WOMEN CREATING CANADA: THE LONG REACH OF TEMPERANCE INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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It is well understood that women temperance advocates in nineteenth-century Canada supported the franchise for women. They did so from the position that women possessed a loftier moral code, as demonstrated in part by their rejection of alcohol and other polluting substances for the body, like tobacco. Women of this view formed the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in 1874 in Canada. Within a few years, it became the largest non-denominational women's organization in the country, counting in its membership many current Canadians' grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Throughout the late nineteenth century, the W.C.T.U. argued that if women were given the vote, they would inject a higher moral tone into politics and indeed, into the entire society.[1]

But this was by no means the only way that temperance women helped to create the Canada we know today. In fact, in many respects, groups like

1 Sharon Anne Cook, *"Through Sunshine and Shadow": The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Evangelicalism, and Reform in Ontario, 1874-1930*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1995, chap 4.

the W.C.T.U. influenced other Canadian norms more profoundly than they did our attitudes to women receiving the franchise, which was accomplished both provincially and federally during and after the First World War. To take the W.C.T.U. as a case in point, in all of their campaigns, the W.C.T.U. worked alongside other women's associations in a loose network to improve Canada. At the core of the W.C.T.U. philosophy was its confidence that women could change the world. The organization is often classified as a "proto-feminist" one, although by placing women's talents and commitment, their particular needs and potential at the heart of its mission, it can safely be identified as (First-Wave) Feminist. Along with their sisters in other organizations, the women of the W.C.T.U. were essential participants in shaping industrialized Canada. Many of their goals and strategies are strikingly modern as they nudged Canada towards a better future.

The W.C.T.U. self-defined as an evangelical women's organization. Long after their heyday, they were termed, "evangelical feminists."[2] Their religiosity put the W.C.T.U. fully in step with Canadian society before the First World War, when the dominant form of religious expression in most Protestant denominations in Canada, the United States and Britain was evangelical.[3] If our own society is more secular, having abandoned religious mission in mainstream culture, we continue to accept the close connection between religious principle and social activism, acknowledging the power of a robust spiritual life for believers. The evidence shows that W.C.T.U. women's resolve was strengthened by their religiosity. In their minute books, they expressed their confidence that they could purify their world. Meetings of the W.C.T.U. always opened and closed with prayer, and often included Bible readings which were connected to the many public projects which the group initiated.

In this era, evangelicalism was characterized by a belief that society would be transformed through worshippers' individual will and the salvation of sinners, supported by a caring community. This transformation would result in a rejection of alcohol by individual drinkers as well as government legislation: "Moral suasion for the individual and Prohibition for the state."[4] Aside from the overt religious focus, in their understanding that morality in public issues was both an individual and collective responsibility, the W.C.T.U. shows its link to modern social policy. Further, when we realize that Canadian norms for how alcohol is legally consumed are much more restrictive than in many other countries, we recognize again the power of the W.C.T.U. in their campaigns to limit public drinking.

The W.C.T.U. had an abiding faith in the power of education. They expended significant resources in both courting teachers to support the temperance cause in the public school system, and in teaching children themselves through temperance-based extra-curricular activities in their own groups, to which they also invited school teachers. They

2 Cook, "Through Sunshine and Shadow," pp. 11-14.

3 William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1989.

4 Archives of Ontario. Annual Report of the Ontario W.C.T.U., 1894.

understood teachers to be amongst their strongest allies, and in 1899, the Ontario W.C.T.U. Conference resolved:

> That we urge [teachers] to endeavour more earnestly to inspire those under their charge with exalted ideals of purity, nobility, and integrity of character... We would emphasize our belief that no person addicted to the use of any of these narcotics should ever enter the schoolroom as a teacher.[5]

The notion that teachers must demonstrate exemplary qualities as models for the children and youths they teach remains a central part of the Education Acts governing education in most Canadian provinces. Teachers often find this intimidating, and yet it is an accepted principle by teachers and exercised through their associations and those which govern them. While we no longer insist that teachers neither smoke nor drink, we do hold teachers to a higher standard of comportment because of the vulnerable populations with which they interact. Ultimately, this demand has contributed to the general respect with which Canadian teachers are held, resulting as well in pay scales and working conditions which are amongst the best in the world.

