

LIBERTY AND COMMUNITY: THE POLITICAL IDEAS OF THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY CANADIAN TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT

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“No language can depict the woe that is poured into the hearts and homes of our people by [the liquor] traffic. It is enough to make one weep tears of blood to think of it.”¹ In the 1870s, evangelical preacher William McKay, intent on removing the influence of alcohol on Canadian society, used these words when addressing a Christian audience. McKay, a preacher and author of spiritual tracts on matters ranging from the proper method of baptism to the evils of the Roman Catholic Church, was born in 1842 and ministered to the Methodist congregation of Woodstock, Ontario. He was one of many Protestant leaders who were active in the movement to ban the production, sale and consumption of alcohol. McKay’s contemporaries used language similar to his own when they characterized the network of producers and distributors of alcohol (collectively known as the liquor traffic) as being “worse than the slave trade” and stated that it brought “present and eternal ruin” upon thousands. These movements, collectively referred to as the temperance movement, demanded that the government ban or at least heavily regulate the alcohol industry. This legislative approach was known as prohibition.² To a modern reader the rhetoric used by prohibitionists might seem inflammatory and extreme, the words of political extremists who operated on the margins of electoral

¹ W.A. McKay, *The Textbook for Campaign: An Appeal to the Christian Public Against the Liquor Traffic* (Canada: c.1875), 2.

² By the 1870s the terms prohibition and temperance were used interchangeably and it was generally understood that temperance organizations were advocating not temperate behaviour but rather state-legislated prohibition. Throughout the paper I will use these two terms interchangeably. For a further discussion of this issue see page 8 of this paper.

politics. However, the viewpoint advocated by these individuals was an accepted mainstream political position widely supported by many in Victorian Canada. Prominent members of both the Liberal and Conservative parties supported the prohibitionist position, and the most successful temperance groups had thousands of members.

The ideas of members of the temperance movement regarding society and the role government should play in shaping it were influential in the political discourse of nineteenth-century Canada. One of the driving ideas behind the movement was the belief that parliament should legislate to discourage the production and distribution of alcohol within Canada. A superficial examination of this core belief seems to indicate that ideas of individual freedom and liberty would be incompatible with the interventionist role temperance groups prescribed for the state. However, further analysis reveals that this is not the case. While they did advocate restricting individual actions to benefit the community, members of the movement also had clearly articulated ideas regarding the role of prohibition legislation in preserving, not limiting, liberty. When discussing an amorphous concept like liberty it is important to note that there is a range of definitions stemming from different philosophical frameworks. This paper will use a basic liberal definition of liberty, which is the ability to choose, act and think for oneself free from arbitrary control or restriction. This can be applied to the spheres of personal behaviour, social interaction and political action. The specific nature of the temperance movement's conception of liberty will be the focus of this paper.

Within the temperance movement, the two core beliefs of community welfare and protection of liberty were combined within a democratic framework that prescribed an active role for citizens. Overall, this paper will argue that supporters of the temperance movement in late nineteenth-century Canada (1870-1898) believed in a democratic state that had an obligation to act on the wishes of the people to protect the well-being of the community, a notion which included a strong emphasis on liberty. This position will be advanced by examining the writings of six prominent temperance advocates as well as the publications of the two leading temperance organizations. The selected writers are Liberal Member of Parliament (MP) George Ross; Conservative

Cabinet Minister George E. Foster; and Methodist Ministers Alexander Sutherland, Robert Wallace, J.G. Fallis and the previously mentioned William A. McKay. The two organizations are the Dominion Alliance for the Total Suppression of the Liquor Traffic (Dominion Alliance) and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Canada (WCTU). These individuals and groups were selected for study based on the representative nature of their writings as well as their prolific output. While the scope of the paper encompasses all of Canada, and the WCTU and Dominion Alliance were national organizations, the six individuals selected were all from Ontario as this was where the Evangelical Protestant base, which supported the movement, was concentrated. As well, the majority of theological colleges for training ministers were located in Ontario. The congregation of theological institutes in Southern Ontario meant that most Protestant Evangelical writers and thinkers were located there, hence the Ontario-centric nature of the sources used.³

Social historians have been among the most active scholars studying the role of alcohol and its use in society. Numerous works examine the role alcohol has historically played in society and the contentious issues surrounding its production, distribution and consumption.⁴ Mariana Valverde's work is especially relevant to this paper, as it specifically engages with conceptions of freedom and its relation to alcohol, in particular the history of alcoholism and the persistence of the notion that self-control allows an individual to be truly free.⁵ Temperance and prohibition have been a popular focus among Canadian social historians. Craig Heron, for example, argues that the temperance movement in the 19th century had a difficult time mobilizing sufficient public opinion to substantially change the legal

³ For more information on Evangelical Protestantism in English Canada see Michael Gauvreau, *Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1991).

⁴ Eric Burns, *The Spirits of America: A Social History of Alcohol* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Griffiths Edwards, *Alcohol: The Ambiguous Molecule* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000); Jack Blocker, "Kaleidoscope in motion: drinking in the United States 1400-2000," in *Alcohol: A Social and Cultural History*, ed. Mack Holt (New York: Berg, 2006).

