

## **The Canada Sunday School Union and Lay Responses to Religious Literature in Canada West, 1843-1850**

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In 1846 a local Sunday school in Smith Township, Canada West,<sup>1</sup> sent the Canada Sunday School Union the following report on the status of their school:

The influence of this school on the community is good. The scholars take great pleasure in perusing the books in the library and committing portions of Scripture to memory, so much so that we are frequently short of teachers to hear them . . . We frequently examine them from the library books, in order to see that they are not taken home and made no use of; we also question them from portions of Scripture which they have previously read or committed to memory, in order to keep the principal truths of the gospel alive in their minds, and fresh in their memory.<sup>2</sup>

As informal and usually lay-run institutions, Sunday schools are often invisible in traditional church records from the first half of the nineteenth century; yet, by the 1840s, there were hundreds of Protestant Sunday schools scattered across the province. Many of these schools were connected to the inter-denominational Canada Sunday School Union (CSSU), an organization established to support the development of Sunday schools and to provide free and inexpensive publications to Sunday schools in the Canadas.

In the 1840s, the CSSU received an annual average of 138 local

reports from Sunday schools in both Canada East and Canada West, with that number reaching more than 200 in certain years.<sup>3</sup> While original records of this communication between the members and the central organization no longer exist, the updates submitted to the CSSU were regularly reprinted in their annual reports, which were distributed to all active members. These reprints may have been shortened, and it is evident that not every report received was included; however, the republished reports present a rare, verbatim description of Protestant Sunday schools from the perspective of lay participants. In fact, taken together, these lay voices reveal much about the religious experience of Protestant communities in early Ontario beyond the Sunday school.

This article provides a preliminary examination of the lay reports published in the CSSU's annual publication from 1843 to 1850. Given the centrality of books, libraries, and reading in the communication between the CSSU and local Sunday schools, this discussion will consider how the rapid development of an evangelical book culture took shape among the laity, including children, in Canada West.

### ***Early Sunday Schools***

Sunday schools emerged in the province of Upper Canada in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Both Richmond Hill and Brockville claim to be home to the province's first Sunday school in 1811, and other regions followed this lead shortly after.<sup>4</sup> Sunday schools in the first half of the century were community-run spaces, with very little practical clerical involvement. With the exception of schools operated by High Anglicans in York and Kingston, Sunday schools in Upper Canada were generally non-denominational and served Protestant children of all affiliations within a particular region or neighborhood. As the Methodist *Christian Guardian* explained in 1830,

The main object of Sabbath Schools is to inform the scholars upon the fundamental principles of Christianity. It is to lay a broad foundation upon which a child may build a structure in his riper years as best accords with his convictions. It has nothing to do with the peculiar doctrines of any branch of the Christian Church, except as a matter of general information.<sup>5</sup>

As resources became more readily available by the middle of the nineteenth century and clergy became more permanently settled, many

Sunday schools became auxiliaries of particular congregations, but non-denominational Sunday schools remained commonplace into the second half of the century.<sup>6</sup> Because the majority of Sunday schools were shared spaces with cooperative leadership, these schools primarily taught lessons in areas that were agreeable to most, if not all, major Protestant denominations. This included almost exclusively rote memorization and recitation of Bible verses, and, for those children not yet literate, elementary lessons in reading and spelling, for the purpose of reading the Bible.

Sunday schools in Upper and Lower Canada were connected to each other and supported by a non-denominational organization from 1823 onward. Known as the Sunday School Union Society of Canada (SSUSC), this group helped to establish Sunday schools across the Canadas and provided books and tracts to existing schools, particularly in rural areas. The organization operated out of its book depository in Montreal and had created a significant network of book distribution by the mid-1820s.

The SSUSC was succeeded by the Canada Sunday School Union in 1836 and, by 1843, the CSSU had become the central organization through which both non-denominational and, increasingly, denomination-specific schools in both Canada East and Canada West were connected. This union included among its membership Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Congregationalists, but evangelical Anglicans and Lutherans also participated.

The CSSU served the same purpose as its predecessor. Led by a committee of laymen of various denominations, it imported and distributed books to local Sunday schools. Almost all of the union's leaders were prominent businessmen and philanthropists in Montreal, including William Lunn, J.C. Becket, and James Orr. Both membership and leadership were voluntary. The CSSU had no real authority in terms of enforcing practices. Instead, it advised, connected, and supplied local Sunday schools.

