“Would You Sell Yourself For A Drink, Boy?”
Masculinity and Christianity in the Ontario Temperance Movement

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The temperance movement was a pervasive feature of nineteenth-century Canadian life. Not everyone believed in the cause, but the discourse surrounding the consumption of alcohol and the effects of drinking as a habit would not have been unfamiliar. Temperance groups set themselves at odds with a society wherein alcohol consumption was an inescapable fact of life. It was made, traded, consumed on the job, during community events, political meetings, and for recreation and escape. Despite the prevalence of alcohol consumption, or because of it, temperance groups sprang up to express their concern over the effects of alcohol consumption, and their eventual conviction that the eradication of drinking would be a pivotal step towards creating a better society on earth and in creating the Kingdom of God.

In order to do so, however, they had to attract and retain members and find workable organizational forms that would inspire devotion among members, and convince those members not only to keep paying their dues, but also to reach outside the organization in attempts to convert others, and later, to work politically to promote their agenda. Although many small temperance organizations sprang up and faded in the Canadian landscape, the first groups that had wide appeal turned out to be the fraternal temperance lodges, which spurs three questions: Why did men (and sometimes women) join temperance lodges? Why did they choose to stay (or leave, as the case may be?) How did they incorporate religious belief

Historical Papers 2011: Canadian Society of Church History
and expression into patterns of joining, staying and leaving lodge life? The answers to these, unsurprisingly, are complex. They included issues surrounding entertainment, community, mutual support and ritual. But underlying most of these motivations was an ideology of responsible Christian masculinity that made the temperance lodges an attractive proposition for men in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth. The lodges attempted to frame the act of joining as a specifically masculine one. They located an ideal masculinity not only in the independence and strength of men, but also in an outward-looking attitude of benevolence and concern.\(^3\) This reflects the strongly Protestant (although nondenominational) character of the lodges. However, this was not the only masculinity available to men, in the eyes of the temperance lodge. If they did not take on the mantle of Christian manly responsibility, men were believed to be prone to the worst evils drink could bring, becoming religiously lost, low, destitute, irresponsible, cruel abusers of wives and children. These two models of masculinity framed much of the temperance rhetoric.

The title of this paper comes from a temperance poem. It was reprinted in 1894 in the International Order of Good Templars’ newspaper, *The Camp Fire*, which was edited by F.S. Spence and published in Toronto. It is a good example of how the temperance lodges perceived masculinity in both its idealized and depraved forms. In its entirety, it reads:

> Would you sell yourself for a drink, boys,  
> A drink from the poisoned cup?  
> For a taste of the gleaming wine, boys,  
> Would you give your manhood up?

> Would you bind yourselves with chains, boys,  
> And rivet the fetters fast?  
> Would you bolt your prison doors, boys,  
> Preventing escape at last?

> Would you wreck your youth and health, boys,  
> Those blessings God has given?  
> Would you ruin your life on earth, boys,  
> And blast your hopes of heaven?

> Would you dig, with your own hands, your grave, boys,
And willingly cast yourselves in?
Would you die a besotted wretch, boys,
In poverty, sorrow, and sin?

Ah, no! A thousand times no! boys,
You were born for a noble end;
In you are your country’s hopes, boys,
Her honor the boys must defend.

Then join the great abstinence band, boys,
And pledge yourselves strong against rum;
Stand firm as a rock to your pledge, boys,
And fight till the foe is o’ercome.  

This poem, while at times overwrought, is a good example of the kind of appeal that the temperance lodges made to men and boys to join and carry on the temperance cause. The role of men in the temperance movement has been largely overlooked in the recent historiography, yet the three main temperance fraternal organizations both predate and often outnumber the comparable women’s organization, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Despite this, our historical memory tends to conceptualize the temperance movement in gendered terms, as a women’s movement, an attempt by women to control the drinking of the men around them.

In part, this may be due to the fact that most of the recent work on the temperance movement has been by feminist historians, who have logically focused on the WCTU as a subject of study. These histories have looked at women’s involvement with the temperance movement as a site of feminist or “proto-feminist” political action, and the ways in which the WCTU was undoubtedly an important and influential organization. However, this recent focus on the WCTU has been coupled with a relative dearth of work on the other temperance organizations that littered the scene, and made the temperance movement vibrant, contested, and a frequent site of both collaboration and competition. The International Order of Good Templars, the Sons of Temperance and the Royal Templars of Temperance were all organizations that (eventually) admitted both men and women, but from my preliminary research, were largely run by men. These three orders were fraternal organizations loosely based on the practices of the Freemasons and the Odd Fellows. They had lodges, meetings full of ceremony and ritual, and were initially often mutual
benefit societies, providing insurance and burial benefits for members.