⁵ Mariana Valverde, *Diseases of the Will: Alcohol and the Dilemmas of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19.

framework surrounding alcohol, and that it was only during the First World War that prohibition was accepted across Canada.⁶ Heron states that one of the major reasons for this early lack of success was the sharp conflict between prohibitionists' views regarding the role of the state and the dominant liberal ideology of Victorian Canada. This conflict between prohibitionist ideas regarding the use of state power and liberal ideology is also discussed by Andrew Holman.⁷ While underlining the middle-class orientation of many members of the movement, Holman argues that temperance advocates recognized the conflict inherent in their cause and sought to reconcile the contradiction by emphasizing the ability of prohibition to create a society of people equal in stature and opportunity. Mariana Valverde also emphasizes the tension present in the temperance movement by placing it within the broader context of moral reform movements within English Canada during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She seeks to explain the contradiction by emphasizing the role of legal restrictions in creating better Canadian citizens. Valverde, Heron and Holman each recognize one of the fundamental ideological issues facing the temperance movement and attempt to provide their own explanation for how the tension was resolved. However, none of these historians engages with the broader ideas regarding individual liberty and how notions of liberty could in fact be compatible with prohibition.

Histories of temperance organizations operating within Canada in the nineteenth century have tended to be broad surveys that focus on the movement's transformation and shift in emphasis from a focus on encouraging temperate behaviour for individuals to an emphasis on an increased state role in banning alcohol production and consumption. Jan Noel argues that this transformation occurred in response to the challenges posed by industrialization and the rise of the middle class.⁸ Noel's work is

⁶ Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003), 146.

⁷ Andrew Holman, *Sense of their Duty: Middle Class Formation in Victorian Ontario Towns* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2000), 134-138.

⁸ Jan Noel, *Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades before Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

limited in its temporal focus, as it only examines the gradual adoption of prohibitionist ideas before Confederation and not the ideological beliefs used to subsequently justify the new role advocated for the state. Brian Ferry expands on Noel's time frame by examining the evolution of these groups throughout the nineteenth century, yet he similarly does not examine the intellectual justification for state restriction of alcohol.⁹ Such an approach ignores the explicitly political nature of temperance during the late nineteenth century and fails to recognize the role of the state in temperance thought.

When specifically examining the temperance movement in the later decades of nineteenth century Canada, scholars have focused predominantly on two aspects of the movement: first, the influence of evangelical thought, and second, the influence of gender and the role of women in the political process. Neil Semple looks exclusively at the evangelical influence on temperance in a section of his book on the history of the Methodist Church in Canada.¹⁰ He discusses how Methodist beliefs required believers to create a Christian society on earth, and how their beliefs were manifested through the prohibition movement. He argues that the Methodist church recognized the problem of restricting individual rights but rationalized it by adopting the belief that no person had a right to injure another. Sharon Ann Cook also examines the influence of both religion and gender, specifically by examining the role of The WCTU in the temperance movement. She argues that the WCTU were strongly influenced by an evangelical vision of society that created and justified a liberated climate in which women could act.¹¹ Cook states that the WCTU saw no clear division between an individual's relationship with God and the commitment to building a social order based on Christian principles. Like Cook, Wendy Mitchinson investigates the evangelical influence on the

⁹ Brian Ferry, "'To the Interests and Conscience of the Great Mass of the Community:'" *The Evolution of Temperance Societies in Nineteenth-Century Central Canada*, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 14 (2003): 137-163.

¹⁰ Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1996), 334-362.

¹¹ Sharon Anne Cook, *Through Sunshine and Shadow: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Evangelicalism, and Reform in Ontario 1874-1930* (Kingston-Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1995).

beliefs and actions of the women of the WCTU.¹² She focuses on how the religious underpinnings of the group created an impetus for political action. She also emphasizes how the WCTU's efforts to ban alcohol helped lead the organization to make female suffrage an integral part of their campaign.

Diane Hallman is one of the few historians to specifically discuss the way members of the temperance movement conceived of liberty and viewed the role of the state. She examines an 1877 debate over prohibition that appeared in *The Canadian Monthly and National Review* as a series of formal exchanges between author Agnes Machar and retired cleric J. Allan. Hallman argues that men and women in the nineteenth century had differing conceptions of justice, with women placing a greater emphasis on the common good over individual rights.¹³ While Hallman's focus is on a debate about prohibition, her article reveals the views on liberty held by British, middle class Victorian women in general, not temperance groups specifically. Women did play an integral part in the temperance movement, however men's ideas also shaped the ideological foundations of the movement.

Scholars studying temperance and prohibition groups have largely approached the issue from a social history perspective, focusing on ideas surrounding religion and gender without examining the beliefs of these groups from the perspective of intellectual or political history. Analyzing the movement from these latter perspectives allows for a more detailed examination of the political ideas that members of the temperance movement held regarding the role of the community and notions of political liberty. The religious and gendered imperatives created by the movement's ideological structure also prescribed specific political action and mandated specific roles for the state in ensuring individual and community welfare. As well, scholars such as Valverde, Heron, Hallman, Semple and Cook seem to view the use of arguments supporting the state acting to promote community welfare as mutually exclusive with arguments

¹² Wendy Mitchinson, "The WCTU: For God, Home and Native Land: A Study in Nineteenth Century Feminism" in *A Not Unreasonable Claim*, ed. Linda Kealey (Toronto: The Woman's Press 1979), 151-168.