### ***The Canada Sunday School Union, Books, and Libraries***

It is not surprising that the Bible was the most commonly used text in Protestant Sunday schools. That was especially true in the period before 1840, when the Sunday school community was still developing its printing and book distribution methods, and access to literature was relatively scarce in many backwoods communities. Bibles, whether purchased or free, were fairly easy to obtain. A number of agents from Bible societies

and missionary organizations were devoted to circulating the Bible among the newly settled population.<sup>7</sup> By 1840 the Upper Canadian Bible Society alone had sixty local branches and depositories that provided Bibles to Sunday schools.<sup>8</sup>

As early as 1819, Sunday schools were receiving free Bibles and Testaments from these types of organizations. In that year, a report in the *Kingston Chronicle*, from the region's Sunday school union, expressed gratitude to the local Bible Society: "those most excellent institutions, the Sunday Schools, would have had some difficulty in being put into immediate operation, were it not that the superabundance of Testaments enabled your committee to supply them with upwards of 100."<sup>9</sup> This sentiment was echoed throughout the province, and the establishment of new Sunday schools was almost always dependent on the school's organizer first acquiring a Bible.

The Sunday School Union Society of Canada also purchased other religious publications on behalf of the smaller, and usually poorer, schools. The organization's 1824 financial report reveals that £2 was sent directly to missionary and religious tract societies in London for books, and upwards of £50 from local unions across the province was sent to the London (Sunday School Union) depository to supply material to schools in Upper Canada.<sup>10</sup> Given its prominence in the British market, material from the Religious Tract Society (RTS) would have filled the majority, if not the entirety, of these two requests.

The RTS continued to supply Canadian Sunday schools with literature through the 1840s. While records from Canadian Sunday school organizations are limited for the 1830s, by 1840 it is clear that a regular network of distribution had been established between Canadian Sunday schools and the RTS. An announcement in *The Canadian Temperance Advocate* in 1840 presents an update on Sunday school books: "the committee of the Canada Sunday School Union notify, that in addition to their assorted stock of books adapted for Sunday Schools, a fresh supply of libraries, has just arrived from London . . . Each library consists of 101 vols. of the most select works, and cost £6 15s sterling. By the liberality of the [Religious] Tract Society, London, this society is enabled to give them for just £3 10s."<sup>11</sup>

This description of a Sunday school library from the CSSU was typical, as most consisted of around 100 items that were selected by the organization. These libraries included mainly small books, occasionally tracts, and, even less often, periodicals. The majority of Sunday school

libraries in Canada West were established with the help of the CSSU, which not only provided libraries at half price, but also gave many Sunday schools a library free of charge if the organization believed the school to be sufficiently “destitute,” in either the financial or spiritual sense. This charitable work was central to the organization’s widespread presence. In 1845 the CSSU reflected on the first decade of its work in supplying free materials to needy Sunday schools, noting that, “the Society has been enabled since its organization in 1836 to furnish a gratuitous supply of books to Schools in destitute parts of the country, to the extent of £1,100.”<sup>12</sup> By 1843 the CSSU boasted that it had provided over 200 Sunday schools with 36,312 library books, not including tracts and Bibles.<sup>13</sup>

The RTS publications that were provided through the CSSU’s libraries fell within the genre of evangelical literature. These stories all included the gospel message, stressing that salvation was only possible through faith in atonement. This type of literature was also always written with extreme clarity, as the tracts and books needed to be easily understood, even where no other religious guidance was available. Other key qualities of evangelical publications of this time, including the RTS’ collection, were simplicity and entertainment.<sup>14</sup>

RTS publications were accepted by all major Protestant denominations. Like many other religious societies of the time, the RTS was committed to non-sectarian values in both its organization and content. Unlike many of the other evangelical groups, the RTS managed to maintain strong favour with members and leaders of the Church of England. In fact, the RTS recruited Anglican writers, many of whom, including Legh Richmond, were among their most popular.<sup>15</sup> Children and adults alike often embraced the material the RTS printed; distinctions between these two audiences were rarely made. The appeal of the RTS was broad, because its literature always focused on the central Gospel message.

American books began to enter the CSSU’s distribution system in 1845 as a result of increased demand. The inclusion of books from the non-denominational American Sunday School Union was mentioned in the CSSU’s 1846 Annual Report where it was explained that,

Heretofore, the books in the Depository have been principally those of the London Religious Tract Society, and we cannot be better supplied with the same kind of books from any other quarter; but it is

gratifying to find that the increased demand for the information, has rendered it necessary for us to add to our variety. During the past year we have made considerable additions to our stock, from the American Sunday School Union, which adds considerably to its value and gives increased interest to our operation.<sup>16</sup>

In 1845, the first year that American libraries were available, the majority of the material distributed by the CSSU continued to be that of the RTS which provided forty-seven libraries, while the American Sunday School Union libraries provided only sixteen.<sup>17</sup> Similar distribution rates continued throughout the last half of the 1840s with the 1848 report noting that the previous year the CSSU had distributed seventy RTS and twenty American libraries.<sup>18</sup>