The oldest of these, The Sons of Temperance, was founded in the 1840s in the New York State, and spread to Canada in 1847, with the first lodge founded in Brockville. They tried to combine the aspect of both a fraternal organization and a mutual benefit society. The British remnants of the present-day organization describes the aims of the historical Sons of Temperance in these terms: “Its objects were to shield its members from the evils of intemperance, to afford mutual assistance in times of sickness, provide a sum of money at the death of a member, to elevate character, to enlist workers in an earnest and noble endeavour to reclaim those who fell under the influence of strong drink, to save the young from the terrible power of the drink habit, and to assist in every way the suppression of the drink traffic.”

The Independent Order of Good Templars (IOGT) was founded in the 1850s, also in New York State. It spread to Canada quickly, and eventually world-wide, particularly among British colonies. The official history states that the first two Canadian IOGT lodges were founded in 1853, at Merrickville and Easton’s Corners. The two main distinctions between the IOGT and the Sons were that the IOGT admitted women as full members from its inception, and did not provide insurance benefits.

There was a schism in the Ontario Orders of Good Templars in 1858, resulting in there being separate Grand Lodges for the British-American Order of Good Templars and the Independent Order of Good Templars until 1888. The schism seems to have been over whether the movement should try to be entirely British or recognize its American roots, although issues of race are mentioned as reasons why it was difficult to reunite the two for several decades.

The Royal Templars entered the scene fairly late compared to the other two organizations, with the first Canadian lodge founded in Toronto in 1878, and like the IOGT, always included both women and men. There were other, smaller, groups that arose and faded with some regularity, but these were the three main lodges on the temperance scene in the nineteenth century. Although all three were organizations that existed outside the denominational system, their rituals and cause incorporated Christian belief at their very core, expressing an ecumenical belief that welcomed members from many different congregational affiliations. This desire to carry religious belief and action outside of the churches and into independent societies shows both the effects of religious belief on socialization and political action, but also displays a belief that
religion need not be confined to activities directly associated with the institutional churches. Many members combined church attendance and activity with their lodge life, and found little tension between the two.

In the nineteenth century, this form of fraternal organization was one of the most prominent ways in which Christian men and women participated in the fight for temperance and prohibition. So why did men join a fraternal lodge that would not allow them to drink? If they wished not to drink, why form a fraternal organization around this? How did traditional rituals of masculine sociability fit with Protestant religiosity? The lodges offered the vision of a better world, a postmillennial looking forward to the ushering of a Kingdom of God of which they would a part. They encouraged men and women of faith to participate in a noble cause, and reinforced their belief that they were doing God’s work. The lodges supplemented these lofty ideals with a sense of ritual, companionship, opportunities for socialization, encouragement for those who wished to stop drinking themselves, a vision of male members as respectable and manly citizens, entertainment, and sometimes, financial support in cases of injury or death.

Perhaps obviously, the first step in becoming part of the world of the temperance lodges was the act of joining. Pressure from family and friends often accounted for many of those who joined, and appears not dissimilar to previously noted patterns of religious conversion, in which family members often joined together, or under the influence of one particularly devout member. It is not uncommon to see numerous people with the same last name joining a lodge over a period of a couple of months. Although much of the literature on family influence on religious conversion and belief tends to focus on the power women had over sons, husbands and nephews, this has proven difficult to verify with the lodge records, so it is impossible as of yet to see if this gendered pattern extends to the temperance lodges. However, although members were often zealous about recruiting friends and family to the lodge, those family members did not always hold to their pledges as much as their sponsors might desire.

Sometimes people were pressured into joining even when they apparently felt no affinity for the cause. For example, Fred Robins was one of the founders of the London IOGT lodge in 1908. He and his wife were fervent Congregationalists, and believers in the temperance cause, and duly enrolled their four children in the lodge as soon as possible. Of the four children, three attended meetings faithfully, and held various positions in the organization as they grew up. The fourth child, Fred’s
oldest son, John, was a dues-paying member (or perhaps his parents continued to pay his dues to keep him as a member in good standing) from the beginning of the lodge until he and his younger brother Arthur joined the army. John remained on the rolls until the lodge became dormant in 1917. However, although his financial contributions were always made, John attended a mere handful of meetings out of the almost ten years he was a member. The only meetings he did attend were, notably, those immediately after the untimely death of his sister Margaret in 1911. John married after the war, but later deserted his wife and son to drift around Western Canada while his father and younger sister Jessie took care of his finances. Fred may have had high hopes for the roles his children would play in the temperance movement, but except for Jessie, the rest either died young, or were never interested in the cause to which Fred devoted so much effort. Family pressure can account for why some people joined, but not necessarily why they stayed.