¹³ Diane Hallman, "Rights, Justice, Power: Gendered Perspectives on Prohibition in Late Nineteenth-Century Canada," *History of Intellectual Culture* 2 (2002).

supporting individual liberty. In their view, members of Victorian society had to choose one or the other. However, during the late nineteenth century, members of the temperance movement believed that both arguments could be used simultaneously and that state legislation could protect both the community's and the individual's rights. This belief is the subject of the investigation that follows.

In order to understand the conceptions of liberty held by members of the movement during the period under review, it is important to understand the intellectual evolution of the temperance movement over the course of the nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1820s, the temperance movement first emerged as a prominent force both in Canada and the rest of the world. The movement was largely led by Protestant religious leaders who, in the first thirty years, focused primarily on changing individual behaviour through the use of moral suasion. Activists sought to engage personally with other community members and to convince them to adopt more temperate behaviours such as abstaining from alcohol. As a result, the movement became known as the temperance movement.¹⁴ However, by the 1850s, the focus of the movement became increasingly state-centric as it sought to mobilize public opinion to encourage the state to enact restrictive measures on what was termed the 'liquor traffic.'¹⁵ By the early 1870s, the movement had fully developed into one dedicated to repressing the liquor traffic through government legislation. The dominant view adopted by supporters of the movement was that weak individuals needed to be protected from the pervasive and destructive influence of alcohol through the creation of a better moral climate.¹⁶ Despite the changes in tactics from promoting personal temperance to legal prohibition, the movement still adhered to its roots and referred to itself as the temperance movement. By the 1870s, the terms "temperance" and "prohibition" had become synonymous in the political discourse of the nineteenth century and were used interchangeably by members of the movement.¹⁷ Hence in this paper contemporary

¹⁴ Noel, *Canada Dry*, 5.

¹⁵ Heron, *Booze*, 146.

¹⁶ Holman, *Sense of their Duty*, 149-152.

¹⁷ Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1991), 23.

usage of the terms will be continued and no distinction will be made between temperance and prohibition.

The change in tactics saw the decline of traditional temperance organizations such as the Royal Templars of Temperance and the rise of new, secular organizations with a specifically political mandate. While the groups were viewed as secular by Victorian society, as they were not officially affiliated with any church, Evangelical Protestantism still provided the driving force behind these groups. The membership of these groups was extremely diverse. Men involved in temperance organizations might be farmers, small businessmen or upwardly ambitious labourers. However, the movement was largely controlled by professionals, businessmen and Protestant clergy who believed that the support of such individuals was necessary.¹⁸ One of the largest of these groups was the Women's Christian Temperance Union, whose membership largely mirrored the class make-up of other temperance organizations. In rural areas WCTU branches were comprised of farmers' wives whereas in urban areas the membership was largely middle class.¹⁹ By 1874, the prohibition movement had consolidated into a nation-wide umbrella group, originally known as the Dominion Prohibitionary Council and later called the Dominion Alliance for the Total Suppression of the Liquor Traffic. The formation of this group was spearheaded by sixteen prohibitionist members of parliament, and quickly established branches in all the provinces. The group was also fully supported by the Presbyterian and Methodist churches which previously had been unwilling to endorse organizations not directly affiliated with their respective churches.²⁰ Throughout the later decades of the century, most prohibitionist political activity fell under the umbrella of the Dominion Alliance.

In response to these developments, opponents of the temperance movement became increasingly vocal within the political arena.²¹ While many of those defending the liquor traffic

¹⁸ Heron, *Booze*, 148-149.

¹⁹ Cook, *Sunshine and Shadow*, 12.

²⁰ Heron, *Booze*, 154-155.

²¹ Opponents of Prohibition included politician Joseph Howe, Queen's University Chancellor George Grant, humourist Stephen Leacock and journalist E. King Dodds.

emphasized the impracticality and ineffectiveness of temperance legislation, leading critics of the proposed temperance reforms attacked prohibition on the basis of an appeal to personal and political liberty. One of the most influential and prolific critics of prohibition was Dean of Trinity College and president of the Liberal Temperance Union, Goldwin Smith. In his writings he emphasized two major points of contention with the temperance movement. First, he believed that banning alcohol through legislation was a misuse of democratic institutions such as the vote. He argued “[t]he franchise is given to men to secure their own rights and liberties against encroachment, not to enable them to encroach on the rights and liberties of others.”²² In Smith’s view, prohibition legislation was a clear violation of a person’s liberty, and therefore had no place in a democratic state. His second major objection to prohibition concerned the imposition of religious beliefs onto a secular country. Smith stated “This is at bottom largely a struggle for social freedom against the preachers and ecclesiastical organization of a powerful church . . . I cannot help thinking there would be a prejudice against Canada as a domicile if, instead of being a free country, she were to become the domain of clerical despotism and blue laws.”²³ Smith and others feared that temperance groups sought to force their evangelical morality on the Canadian public.

As a response to these critiques, many of the writings cited in this work were created as part of the temperance movement’s engagement in the debate surrounding prohibition. The ideas of these writers and organizations were developed and honed through dialogue with their intellectual opponents. Consequently, the movement’s ideology could at times be very heterogeneous and inconsistent as it evolved in response to opposing ideas. Gradually over the course of the late nineteenth century, temperance advocates, led by the writers and organizations examined in this paper, sought to create a more stable and homogenous body of work which reflected a consistent ideological position.

One of the key elements of the movement’s ideological position was a strong concern for the moral and physical well-

²² Goldwin Smith, *Temperance vs. Prohibition: An Address on the Scott Act* (Toronto: 1885), 16.

