

“Women Constantly Troubling Us”: The WCTU and Social Reform

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The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was one of the driving forces behind Canada’s temperance movement. It was one of the most powerful instruments of women’s consciousness-raising and one of the first mass movements of North American women.¹ The first Canadian WCTU was founded in Ontario in 1874, and others were soon emerging throughout the country.² Representatives from the Ontario and Quebec provincial unions founded the Dominion WCTU in 1883 in Montreal, and it was the first non-denominational women’s group in Canada to organize at the national level.³ It firmly guarded its independence from male intrusion, eventually allowing men to be members, but never allowing them to vote.⁴ This movement came out of nineteenth-century gender ideologies and religious values rooted in social gospel and evangelism. Though temperance remained its central issue, the WCTU quickly became a springboard for women to launch out of the private sphere and into other public reform movements.

Temperance issues had been present in Canadian society since long before Confederation, as “hard drink was a legacy for those settling the frontier.”⁵ From the first European settlers on the East Coast to the voyageurs who portaged through the rough forests further inland, “booze offered release from their daily struggle with unforgiving conditions.”⁶ In nineteenth-century Canada, “liquor was as common as water and almost as cheap,” as it was used not only for leisure, but also in remedies for a variety of ailments, including those for women and children.⁷ Allen Winn Sneath writes that “from the very beginning, the control of liquor was a bitterly fought contest between French and English,

Catholic and Protestant, and Church and State.”⁸ Concern about alcohol abuse began in the first half of the nineteenth century and slowly mounted throughout the continent, as stories about liquor abounded.⁹ Often, preachers of evangelical Protestant traditions, particularly Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, delivered the message of temperance because they associated sobriety with self-discipline and personal control.¹⁰ The prohibitionists were inspired by this message as a means to resolve the social concern over alcohol, and starting in the latter half of the nineteenth century, their crusade “would stretch over seven decades before finally reaching the dry utopia that the movement dreamed of.”¹¹ The temperance movement went through four phases of renewed organizational strength between the 1850s and the 1910s, each phase roughly twenty years apart.¹² From 1918 to 1920, aided by jingoist wartime sentiments, the temperance movement was able to achieve a brief period of countrywide prohibition.¹³

The WCTU was formed in the 1870s during the temperance movement’s second wave—it changed the nature of temperance in North America. According to Craig Heron, “concerned women had concluded that leaving the initiative to the men had not worked and that they needed to take up the cause on their own.”¹⁴ The temperance movement was radically altered between 1820 and 1920. It had shifted its advocacy from one-on-one level interactions and small-scale local organizations to national and international pressure groups like the WCTU.¹⁵

In Canada, as in Britain and the United States, gender ideologies also shifted during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in part due

to the temperance movement. The gendered doctrine of separate spheres left women confined to the private sphere, while men were active in politics and in the workplace. As some women moved out of the private sphere in the mid-nineteenth century, “the family and women’s role in the home seemed threatened.”¹⁶ In response, social ideologies promoted the idea of a highly idealized domestic and maternal role for women, whereby they became responsible for the moral and religious wellbeing of their family.¹⁷ This ideal was expanded to include the responsibility to convert and save sinners, while also protecting their families from the evils of male intemperance and its resulting violence.¹⁸ The ideology of separate spheres was selectively used by middle-class and working-class women “to negotiate power in the home and to make claims in public based on a respectability rooted in domesticity.”¹⁹ The female prohibitionists who joined this movement combined “a fervent Protestant evangelicalism and a commitment to secular reform” with their determination “to attack all the forces in their society that they believed threatened the home.”²⁰ The shift from faith to social action was exemplified for Canadian women by the American temperance pioneers, who were “also steeped in evangelicalism, [and] who made the case for a separate, non-denominational movement to fight booze.”²¹ Nancy Sheehan notes that “the underlying philosophy which allowed many women to become involved in temperance activities outside of the home was the belief that the innocent victims of the traffic in alcoholic beverages were women and children and family life.”²² Women came into the public sphere with the goal of temperance and prohibition to save children, protect the home, and to fulfill their role as wives and mothers in society.²³

In 1874, inspired from the formation of the national American WCTU in the United States, Letitia Youmans founded the first local WCTU branch in Picton, Ontario.²⁴ In comparison to the American WCTU, Youmans established the evangelical and small-town nature of the Canadian WCTU.²⁵ Youmans also developed a program that was specifically focused on women and children.²⁶ The organization was attractive to “women who harboured many fears: of their economic dependence on morally compromised husbands; of the beguiling, catastrophic effects of alcohol; [and] of innocent children being led astray by their fathers’ poor examples.”²⁷ The WCTU in Canada quickly grew into a Dominion-wide mass movement

among middle-class women. By the turn of the century, around ten thousand women were part of the movement throughout the country’s cities and towns; this number increased to seventeen thousand by 1914. These women were mostly the daughters and wives of doctors, clergymen, merchants, and, to a lesser extent, working-class women.²⁸ Initially, the WCTU focused on the moral and religious issues related to alcohol consumption, but this soon expanded to include the idea that prohibition would solve crime, male violence, family breakdown, political corruption, and immorality in society.²⁹

