hotels. Further to these facts was the influence wielded by businessmen in the brewing industry. One only needs to look at the Molson family as an example. The family owned and operated many businesses which “...extended beyond the liquor trade and included

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16 Louis P. Kribs, *Report of Louis P. Kribs In Connection With The Investigation Held By The Canadian Royal Commission on The Liquor Traffic* (Toronto: The Murray Printing Company, 1894), 12.

17 Cyril D. Boyce, “Prohibition in Canada,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 109 (Sept., 1923): 228.

18 British Medical Journal, “Prohibition in Canada,” *British Medical Journal* 2870 (Jan., 1916): 32.

banking, steamship lines, a railway, and a hotel [and] therefore held an extremely important role in the local economy and its maintenance and growth.”<sup>19</sup>

This however, did not stop those advocating on behalf of temperance and prohibition from attempting to appropriate economic arguments for their own purposes. A sample of economic arguments in favour of prohibition can be seen coming from B.H. Spence who quotes a number of businessmen from Toronto after a 1917 survey that sought their opinions on the effects of the enacted prohibitory legislation within the city.<sup>20</sup> Included among the benefits cited by Spence are “money that was formerly wasted in drink is now used to buy food and comforts for wives and children,”<sup>21</sup> and “women folks have more money to spend since the husband is able to take home a full envelope.”<sup>22</sup> Spence also cites businessmen who claimed higher productivity<sup>23</sup> and we see a similar argument being made by a British Colombian Managing Director of a mine who advocated a position that “drink often made his workers less efficient.”<sup>24</sup>

The selected quotes that were cited by Spence are interesting to note because of their focus on the benefits conveyed to women and children. Remembering the position taken by groups such as the WCTU that women and children were victims of intemperance, one can see an underlying moral appeal within these arguments, an appeal that directly addressed one of the perceived wrongs of intemperance. The argument that workers were more effective does not seem to be disputed, but for the purposes of furthering the cause of temperance, it does not seem to have been a position that was adopted unless it was accompanied by a moral argument. The same B.C. Managing Director who lamented worker inefficiency had to resort to moral principles to support his position as he “argued that

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19 Allen Winn Sneath, *Brewed in Canada: The Untold Story of Canada's 350-Year-Old Brewing Industry* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2001), 93.

20 Spence, “Prohibitory Legislation in Canada,” 246.

21 Spence, “Prohibitory Legislation in Canada,” 247.

22 Spence, “Prohibitory Legislation in Canada,” 247.

23 Spence, “Prohibitory Legislation in Canada,” 247.

24 Ajzenstadt, “The Changing Image of the State: The Case of Alcohol Regulation in British Columbia, 1871-1925,” 446.

the enforcement of [prohibitory] laws...would positively affect the morality of the entire community by preventing 'disgraceful and disorderly occurrences.'"<sup>25</sup> In fact, arguments involving worker efficiency only seem to arise because of moral ideals. This can be easily seen as "Reformers associated with the church...called for state regulation...[interpreting] alcohol consumption as undermining religious commitment to hard work, purity, sobriety, and thrift."<sup>26</sup>

With their motivation established and supporting points stemming from that motivation action, enforcing and advocating both temperance and prohibition were a logical next step. There were two primary channels through which these were achieved, political and educational. First the political channel. Most action from the political spectrum was, perhaps unsurprisingly, legislative with few, if any, notable politicians advocating in favour of prohibitory legislation. Perhaps one reason for this was the lucrative tax revenue that disappear.<sup>27</sup> As well, there was the confusion among who exactly had jurisdiction to enact the legislation as "the British North American Act gave the provinces the power to license taverns and saloons to raise revenue...[but] did not mention which level of government controlled the manufacture, sale, and transportation of liquor."<sup>28</sup> This confusion was noted to have hindered prohibitory efforts and, if B.H. Spence is to be believed, was "a 'ready to order' excuse for inaction,"<sup>29</sup> for politicians who didn't care for the issue. Seeing the confusion that arose from the question of jurisdiction alone it does not take long to see why political means was not the primary reason for success of temperance and prohibition.

Jurisdictional confusion aside, there seemed to be little incentive for politicians to enforce prohibitory measures, a fact clearly evinced by a royal commission in 1892 which "was appointed to study the feasibility of a national prohibition law. Inquiries were held throughout the provinces with

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25 Ajzenstadt, "The Changing Image of the State: The Case of Alcohol Regulation in British Columbia, 1871-1925," 446.

26 Ajzenstadt, "The Changing Image of the State: The Case of Alcohol Regulation in British Columbia, 1871-1925," 446.

27 Sneath, *Brewed in Canada: The Untold Story of Canada's 350-Year-Old Brewing Industry*, 93.

28 Sneath, *Brewed in Canada: The Untold Story of Canada's 350-Year-Old Brewing Industry*, 90.

29 Spence, "Prohibitory Legislation in Canada," 232.



four commissioners reporting adversely to Prohibition...”<sup>30</sup> Those arguing political means was the reason for prohibitions success may point to the Scott Act, an act which would, given a petition with a substantial number of signatures, enforce prohibition on a county or city where a majority vote was in favour.<sup>31</sup> However the act did not achieve total prohibition and came only “under intense pressure from the new Dominion Alliance for the Total Suppression of Liquor Traffic,”<sup>32</sup> an agency with a clearly moral agenda. The act was also seen as something that “allowed provincial leaders to pass off a hot political issue onto local governments, while championing democratic cliches about letting the people decide.”<sup>33</sup> Clearly it can be viewed that political means were not to be the reasons for prohibitions success and any political action taken was directly a result of pressure from groups that ascribed to a higher moral calling for society, and this is without even taking into consideration an 1898 plebiscite from the Laurier Liberal government which, while the majority voted in favour of prohibition, did not gather enough support in the governments eyes to justify enacting legislation.<sup>34</sup>