²³ Smith, *Temperance vs. Prohibition*, 25.

being of the community. The writers examined in this paper appealed to a popularly held conception of the common good to justify limitations placed on individual behaviour. They also appealed to a sense of duty where each member of society was morally required to contribute in a positive manner towards the betterment of the collective whole. These activists defended placing obligations on each individual by appealing to the moral values of their audience, as shaped by their Protestant faith. The broader view of the Protestant, community-centred ethos is reflected in an article published in the Methodist weekly newspaper *The Christian Guardian*. An article entitled “London Conference Temperance Meeting,” which appeared in the 8 July 1878 edition of the paper, described an Anglo-Protestant view of community obligation:

Mutual care for one another was one of the highest principles of social life. If we would recognize and act on this principle it would be better for all concerned. He said that in society we are joined together by invisible links, each person constituting a link. What a chain it would be if every person were a true link! If each were willing to make sacrifices for others and do their part.²⁴

Such words demonstrate a clear expression of the belief that all members of the community have duties towards others and failing to honour existing implicit obligations means the entire collective suffers. Thus, the community is justified in taking action to improve its own condition and members are expected to engage in such beneficial action. Many authors sought to expand this notion of community to include all of Canadian society. Ruth Elizabeth Spence, wife of secretary of the Dominion Alliance for the Total Suppression of the Liquor Traffic Francis S. Spence, described the requirements society can place upon individuals in her book, *Prohibition in Canada: A Memorial to Francis Stephens Spence*. She wrote: “Society, the community, the state, has an unchallenged right to call its individual members to service for the protection of the lives and liberties and rights of all. It has also the right to demand of those individual citizens the highest

²⁴ “London Temperance Conference,” *The Christian Guardian*, 8 July 1878, 213.

mental and physical efficiency of which they are capable.”²⁵ She described a moral imperative where each person should abstain from activities that impair their own mental or physical functioning while being responsible for engaging in political action aimed at improving the well-being of fellow citizens.

The broad principle outlined by Spence was used as a justification for outlawing the production of alcohol. Those responsible for both the production and distribution of alcohol were identified as the most pressing source of harm to the community. Robert Wallace was one temperance advocate who clearly outlined what he believed the numerous harms of alcohol to be. He was born in Ireland in 1820, and served as a Methodist Minister and temperance advocate, preaching across Ontario and Quebec. In 1885 Wallace wrote:

We may calculate the loss of property to the nation, but who can compute the wretchedness caused to families, the poverty, cruelty, disappointed hopes, broken hearts and withered lives, and diseased constitutions transmitted by drunkards and the vice and crime which [the liquor] traffic occasions.²⁶

William McKay’s statement about the woe caused by drink, which opens this paper, also demonstrates how individuals committed to the temperance movement saw the alcohol industry. They believed the harms caused by alcohol meant that those who sold and produced it were endangering the well-being of the community as a whole and therefore violated a basic moral principle which allowed society to function. Wallace outlined this idea when he wrote, “[e]very man is bound to pursue such a business as will tend to promote the welfare of the community, this the dealer in intoxicants does not do.”²⁷ Thus, the argument suggested that an individual’s pursuit of financial success should be limited by their obligations towards promoting general well-

²⁵ Ruth Elizabeth Spence, *Prohibition in Canada: A Memorial to Francis Stephens Spence* (Toronto: Ontario Branch of the Dominion Alliance, 1919), 504.

²⁶ Robert Wallace, *The Scott Act and Prohibition: The Hope of Canada* (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1885), 9.

²⁷ Robert Wallace, *Lesson or Statistic: Facts and Figures on the Temperance Question* (Toronto: Ontario Branch of the Dominion Alliance by S.R. Briggs, 1883), 13.

being. Many temperance advocates celebrated the contributions of ‘legitimate’ businessmen to the common benefit of the collective. In the view of Reverend J. Fallis, born in Millbrook, Ontario and preaching in Lambton Country, Ontario, it was the cobbler, carpenter and farmer whose works should be celebrated, as without them society would cease to exist.²⁸

Building on the idea that businesses should contribute to the common good, many advocates for prohibition advanced the position that any commercial activities harmful to society should be banned by the government. Those who wanted to partake in the liquor trade needed to prove that their business would be more beneficial than harmful. A Methodist Minister from Yorkville and president of the Ontario Temperance and Prohibitionary League, Alexander Sutherland, supported such a concept. Speaking to this idea, in 1871 he wrote, “I am sure the sale of intoxicating liquor would be prohibited as inconsistent with the welfare of the community...I submit, if any man objects to our proposition, he is bound to show that more good comes from grog-shops than evil.”²⁹ Temperance advocates believed that such a standard would be impossible for any business involved with the production or distribution of alcohol to meet, thus further advancing the prohibitionists’ cause. George Ross, a Liberal Member of Parliament during the 1870s and an outspoken advocate for temperance, placed the notion of community benefit into a broader democratic framework. When speaking in Parliament on 29 April 1874, Ross declared that “[t]he interests of the public were paramount to the interests of the publican, and that whether or not the restriction would be inconvenient, ‘on grounds of public policy,’ the restriction must be made.”³⁰ Ross then went on to argue that the public interests served by banning alcohol were representative of the interests of the majority of Canadians, thus granting legitimacy to his cause. He stated that, “[w]hen the choice is between the best interests of the many and

²⁸ Rev. J. Fallis, *Scott Act Review: For God, Home and Country* (Lambton, ON.: 1888), 1.