Beyond the essential role of teachers, the W.C.T.U. believed that children needed convincing school textbooks to most ably receive the temperance case. These they promoted with the provincial Departments of Education, pressuring them to revise curriculum so the temperance message would be imbedded in the formal curriculum. These W.C.T.U. departments of "Scientific Temperance Instruction" succeeded in having school textbooks adopted that put the temperance message to generations of school children.[6] In so doing, they became part of the complex system of pressure groups weighing in on provincial curriculum committees to adopt textbooks and curricula in line with community standards. As illustrative of this process, in 2010 the Ontario Ministry of Education elected to withdraw a Sex Education curricula after parents protested that it did not meet community standards. School textbooks in 2016 still bear the mark of the temperance message in their organization and general approach in teaching about the dangers of drinking and smoking.[7]

The W.C.T.U's unwavering support of the public school system across Canada, rather than sponsoring parallel religiously-informed education through independent schools, thereby enriched the curriculum of the school system and reinforced the moral mission of Canadian teachers. Of our many national characteristics to be celebrated, the strength of our public school system is a key one, with an independent sector that remains amongst the smallest in the developed world. This is grounded in a tradition which we can trace back to decisions of groups like the W.C.T.U. to fight for children in the state-sponsored school system.

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5 Archives of Ontario, Annual Report of the Ontario W.C.T.U., 1899.

6 Cook, pp 119-123.

7 Sharon Anne Cook, *Sex, Lies and Cigarettes: Canadian Women, Smoking, and Visual Culture, 1880-2000*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2012, chap. 4.

Comprised mainly of middle-class women without themselves much formal education, an important part of W.C.T.U. programming was directed to teaching the members about current public affairs. They did this through locally-organized "unions," where the women led study groups on public issues and possible solutions. Sometimes, they all read the same book or pamphlet and discussed it; at other times, a leader summarized challenging sources and presented this to the group, asking leading questions to help the members understand the essence of the source, and to then plan their community-based response. However the local union decided to approach their studies, they did so through their own deliberations, experimenting with different approaches to see what would make the learning process most pleasurable and effective. The unions pioneered strategies that today would be very close to those of many book clubs with similar results. Groups of women studied and worked together to champion reforms over the course of decades, creating lasting networks of engaged women that included neighbours, kin and more distant members of the community.[8] This produced a particular middle-class women's culture in Canada that endures today in many communities.

The W.C.T.U. provided a forum for regular women to become active participants in their own communities long before they had the right to vote, and after as well. The members of this, and associated organizations, chose their issues carefully: immigration, women's rights in the justice system, the penal code, violence against women and children, the care of the aged, male violence and irresponsibility, the survival of the family unit, cultivating a culture of peace rather than war, and the need to provide social services for vulnerable community members, such as new Canadians. The issues they championed were ones that affected their lives, and those of their families and kin in communities across Canada. They did not typically involve themselves in national campaigns or even provincial ones where they were not directly affected. They sought practical solutions to community-based problems that were collaborative and long-lasting. They were deeply representative of those communities' views and thus in response to some crises, could easily have been termed racists and classists by today's standards. And yet, through their care of representing community standards, they provided models for today's community activists who wrestle with problems in our environment and social services. They demonstrated that women with little education but deep concern could train themselves and work collaboratively in partnerships to be activists, thereby changing public policy in the short and long term.

The phenomenon of every-day women banding together to address weaknesses and wrongs in their communities is not as common in the twenty-first century as it was in the late nineteenth. Except for a relatively narrow range of issues touching on such topics as rape culture or violence against women, Canadian women too rarely see their public role anymore as studying with other women, developing strategies to get the attention of those with more power, or mobilizing other women and children to demonstrate their collective power through gen-

8 Cook, *"Through Sunshine and Shadow,"* pp. 133-147.

dered solidarity. The social and legislative results of our foremothers who did take this approach are impressive and worth considering anew in modern Canada as we continue to build a humane and prosperous society founded on diversity and respect.