Educational programs can perhaps be seen as the most effective means by which temperance and prohibition were promoted. These programs were most visible in two ways, school curriculum and Sunday School lessons. Advocating temperance via provincial school curriculum can appear to have been particularly effective given the fact that “By the turn of the century most provinces had some form of temperance teaching in the schools.”<sup>35</sup> However there is evidence to suggest this was not the case. In 1903, an Inspector in the Northwest Territories noted “except in schools where pupils are being prepared for the school leaving examination very little time is devoted to hygiene and temperance...as a rule the teaching is of a desultory nature,”<sup>36</sup> while in Ontario “Teachers complained

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30 Sneath, *Brewed in Canada: The Untold Story of Canada's 350-Year-Old Brewing Industry*, 93.

31 Sneath, *Brewed in Canada: The Untold Story of Canada's 350-Year-Old Brewing Industry*, 90.

32 Sneath, *Brewed in Canada: The Untold Story of Canada's 350-Year-Old Brewing Industry*, 90.

33 Sneath, *Brewed in Canada: The Untold Story of Canada's 350-Year-Old Brewing Industry*, 91.

34 Sneath, *Brewed in Canada: The Untold Story of Canada's 350-Year-Old Brewing Industry*, 94.

35 Sheehan, “The WCTU and Educational Strategies on the Canadian Prairie,” 103.

36 Sheehan, “The WCTU and Educational Strategies on the Canadian Prairie,” 104.

that the subject was difficult to teach without an informative and readable textbook.”<sup>37</sup> Even when a textbook was found for the Ontario teachers it proved to be of little consequence as “the government decided to 'unmandate' the Nattress textbook after a committee...criticized it in 1900.”<sup>38</sup> School curriculum was not going to be the means by which temperance and prohibition became successful.

Perhaps the reason temperance can appear to have achieved success through school curriculum is because of the sheer effort moral agents such as the WCTU put into advocating for reform in curriculum. There was a belief among members of the WCTU that “the supervision and education of children would result in children's proper moral behaviour and be an influence of good for their parents”<sup>39</sup> With this belief serving as their motivation the WCTU undertook many actions to further their cause including purchasing textbooks and donating them to schools,<sup>40</sup> agitating for curriculum change,<sup>41</sup> and importing journals from the United States featuring graded lessons which they would circulate to teachers.<sup>42</sup> This is but a snapshot of WCTU activity and while the changes to curriculum may not be seen as the reason for the success of temperance, changes that were favourable to temperance did come, changes that were primarily driven by a higher moral purpose.

The other educational channel by which temperance was most visible was Sunday Schools. Once again, the WCTU was a key player in this regard, partnering with the Church by supplying Sunday Schools with “lesson plans, materials, and suggestions for topics, special speakers, and a temperance programme.”<sup>43</sup> There were also instances such as the observance of World Temperance

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37 Sharon A. Cook, *Through Sunshine and Shadow: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Evangelicalism, and Reform in Ontario, 1874-1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 119.

38 Cook, *Through Sunshine and Shadow: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Evangelicalism, and Reform in Ontario, 1874-1930*, 122.

39 Nancy M. Sheehan, “National Pressure Groups and Provincial Curriculum Policy: Temperance in Nova Scotia Schools 1880-1930,” *Canadian Journal of Education* 9 (Winter, 1984): 74.

40 Cook, *Through Sunshine and Shadow: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Evangelicalism, and Reform in Ontario, 1874-1930*, 122. 122.

41 Sheehan, “National Pressure Groups and Provincial Curriculum Policy: Temperance in Nova Scotia Schools 1880-1930,” 74.

42 Cook, *Through Sunshine and Shadow: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Evangelicalism, and Reform in Ontario, 1874-1930*, 122.

43 Sheehan, “The WCTU and Educational Strategies on the Canadian Prairie,” 107.

Sunday in Alberta. Nancy Sheehan described the observance of this day as:

...a way of interesting Sunday School goers in [the prohibition] question. In conjunction with the Provincial Prohibition Association, the Alberta WCTU Sunday School department launched a campaign for the special observance of this Sunday, featuring pledge signing, leaflet distribution, and help for the Sunday School lesson on that day. In 1927, 40,000 copies of the temperance leaflet were distributed. The Sunday School superintendent had only praise for the cooperation received from the churches to mark the special observance of World Temperance Sunday.<sup>44</sup>

The observance of World Temperance Sunday is particularly interesting to note. Sunday is regarded in most Christian denominations as a holy day, the Sabbath, and it is not hard to imagine observances such as this being used to implicitly link holiness and temperance, furthering the moral resolve of those who were already advocates for reform and perhaps planting the seeds of this resolve in those who were not yet active in advocating reform. This principle can be extended to Sunday School lessons on temperance as a whole and displays how the Sunday School partnership between Church and the WCTU was a logical one, driven by both groups shared desire for a moral society.

In summary, a desire for a moral society was the foundation upon which temperance and prohibition rested. Economic arguments advocating both positions, especially prohibition, were built upon this foundation and had little merit outside of their moral focus while political and educational action was primarily the result of advocacy and initiatives taken from groups driven by this moral purpose. By linking temperance and morality through religious rhetoric, tales of struggle, perceived lower crime rates, and also by deriding the morality of non-white societies, advocates for temperance and prohibition were able to bring their cause to the forefront of Canadian society and bring success that had never been seen before.

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<sup>44</sup> Sheehan, "The WCTU and Educational Strategies on the Canadian Prairie," 107.

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