²⁹ Alexander Sutherland, *The Canadian Temperance Reciter: a collection of dialogues, addresses, &c., suitable for temperance anniversaries, bands of hope, and social gatherings* (Toronto: A. Miller, 1871), 97.

³⁰ George W. Ross, *Address delivered in the House of Commons of Canada, April 29, 1874, on the motion for adopting the second report of the select committee, on prohibition* (Toronto: 1874), 12.

the selfish interests of the few, I stand with the majority.”³¹ In this speech, Ross specifically identified the assertion of individual rights with selfish interests. He thus described a dichotomy between righteous communal concern and selfish individual concern. The majority and their rights should be the priority of the state. When activities such as the production of alcohol compromised the well-being of the majority, then, he argued, these activities should be banned.

Prohibitionists portrayed their goal as limiting the liquor traffic’s ability to injure the community as a whole. They were very careful to specify that they had no desire to regulate individual behaviour if it only harmed the practitioner. Alexander Sutherland wrote that “[a] man may have a certain kind of “right” to drink what he pleases, especially if it injures no one but himself; but he can have no right to engage in a business which is a grievous injury to large number of his fellow beings.”³² Robert Wallace expressed a very similar idea in his pamphlet *The Scott Act and Prohibition: The Hope of Canada*, published at least five years after Sutherland’s tract. Wallace stated that,

If men choose to injure themselves, we cannot help it; all we can do is try and persuade them of the folly of it and to show them a better way. But if they attempt to murder others, we are bound, in obedience to the Divine Law to prevent them, even by the strong arm of the civil law.³³

Both Sutherland and Wallace drew parallels between prohibition and popularly accepted state limitations. Similar to the judiciary, the temperance movement was concerned about the overall well-being of society, not about limiting the actions of individuals. However, when an individual’s actions harmed another, the state was morally required to act. For these men, writing and speaking in the late nineteenth century, the parallel between criminal acts and the actions of the liquor traffic were obvious. The difficulty came in convincing the general populace.

Temperance rhetoric combined the concern for community welfare demonstrated above with an emphasis on the

³¹ Ross, *Address delivered in the House of Commons*, 16.

³² Alexander Sutherland, *A Plea for Total Abstinence* (Toronto: Christian Total Abstinence Society, c.1875), 2.

³³ Wallace, *The Scott Act and Prohibition: The Hope of Canada*, 29.

necessity of prohibition to preserve the liberty of Canadian citizens. Temperance activists identified three ways that temperance legislation would preserve or enhance individual liberty. Their first concern was to demonstrate that the move to prevent the production of alcohol would not restrict the property rights of law-abiding citizens, but rather would increase the economic prospects of all businesses. One of the most controversial issues surrounding the introduction of prohibition legislation was the question of whether the government should provide compensation to those who manufactured or sold alcohol if such legislation was passed. Defenders of the alcohol industry argued that prohibition would limit the ability of businessmen to use their property to provide for themselves. Since the government would be depriving them of their ability to make a living, they were entitled to receive financial compensation.³⁴

Temperance advocates responded forcefully to the accusations that their proposals limited the legitimate exercise of property rights. In 1885, William Burgess, a Methodist preacher from Toronto, specifically responded to these accusations. He wrote:

There is no law, natural, moral or statutory, declaring the right to sell intoxicants. No man can claim a license as a right and no man can hold a license other than as a privilege or permit. On the other hand, all legitimate trade is the right equally of every citizen. Anyone may become a provision dealer, a dry good merchant etc... A liquor license is sought for and obtained as a favour and never as a right.³⁵

Temperance supporters argued that prohibition would not, therefore, deprive liquor producers or merchants of any basic right. Their activities were already tightly controlled by the state and the privileges granted to them could be revoked on the discretion of the civil authorities. Burgess's writings served to further reinforce the difference temperance activists perceived between legitimate commerce and the activities of the liquor traffic. Former University of New Brunswick professor and Conservative Cabinet Minister George Foster also justified

³⁴ See Goldwin Smith, *Temperance versus prohibition*, 16-25.

³⁵ William Burgess, *The Liquor Traffic and Compensation: A Chapter on the Controversy* (Toronto: Rose, 1885), 7.

denying compensation to businesses as being compatible with nineteenth century notions of property rights. He argued that “[Prohibition] takes no right from the present seller. He has paid for the liberty of selling liquors for one year.”³⁶ Foster clearly established the difference between rights and privileges in his writing; selling alcohol was a privilege that could be rescinded by the state. Both Burgess and Foster reinforced the idea that the alcohol industry was fundamentally different from other forms of economic activity and so should have been subjected to different legal rules.

The leaders of the movement also sought to demonstrate how prohibition not only protected existing property rights, but also enhanced the economic prospects of the entire community. In his pamphlet *The Lesson or Statistics, or, Facts and Figures on the Temperance Question*, Robert Wallace provided a detailed analysis of the economic costs associated with the production of alcohol, including the destruction of grain and other agricultural products. Wallace argued that redirecting these resources into other avenues of commerce would encourage economic activity.³⁷ George Ross advocated a similar position in parliament, emphasizing the negative economic effects of alcohol by stating that its production used up valuable resources that could be employed in other industries, while its use promoted an unproductive workforce.³⁸

The WCTU employed this analysis in their campaign literature as they tried to convince the voting populace that the sale of alcohol prevented the free flow of money essential to economic prosperity in Canada. In *Pamphlet Number 4* they wrote, “[d]rop the stupendous sum of the nation’s liquor bill from the amounts that should be coursing through healthy channels of commercial and industrial operations and you will see what is the chief cause of stagnation in the legitimate and equitable business of the country.”³⁹ This particular leaflet targeted individuals who

³⁶ George E. Foster, *Canada Temperance Manual and Prohibitionists Handbook* (Montreal: 1884), 85.