If not for family pressure or religious fervour, why did other men (and women) remain members of the temperance lodges? Popular press consideration of the temperance lodges sometimes took a solely secular view, suggesting that the lodges prepared men for careers as strong political leaders, and also allowed a chance to socialize with the opposite gender in safe, respectable circumstances. In a heavily romanticized encomium to both Templary and rural life from the Toronto Daily Globe, republished in the 1888 International Good Templar, the writer discusses both the fun that there was to be had as well as the important civil impact of the lodges, writing first about the lodge outings, where:

The farmer and the missus, the clerk and the blacksmith, the hired man and the hired girl all piled into the sleigh together, knees were freely utilized when the seating accommodation gave out, strong and willing arms volunteered to keep the band together, generally however, confining their attentions to some favorite waist, the driver was crossed down on the tongue of the sleigh, and with song and joke and laughter, away went the jolly party through the keen, cold night, behind a farmer’s spanking team, ruthlessly destroying the fiction that temperance people are long-faced, and narrow-chested, and weak-limbed, and baby-muscled, and creaky-voiced, and watery-minded.

Temperance lodges may have been serious about the evils of alcohol and their Christian duty, but that did not interfere with efforts to make their meetings entertaining for members, with outings, picnics, teas, debates and
spelling bees, among other activities. In general, the entertainment and Christian political action were seen as compatible, although occasionally a temperance newspaper would sound the alarm that lodges were spending too much time on pleasant activities and not enough on their mission.\textsuperscript{17}

The same \textit{Toronto Daily Globe} journalist also saw the lodge not only as a locus for respectable fun, but also as a prime training ground for public life, writing that:

The pulpit is all over this country are filled with men who got their preliminary training in the Temple or the Division, and thence were graduated into the ministry. Many of our municipal representatives date their interest in affairs and their capacity for public business to the opportunities which the Lodges afforded. In scores of young men the taste for reading and the desire for information had birth in the rivalries of the Lodges. Hon. Alexander Mackenzie, Hon. G.W. Ross, Hon. Geo. E. Foster, Sir Leonard Tilley, Hon. Mackenzie Bowell – scores of our public men have stepped from the threshold of the Lodge into public life and grown into prominence with the Temperance movement.\textsuperscript{18}

The writer, notably, does not put much emphasis on the actual work of temperance, beyond its usefulness as a training ground for politicians and the pulpit, other than a brief mention of the few souls the temperance lodges managed to save from the evils of drinking. This lack of emphasis on the effectiveness of temperance training on politicians was something that members of the lodges saw borne out in practice, much to their dismay. Of the politicians listed above, only Sir Samuel Tilley carried his temperance beliefs into his political career. Tilley at one point held the office of the Most Worthy Patriarch of the Sons of Temperance of North America, the highest office in that organization, and worked publicly for temperance in his political career.\textsuperscript{19} Some of the others ran on temperance platforms, but made no effort to enact prohibitory legislation once elected.

A notable disappointment was Sir George William Ross, a member of the IOGT, who, as a backbencher for the Ontario Liberal Party in 1874 spoke in the House of Commons in support of prohibition, saying that “On a question like this, when the choice is between the paltry revenue of a few millions – paltry because life is invaluable as compared with money – and the sacrifice of many of the noblest and best of our young men, I decide in favor of humanity.”\textsuperscript{20} With rhetoric like this, members of the temperance lodges believed that when he became premier of the province in
1899, he would continue to bring his temperance beliefs into his public life and finally enact the prohibitory laws they had been long promised. In this, however, they were to be disappointed. However, he used the stalling tactic, also employed by Sir Oliver Mowat at the provincial level in 1894 and Sir Wilfrid Laurier at the federal level in 1898, of insisting on holding a plebiscite first to determine the will of the people. In 1902, the referendum was held, and although a majority of the votes cast were for prohibition, as they had also in 1894 and 1898, Sir George Ross disappointed his temperance supporters greatly by refusing to bring in the desired legislation. Long membership in the lodges was, as members discovered to their dismay, no guarantee that politicians would advance their goals and halt the sale of alcohol. Although some would take their ideals of Christian masculine stewardship of society to the political arena, most would not, at least when it came to enacting prohibitory laws.