The WCTU was firmly rooted in Christian values. Pastors in the evangelical Protestant traditions preached the original messages of temperance.³⁰ Women from the Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian traditions were often the driving force in the WCTU. Heron writes that “international and regional comparisons indicate that evangelicalism [...] was the crucial cultural variable that explains the strength of temperance sentiment.”³¹ Compared to evangelicals, women from Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran backgrounds were not as easily pressured to join the WCTU. Adherents to those religions were more liturgical and ritualistic than the evangelicals, and therefore they felt less individual responsibility for moral perfection than evangelical Protestants.³² Sneath writes that “Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist groups were passionate about the social implications of the liquor trade,” while the Roman Catholics did not approve of excessive drinking but did not actively condemn it, and the Anglicans took “the proverbial stance in the middle” of those two views.³³ As a result, evangelical Protestantism provided the major energy for female reform.³⁴ The initiatives of the WCTU groups “were always tied to evangelical goals,” and “for some the evangelical vision was more compelling than the reform goals.”³⁵ In the nineteenth century, the temperance movement distinctly “viewed intemperance as a sin, urging total abstinence through moral suasion and the power of prayer.”³⁶ This approach depended on paying attention to one’s personal character, pledge-signing, missionary efforts targeting ‘drunkards,’ and early temperance education.³⁷ This indicates the evangelical tradition’s influence on the WCTU’s approach to the promotion of temperance in Canadian society.

The WCTU’s strength was often dependent on the influence of the evangelical religion in different

parts of Canada. For example, the narrow base of evangelicalism in Newfoundland limited the WCTU's success in that province.³⁸ In the Prairie provinces before 1900, the WCTU tried to expand its influence, but it was largely unsuccessful.³⁹ Before the turn of the century, the Prairies were sparsely inhabited and attendance was irregular across denominations.⁴⁰ Cheryl Warsh describes the Prairies as having an "agrarian outlook that saw intemperance as a personal rather than a social failing."⁴¹ Similarly, the formal temperance movement in the form of the WCTU was less successful in Québec.⁴² Temperance organizations in Québec advocated for a program of moderation rather than complete prohibition, as the majority population of French-speaking Catholics were wary of state intervention in individual morality.⁴³ These religious differences were exacerbated by the fact that the WCTU often did not translate their promotional materials from English into French.⁴⁴

While the WCTU declared itself non-denominational, this was put to the test in the 1890s with the formation of another integral Dominion-wide women's organization. The National Council of Women of Canada's (NCWC) "public non-denominational stance also lost it the immediate support of the Dominion Woman's Christian Temperance Union."⁴⁵ Members of the WCTU "believed that their Union and its causes were essentially and rigorously Christian, as their name stated."⁴⁶ The NCWC's policy that members could engage in silent prayer at the beginning of each meeting was interpreted by the WCTU as "an unacceptable denial of the need for an explicit religious commitment." Therefore, the WCTU refused to affiliate with the NCWC for the first couple years of their simultaneous existence.⁴⁷

The WCTU emphasized temperance work in Sunday Schools across Canada. Sunday Schools, which catered to a wider range of age groups than they do today, allowed women to hold leadership roles. This made the formal promotion of temperance ideals in Sunday Schools a natural transition.⁴⁸ The WCTU designed courses and materials that emphasized temperance principles, as they related to Christian principles about the human body and morality.⁴⁹ Sheehan describes how in Prairie Sunday Schools, using the program developed in Ontario, a teacher had "lesson plans, materials, and suggestions for topics, special speakers, and a temperance programme."⁵⁰ By 1912, thirty-five Sunday Schools in Alberta and twenty-one in Saskatchewan used

the temperance program promoted by the WCTU. Sheehan describes World Temperance Sunday, which "was also a way of interesting Sunday School goers in [the question of temperance]."⁵¹ This was a "campaign for the special observance of this Sunday, featuring pledge signing, leaflet distribution, and help for the Sunday School lesson on that day."⁵² After the brief period of Prohibition from 1918 to 1920, the WCTU increased their Sunday School activities, which included the appointment of a temperance superintendent in some church districts, as well as a nation-wide educational competition launched in 1928.⁵³ Sheehan suggests that the WCTU was aware that after the repeal of Prohibition in 1920 "it became more important than ever that the youth get proper training in temperance principles" and that "the Sunday School programme was the best vehicle at hand."⁵⁴ This was only one of the many ways that the WCTU interacted with religious groups.