³⁷ Wallace, *The lesson or Statistics, or, Facts and Figures on the Temperance Question*, 1-8.

³⁸ Ross, *Address Delivered in the House of Commons*, 13.

³⁹ Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, *Hard Times: Campaign Leaflets # 4* (Toronto: WCTU, c.1889), 1.

owned property and were engaged in commerce. Members of the WCTU argued that a business owner's right to make money from the moral and proper use of their property was being hampered by the presence of alcohol. Limiting the liquor traffic would leave moral businessmen free to exercise their rights to the fullest possible extent. Including these ideas in their campaign literature indicates both the importance the WCTU accorded to the idea that alcohol hindered economic success and their belief that such arguments would resonate with the wider population.

After emphasizing its role in the preservation of economic and property rights, advocates claimed that the second avenue through which temperance legislation could promote liberty was by protecting individuals from the pernicious mental and physical effects of alcohol. In the view of temperance advocates, alcohol was not only a poison which corrupted one's body but also a dangerous substance which enslaved men to their passions and caused them to give up their higher mental functions. The loss of such mental abilities necessarily imperilled a person's liberty. In order to prevent such consequences, advocates argued, the state needed to step in to protect its citizens. Alexander Sutherland, for example, ridiculed the notion that temperance or abstinence was not compatible with ideas of individual liberty, and argued that abstaining fostered a truer form of liberty. He wrote:

We ask you to sign the pledge that you may gain your liberty—liberty from the tyranny of a pernicious social custom. What kind of liberty do you want? Liberty to destroy your manhood? to impoverish your family? to waste your energies? to becloud your intellect? to ruin your soul? If that be your boasted "liberty," then I say give me the "slavery" of total abstinence.⁴⁰

Thus abstaining from a particular activity was argued to provide much greater freedom for the individual. Sutherland dispelled the notion that a restriction on personal behaviour was incompatible with ideas of personal liberty.

George Foster outlined the harmful mental effects of alcohol consumption and how it limited the ability of society to propagate positive values. When speaking as a private citizen, and not a representative of the Canadian government or the

⁴⁰ Sutherland, *Plea for Total Abstinence*, 20.

Conservative Party, at a temperance conference hosted in Hamilton, Ontario on 19 June 1880, Foster outlined this idea by asking,

Does the dram shop promote intelligence among the people? If it does, throw your arms around it. Put the majesty of the law around it. Don't let it be harmed. But if the traffic is always the enemy of intelligence, pull it out, tear it down. Where is the consistency in building up an educational system and then putting the protection of law around a giant who will tear it down?⁴¹

Foster believed that society had an interest in promoting the intelligence of each individual so that he or she could function as an active participant in the social and economic life of the country. He portrayed alcohol as a factor that undermined the ability of society to enforce the individual values necessary to achieve these collective ends.

Temperance activists also believed that alcohol should be banned because its consumption affected the most vulnerable members of society. This vulnerable population was identified as people, predominately women and children, who had chosen to abstain yet still suffered from the effects of alcohol being legally available. When speaking in parliament, George Ross stated that he received numerous petitions demanding prohibition legislation, and many of the signatories were women and children. Ross argued that the age and gender of the signatories should not be taken into account when assessing the merit of the demands. "Are they not subjects of Her Majesty as surely as we are? Have they not only inherent rights as citizens but constitutional rights as members of the body politic?"⁴² Methodist preacher and author William Alexander McKay from Woodstock, Ontario, outlined how the liberty of everyone in society is interconnected, and preserving it for the majority sometimes necessitates limiting it for a minority. In his work *The Text Book for the Campaign: An Appeal to the Christian Public Against the Liquor Traffic*, McKay wrote:

We live not in a savage society but in a civilized community, and in such a state every man's liberty is

⁴¹ George Foster, *Scott Act: An Address by George Foster* (Hamilton: 1880), 1.

⁴² Ross, *An Address to the House of Commons*, 4.

limited by the good of society...wives have rights, children have rights, quiet peaceable members of society have rights, who wish to live in security of life and property, have rights, and these rights must be preserved even at the expense of denying to some others the right to sell whiskey and get drunk.⁴³

McKay believed that to create a society where the liberty of all was protected, the liberty of some must be limited. Fundamentally, members of the movement viewed the struggle for prohibition as a quest to more evenly distribute the harms associated with alcohol rather than allowing them to disproportionately affect the most vulnerable in society.