But drinking and the pledge were obviously not secondary matters to the lodges themselves. On joining a lodge, the most formal part of the initiation ceremony was the public taking of the pledge, which varied slightly over time and between organizations, but this one is fairly representative: “You, in the presence of Almighty God, and of these witnesses, solemnly and unreservedly promise that you will never make, buy, sell, use, furnish, or cause to be furnished to others, as beverage, any Spirituous Liquors, Wine or Cider and that in all honorable ways you will discountenance their use in the community.”

In order to underscore the importance of abstaining from alcohol to the lodges and society as a whole, the Sons of Temperance initiation ceremony emphasized this point heavily, through use of the binary ideas of Christian masculinity vs. depraved manhood:

Man walks forth in the pride and dignity of his manhood. His eye searcheth upward after God. The earth and all its fullness minister unto him. On his brow wisdom sits enthroned, reason guides his footsteps, his great heart encompasseth all his kingdom. Plenty springs up in his pathway, he giveth aid to the needy, and is the supporting staff of parents and home. But strong drink takes possession of him, his visage is marred and debased, he creeps in the slough of sensuality, his heart’s best affections are blunted, the dear ties of kindred are broken, and cruelty and shame take up their habitations within him. Strong drink is the foe of man, the destroyer of manhood: therefore we hate it, O Brother.
In contrast to the depravity of drink, the temperance lodges set the figure of the ideal man, who was self-controlled, interested in the welfare of others, and independent.

In contrast, although the International Order of Good Templars had fairly similar views on ideal masculinity, their initiation ritual placed much less emphasis on gender roles. This may be due in part to the fact that the IOGT, from its inception, always allowed female members, whereas the Sons of Temperance started as a male organization, and only slowly and with some resistance started to allow women to join, initially as visitors and later as full members. But while the IOGT did not dwell on gender roles in their initiation ceremony, they did try to make it clear that, from the moment of joining the lodge, members were expected to take their pledges seriously and that the consequences of alcohol use were paramount in their minds: “We have seen the tears of the widow and orphan; and have heard the low sad wail of agony sent up by broken hearts. We have seen bright hopes and prospects blasted; and the innocence of youth grown old with the deformity of ignorance and want. We have seen beauty clothed with rags and shame, and manhood shorn of its glory – each repeating daily the sad warning of the past: ‘BEWARE OF STRONG DRINKS!’”

The initiation ceremony was merely the beginning of a new member’s exposure to rhetoric featuring the evils of alcohol. The ceremonies were designed to be an impressive introduction to the life and mission of the lodges, and to impress on initiates the importance and solemnity of the order, and the seriousness of their mission. However much fun and entertainment might follow in practice, initiation ceremonies were intended to be solemn affairs, dedicating the new members to the order, to God, and to the temperance cause. However, despite the pomp, circumstance and later attempts to make lodge life enjoyable, many of those who joined the lodge did not stay. By far the most common cause for expulsion from the lodge was for non-payment of dues, which suggests that of the many who joined, some found the obligations and expectations of lodge life too onerous, or the financial burden too heavy.

But many did stay, often for decades. When the Sons of Temperance lodge at Orono celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 1890, among those attending were several men who had belonged to the lodge for more than two decades, and in two cases, since the 1850s. These older members occasionally stated that they found it difficult to make it to meetings, but made an effort to pay their dues and remain as brothers.
long-term members, George Walkey and John Gifford, at a meeting years earlier, had related their reasons for joining the lodge, and both stated that they had been drinkers before joining the Sons of Temperance, and had, with the help of their fraternal brothers, stopped. Past Worthy Patriarch Robert Moment chimed in that he, too, had had “his own experience with the “Brown Jug” and explained for [that] reason he sympathised with others that now use the same.” These men, each of whom had joined the Orono Sons of Temperance lodge in the first decade of its founding, spoke out about their reasons for joining, and how the lodge had helped them to abstain from drinking held pride of place. They found in the fraternal atmosphere of the lodge what they needed to become total abstainers. Thus, the usefulness of the lodge to members who wished to stop drinking was a major reason that men stayed.

But what of those whose dedication to the temperance cause or their pledge was not as intense, or who gave in sporadically to the temptations of alcohol? Most of the expulsions that occurred from every lodge studied were due to the non-payment of dues, which may indicate a waning of sympathy with the temperance cause. But far more dramatic occasions were the expulsions of those who had broken their pledge. The IOGT records I have are mostly from the early twentieth century, and while violations do occur, they appear to be relatively infrequent. In contrast, the very complete records of the Orono Sons of Temperance Lodge over fifty years of their existence show many violations of their pledge. They did become relatively less frequent as the nineteenth century drew to a close, but never completely disappeared. Interestingly, the record of violations in the Orono lodge did not drop off after they started to admit women. The members did not seem to make any effort to amend their behaviour when female visitors started to attend. No records so far show a female member of any lodge being brought up on charges, much less expelled.