In 1887, three departments of the WCTU were named to enable the organization to engage with religion-specific temperance issues.⁵⁵ The Department of Unfermented Wine used printed materials to promote the use of non-alcoholic wine as a sacramental beverage.⁵⁶ Similarly, the Evangelistic Department created written materials for the use of local unions, which "made suggestions for meetings and prayer services, and outlined a variety of worthy causes, from helping the indigent aged to providing refuge for reforming prostitutes."⁵⁷ This department was the most direct reflection of the organization's religious foundation.⁵⁸ Lastly, the Department of Sabbath Observance attempted to place pressure on local governments to regulate and monitor the observance of the Sabbath, while also providing materials and guidelines to local branches of the organization on the same issue.⁵⁹ By 1900, the WCTU had "26 different departments organized around separate issues but united in the belief that social reform could be achieved through female activism."⁶⁰ Through their Evangelical Departments, the WCTU not only dedicated themselves to the needs of women and children, but also to the elderly, the ill, and the imprisoned; however, prohibition remained the organization's primary goal.⁶¹

The WCTU saw women as the victims of excessive drinking. Though prohibition was their main concern, they also attacked tobacco consumption, child neglect and abuse, the moral dangers working women faced, and prostitution; they eventually

expanded to temperance education, social purity, and female suffrage.⁶² The members of the WCTU were acutely aware of the concerns of the average Canadian woman.⁶³ While they continued to support the prohibition throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it did not take priority over the “other evangelical efforts to eradicate evil.”⁶⁴ One of the first issues addressed by the WCTU was to appeal to the state to eradicate saloons and public houses, which they saw as one of the sources of polluted morality in society.⁶⁵ They thought women to be susceptible to immorality: “the WCTU claimed that mothers were victimized by the immoral atmosphere emanating from saloons located in the developing new cities,” which prevented mothers from fulfilling their responsibility for the morality of their families.⁶⁶ They also “initiated what were referred to as social purity campaigns in the hopes of ridding society of such perceived evils as prostitution and gambling, both of which all too often accompanied excessive drinking.”⁶⁷ Another social purity campaign focused on women’s dress reform, as the departure from simple and modern dress was seen by the reformers as indicative of a loss of female moral superiority and social purpose.⁶⁸

Religion-based ideas about the moral superiority of women, as well as the expanding role of WCTU members in social services, helped forge the demand that women be able to exercise more practical power within the family, and politically within society.⁶⁹ Heron writes: “starting in 1889, the organization regularly called for votes for women to give them the chance to implement their moral vision via the so-called ‘Home Protection Ballot.’”⁷⁰ During the first sixty years of the temperance movement, the government’s “refusal to enact temperance legislation, [...] prompted the WCTU to pursue its suffrage campaign with increased vigour.”⁷¹ In 1891, the WCTU formally endorsed female suffrage at all levels of government.⁷² From 1896 to 1905, the temperance women were the primary suffrage activists.⁷³

Men objected to the multi-pronged approach of the WCTU because it targeted various spheres of male amusement. Many men scorned prohibition as they did with other threats to gender privilege.⁷⁴ In many cases, politicians resisted the state intervention called for by the WCTU. They used the

same ideological argument that allowed women to be part of these social reforms, claiming that “the moral ordering of the family should be left to the mothers and to the church.”⁷⁵ Apparently, a government nickname for the WCTU was “Women Constantly Troubling Us,” akin to “Waggling and Critical Tongues United,” which was used by intemperate veterans who resented and resisted the WCTU’s efforts.⁷⁶ The WCTU promoted a new conception of the relationship between mothers and the state, as they challenged the idea that these types of issues had to be dealt with privately. Mimi Ajzenstadt writes that the WCTU conceived “of mothers as agents of socialization, and considered the state responsible for providing the proper conditions to perform that role.”⁷⁷ Ajzenstadt writes that by “the turn of the century, people affiliated with the church believed state supervision should be extended to ensure the creation of an environment in which women could educate their families according to Christian values.”⁷⁸ This is part of a larger turn toward state dependence, which would play out in the twentieth century.

The WCTU was central to the Canadian temperance campaign, but it was not as effective as it could have been.⁷⁹ The members of the WCTU did not spend time analyzing the effectiveness of their operations or adapting their campaigns to specific communities.⁸⁰ However, the WCTU’s earnestness and moral righteousness gave a new energy to the temperance movement and reinvigorated the sense of mission to purify society.⁸¹ While this was critical in the lead-up to the temporary Prohibition in Canada from 1918 to 1920, it also allowed for women to safely leave the private sphere in the name of religiously inspired social reform.⁸² By the turn of the century, many women had challenged the patriarchal expectations of nineteenth-century society and joined activist organizations with broad social agendas, like the WCTU. This had huge implications for women’s activities in the public sphere; for example, the first woman elected to a provincial legislature, Louise McKinney, had previously been the president of Alberta’s WCTU.⁸³ As a tool for female consciousness-raising and as an empowering mass movement, the WCTU had long-term significance in Canadian history. It was a stepping-stone for Canadian women on the path to gender equality.

Notes

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30. Heron, *Booze*, 372.
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33. Sneath, "Temperance Crusade," 87.
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