Temperance activists used one further argument to demonstrate that temperance legislation would protect individual rights: they claimed that limiting the availability of alcohol would limit its ability to exert a corrupting influence on Canadian politics. Prohibitionists presented two dangers stemming from the pervasive influence of alcohol. The first was alcohol's corrupting influence on reason and, consequently, on the democratic process. The WCTU attempted to capitalize on the fear of the saloon corrupting politics and endangering the rights of all by issuing campaign literature proclaiming "The political liberty of our country demands the suppression of its worst foe – the saloon."⁴⁴ Sutherland provided a more detailed explanation of this view when he recorded the words of a speaker at a rally in the 1870s, who stated:

Let this evil diffuse itself through the family circle, - let it prevail at the polls of your elections, let the drunkard be honoured with a seat in parliament and reel into the senate-chamber, -and nod on the bench and in the jury box, and liberty is at an end...If liberty shall here find her grave it shall be dug by drunkards hands. If the knell of departed freedom should here toll, it will toll amidst the revels of national intoxication.⁴⁵

Sutherland, like Foster, believed that alcohol undermined the

⁴³ W.A. McKay, *The Text Book for the Campaign: An Appeal to the Christian Public Against the Liquor Traffic* (Canada: c.1875), 17-18.

⁴⁴ Woman's Christian Temperance Union, *The Saloon Must Go: Plebiscite Series # 5* (Toronto: WCTU, c.1889).

⁴⁵ Sutherland, *The Canadian Temperance Reciter*, 215.

ability of an individual to participate in civil society. However, Sutherland demonstrated this concept by discussing the influence alcohol held over the judicial process and over parliament. A legal trade in alcohol corrupted institutions that Canadians depended on to preserve their liberty by limiting the ability of the men serving to think rationally. Without rational and intelligent public servants, protections for individuals would gradually become meaningless and unenforceable.

In addition to the corrupting power of alcohol itself, the alcohol industry was also portrayed as a threat to the liberty of individual citizens due to its control over the political process. Beyond limiting the reasoning faculties of members of parliament through their popular product, the brewers and distillers also invested significant amounts of money into political parties and, in the view of many temperance leaders, controlled the internal politics of the Liberal and Conservative parties. W. A. McKay demonstrated this view when he wrote “[t]he [liquor] traffic is a most powerful factor in the political life of this Dominion. It controls the party machinery from the ward meeting to the national convention. Candidates for office cringe and cower in its presence, and party leaders on both sides do it reverence.”⁴⁶ The Dominion Alliance’s campaign literature also contains similar ideas. Alliance secretary Francis Spence, in a pamphlet entitled *The Liberty Question* wrote, “*They are the deadliest venom that poisons politics*. It is from the doors of the saloon to the low caucus back to the saloon, that the footsteps are traced that mean the destruction of liberty; for they mean the destruction of all civil dignity and of all the honour of citizenship [original emphasis].”⁴⁷ To the members of the Dominion Alliance, the brewers’ and distillers’ control over political parties meant that citizens’ ability to direct the government was limited. Activists thought that such limitations made Canadian citizenship less meaningful and further weakened civil society by limiting the ability for all (white males) to meaningfully influence the political process through their vote. This concern was warranted, for brewers such as the Molson Family were some of the richest and most politically

⁴⁶ McKay, *The Textbook for the Campaign*, 7.

⁴⁷ Dominion Alliance for the Total Suppression of the Liquor Traffic, *The Liberty Question* (Toronto: Dominion Alliance for the Total Suppression of the Liquor Traffic, 1898), 2.

influential people in the Dominion.⁴⁸ Such a critique is different from the other arguments espoused by prohibitionists, as it does not relate to the nature of alcohol or its effect on the human body. Rather, it is a critique of the accumulation of money and political power in the hands of a few elites in the alcohol industry.

Underlying the beliefs of members of the temperance movement regarding the protection of the community and preservation of individual liberty was a democratic ideal that sought societal change through popular mobilization. George Foster outlined the role temperance activists prescribed for parliament, writing:

On what principle of popular government can it be contended that a small minority of sellers financially interested in the profits of their sale, shall be allowed to force the traffic on a majority whose homes and best interests are exposed to constant risk? The Canadian Legislature recognized this right of a community to protect itself and embodied it in this act.⁴⁹

Foster argued that parliament would support the temperance ideals of community protection but only if these views were supported by the majority of voters. The legislature could be used as a tool to advance temperance objectives if sufficient support could be raised. Francis Spence's writing summarized the temperance movement's basic understanding of the role of parliament and voters. In his pamphlet *The Final Appeal*, published in 1898, shortly before the national plebiscite on prohibition, Spence stated that "[t]he liquor traffic exists by permission of the people and it can be suppressed by the will of the people."⁵⁰ This statement revealed a profound faith in democratic institutions amongst members of the temperance movement. Despite fear surrounding the control which alcohol interests exerted over the political process, the leader of the largest temperance group in the country still publicly expressed his belief in the power of direct democracy (in this case a non-

⁴⁸ See Karen Molson, *The Molsons: Their Lives & Times, 1780-2000* (Richmond Hill: Firefly Press, 2001), for details on the Molson family's business success and political influence.

⁴⁹ Foster, *The Canada temperance manual and prohibitionist's handbook*, 5.