Not all violations of the temperance pledge led to expulsion, however. And when they did not, religious tropes of repentance and forgiveness provided a basis for the pattern the organizations tended to follow. In the Orono Sons of Temperance minutes, a very clear pattern emerges. If a man was charged with violating Article Two of their Constitution (the pledge), there were generally two outcomes. If the man refused to meet with the committee appointed to investigate the charge, or refused to come to a meeting and explain himself, the result was usually expulsion. However, if, once accused, a man admitted that he had violated the pledge, and stated that he wished to remain a member of the lodge and,
in general, acted with repentance, he was usually retained. Even habitual violators of the oath could, on occasion, be retained, although in general, the more violations, the more likely expulsion was. This tendency to keep those who admitted their wrongs and asked forgiveness shows that the lodges were not single-minded in their dedication to the ideals of temperance, and indeed, that their religious framework made it possible to expel some men for being unrepentant while welcoming back those who admitted their guilt and begged pardon. They did not condone violations of the oath, but they also understood that it was not as easy to forswear drinking as it was to recite the pledge.

Repentance was the key, which also points to their desire that members take manly responsibility for their actions, as well as indicating that they were not ready to give up on someone so easily. There is also a sense that long-time lodge members knew each other well, and knew who was actually struggling with what we would today call an addiction, and who was a member in name only. In the most dramatic case, Francis Fitzpatrick, shoemaker from Orono, joined the Sons of Temperance lodge in 1854 for the first time at the age of twenty-one, four years after the founding of the lodge. Over the next sixteen years, he was brought up on charges no fewer than thirteen times, and expelled six times in total. He often had the same sponsor nominating him for membership, possibly pointing to someone in the community who hoped he could be helped. Several of the times he was charged with a violation of Article Two, the charge was not brought by one of the brothers, but through a confession before the group by Fitzpatrick himself. However, he was always penitent when brought up on charges and showed a desire to do better, which can help us understand why the Sons of Temperance continuously admitted a man with a long history of habitual drunkenness. While the Sons took their oaths seriously, they believed in second chances, or, in this extraordinary case, thirteenth chances. They hoped they could help him attain the ideal of masculinity that they themselves worked hard to retain. In Frank’s case, however, the flip-side of masculine dissipation led them to finally refuse to continue admitting him to membership, although one brother tried repeatedly, even after the thirteenth offence.

In conclusion, men joined to socialize, to work for a cause they believed in, and often, for mutual aid in stopping drinking. Not all who joined stayed, and family pressure, religious belief and a fraternal atmosphere were not always enough to convince men that this was an organization and a cause with which they wanted to affiliate themselves.
Moreover, even among those who stayed, their political lives did not always live up to the hopes of the temperance movement. But those who remained did so because they found in the message of the lodges a cause to believe in, fun to be had, and an image of themselves as men that was appealing.

**Endnotes**


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5. Sharon Cook’s Through Sunshine and Shadow: The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, Evangelicalism, and Reform in Ontario, 1874-1930 (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995); Ruth Bordin’s Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); and Barbara Epstein, Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth Century America (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), have all considered the role of women in the movement, but not generally of men. Jan Noel’s Canada Dry looks at the early temperance movement as a popular cause that both men and women joined, but she depicts the effects of drunkenness as gendered, showing drunkards as men and victims of drunkenness as women. By far and large, she does not examine gender as an important aspect of the temperance movement. See Jan Noel, Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades Before Confederation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 97.


15. Letter from Fred Robins to G.C. Austin, Esq., Department of Public Highways, recorded 9 July 1922, Miscellaneous Personal Materials, Box 4098, Fred Robins Fonds, UWOA.


25. February 26, 1890, Minute Book, 1881-1891, Sons of Temperance (Orono), MU2879, Archives of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario, hereafter AO.

26. October 29, 1879, Minute Book, 1877-1881, Sons of Temperance (Orono), MU2879, AO.

27. Minute Book, 1854-1859, Sons of Temperance (Orono), MU2879, AO.

28. Minute books, 1853-1854, 1854-1859, 1863-64, 1866-1870, the Sons of Temperance (Orono), MU2879, AO.