⁵⁰ Francis Spence, *The Final Appeal* (Toronto: Dominion Alliance for the Total Suppression of the Liquor Traffic, 1898), 4.

binding plebiscite) to influence government policy.⁵¹

The campaign literature published by the WCTU emphasized the role that individual voters could play in achieving prohibition. According to the WCTU, each male voter was responsible for doing his duty to end the danger alcohol posed to his family and liberty by voting in favour of prohibition and supporting politicians that advocated temperance legislation. Pamphlet number sixteen implored voters to support the temperance cause by stating that, “The ballots of freemen must defend the homes of freemen.”⁵² There was also a recognition that success depended not solely on the actions of temperance supporters, but on convincing a majority of voters to support their position. Campaign pamphlet number two called upon all Christian voters to support temperance through their actions at the ballot box. The pamphlet asked that, “God Pity us and grant to this great nation a Christian Citizenship which will, at the ballot box, make unlawful this gigantic crime of crimes.”⁵³ Such statements conflated democratic duty with religious duty and reflected the prohibitionist view that each citizen had a moral obligation to vote and campaign in favour of prohibition.

The moral duty of citizens to influence government in favour of prohibition was depicted in explicitly Christian terms. For many advocates, the promotion of liberty and the communal good was inseparable from fulfilment of religious duty. The promotion of Christian principles through government legislation was believed to produce greater liberty for all. The Dominion Alliance expressed this idea in a pamphlet published in 1898:

For the more a man is filled with a religion – that is to say the more he is possessed of those truths which spur on; and those methods which actuate the noblest impulses of his being, in his dealings with all; and that is what religion is – the more fond he is of liberty in the state. The more capable he is of exercising safely and profitably the liberty of the man.⁵⁴

⁵¹ For more information on the plebiscite of 1898 see Heron, *Booze*, 172-173.

⁵² Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, *The Home vs. The Saloon: Campaign Leaflets # 16* (Toronto: WCTU, c.1889).

⁵³ Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, *Where is thy Brother?: Campaign Leaflets # 2* (Toronto: WCTU, c.1889).

⁵⁴ Dominion Alliance for the Total Suppression of the Liquor Traffic, *The Liberty Question*, 2.

Members of the Dominion Alliance also sought to demonstrate the scriptural basis for their actions. Many temperance advocates wrote pamphlets seeking to convince Christians that their religious duty was to support temperance. Robert Wallace gave a lecture in 1873 to the Ontario Temperance and Prohibition League seeking to demonstrate the biblical basis for temperance legislation. Later in the year, the lecture was recorded and published by Wallace.⁵⁵ William McKay also emphasized the scriptural obligation for Christians to push for temperance. He wrote, “Christian, you who are guided solely by the authority of God’s word, can you read these passages and many other similar ones, and yet, hesitate as to the teachings of the scripture of this matter?”⁵⁶ Both the civil government and the church were argued to have a role to play in creating a moral and free society. However, prohibitionists believed the goals of the church were not incompatible with the goals of a liberal state. If the majority of the population decided that banning alcohol was desirable, then the civil government was obliged to follow this directive. Ultimately, Reverend Fallis summarized the basic temperance view when he declared, “[i]f the liquor traffic is morally right, it should have the greatest liberty; if morally wrong it should have no liberty.”⁵⁷

Overall, temperance supporters in late nineteenth century Canada advocated a democratic state which would act to promote the well-being of communities while simultaneously protecting and enhancing the liberty of the individual by outlawing the production and distribution of alcoholic beverages. The arguments advanced by the movement regarding the promotion of community welfare were the less controversial element of temperance beliefs. They clearly laid out a conception of what constituted a good society: one which involved the participation of all its members in activities that were morally and economically beneficial for the community. Failure to consider the broader implications of one’s actions resulted in harm to

⁵⁵ Robert Wallace, *Temperance from the Bible stand-point: a lecture delivered before the Ontario Temperance and Prohibitory League* (Toronto: Flint and Morton, 1873), 1-8.

⁵⁶ McKay, *The Textbook for the Campaign*, 30.

⁵⁷ Fallis, *Scott Act Review*, 2.

others. Such an ideology, which placed primacy on the value of the community as a cohesive whole, seems to stand in opposition to ideas of personal liberty or any value system which places an emphasis on the individual as opposed to the collective. However, within temperance thought, these two contradictory beliefs were both incorporated into broader ideas regarding the nature of the Canadian state. Temperance activists saw alcohol and the liquor traffic as a threat to both community and liberty. Promoting the well-being of the community meant protecting the rights of all its members, not simply those who were accepted as citizens (white males). While prohibition would restrict a man's ability to drink, it would allow the children and wife of the man to better live their lives in a productive and fulfilling way, allowing the community to benefit from their contributions, simultaneously allowing the greatest possible liberty for the greatest number of individuals. Such beliefs demonstrated a keen awareness that banning alcohol would require the coercive use of state power, and prohibitionists sought to justify the restrictive nature of prohibition legislation by emphasizing the philosophical consistency between prohibition and other uses of government legislation to ban injurious practices.

Many modern historians of the temperance movement and of alcohol in general have described the campaign for temperance as an attempt by community-minded prohibitionists to force a society dominated by liberal values to accept repressive action by the government. However, this paper shows that the ideas of the temperance movement were amorphous and difficult to categorize as simply liberal or aliberal. While modern scholars see a conflict between the promotion of the community welfare and the promotion of liberty, temperance activists saw an opportunity to achieve both ends through prohibition. The extent to which prohibitionists portrayed their movement as being commensurate with personal liberty as a reflection of their personal beliefs, or rather, as a political ploy to effectively mobilize public support, is unknown, and requires further research. An expanded analysis of the issues raised in this paper will provide a more detailed exploration of how the prohibitionist cause fits into broader ideas of Canada's political development as a liberal state. Such analysis will be the focus of my future research.