As seen in Table 1, detailed records for the years 1839-44 reveal that among the top items distributed were religious tracts, numbering anywhere from just over 1,000 to 17,690 annually. Library books often surpassed tracts in terms of distribution, with over ten thousand issued in 1840, its most active year. Even in the union's least active year, 1843, 6,056 library books were sent out.<sup>19</sup> Both tracts and books from the CSSU filled the shelves and boxes of Sunday school libraries, and it is not surprising that, when the *Journal of Education* published a statistical account of all libraries in Canada West in 1851, Sunday school libraries accounted for sixty-seven percent of all library material in the province with 50,732 volumes, nearly ten times the number of common school collections and more than forty-five times the province's Mechanics' Institutes.<sup>20</sup>

| Items Issued from the Book Depository of the Canada Sunday School Union 1839-1844 |               |                  |        |                |            |      |                     |
|---|---------------|------------------|--------|----------------|------------|------|---------------------|
|   | Library Books | Elementary Books | Tracts | English Bibles | Hymn Books | Maps | All Other Materials |
| 1839  | 7,434         | 3,393            | 17,690 | 712            | 88         | 75   | 445                 |
| 1840  | 10,329        | 1,494            | 9,650  | 11             | 96         | 30   | 745                 |
| 1841  | 8,732         | 2,588            | 4,691  | 75             | 280        | 25   | 1,069               |
| 1842  | 9,908         | 5,459            | 2,280  | 158            | 742        | 20   | 711                 |
| 1843  | 6,056         | 3,011            | 1,769  | 136            | 306        | 10   | 478                 |
| 1844  | 8,842         | 3,878            | 2,350  | 191            | 718        | 10   | 260                 |

*CSSU Annual Report 1843*, 18.

Regardless of its lack of practical power, the CSSU promoted particular goals and had clear expectations for the province's Sunday schools. The instructions that the CSSU provided to local schools in their printed annual reports and other publications describe those goals and expectations in detail, explaining that Canadian Sunday schools were to be exclusively religious institutions with a clear aim of individual commitment to the Christian faith. Schools were expected to promote general Protestant morality, piety, and encourage active evangelical and inter-denominational cooperation.

In practice, however, it was not up to the CSSU to define the purpose of the Sunday school. The survival of these schools rested on the continued support and participation of the laity within their local communities. Laymen and women supported Sunday schools by becoming financial subscribers, volunteering as teachers and superintendents, and sending their children to the weekly lesson. What were lay settlers saying about these community Sunday schools? What patterns emerge from an analysis of the communication between local Sunday schools and the CSSU?

### ***Reports of Local Sunday Schools***

When local Sunday schools submitted their annual reports to the CSSU, they provided updates on the status of their schools, including attendance figures, the success of pupils, and any concerns of teachers and superintendents. These accounts, however, were dominated by requests for books and libraries, as well as reports on how CSSU libraries had been received in their communities. Consequently, the reprinted reports reveal as much about the practices of early Sunday schools as they do about how evangelical literature was received by lay settlers in the 1840s. This period saw a rapid increase in both the domestic production of evangelical literature and its importation from abroad, yet we still know very little about the role of this emerging book culture in the lives of settler families and communities.

The local reports sent to the CSSU reveal a great deal of diversity among Sunday schools in Canada West in the 1840s. Some schools had hundreds of students, while others struggled to gather a few from their widely scattered settlements. A number of schools had very structured practices, with homework, grade levels, and public examinations, but most conducted only simple exercises in Bible memorization during class time.

Individual superintendents or teachers could influence the operations of local Sunday schools. But, while diversity existed, some important patterns can be seen from schools in various counties across the province, particularly in regards to issues relating to books, libraries, and reading.

The most common sentiment was that there would be more interest in a Sunday school if it had a circulating library. This was expressed both by those schools requesting a library from the CSSU, as well as those reporting on their recent receipt of a library. In 1843 a school from the Oxford district described the benefits of their new Sunday school library in a letter of thanks to the CSSU: “we desire to tender your society our sincere thanks for the very excellent library sent us . . . We find a good library the best inducement that we can hold out to secure attendance of the Sabbath School scholars.”<sup>21</sup>

It was not only the young pupils whose interest in Sunday schooling increased when a library was established, but their families as well. An 1847 report from Perth noted that, “there is to be observed an increasing interest on the part of parents and guardians, caused, we think, by the increasing interest taken by the Scholars in the books which they get from us weekly to read.”<sup>22</sup> Similar observations were reported from Peterborough in 1848, when it was stated that, “indeed, the prosperity of the schools depends in a great measure on the efficient state of their libraries.”<sup>23</sup>

Libraries usually became part of a Sunday school after the school had been operating for some time. So, the observation that people were attracted to a school because of the access to books suggests that they were not seeking religious education alone. They were also looking for literacy education, exposure to new books, and leisurely reading. Religious education was almost always available before a Sunday school acquired a library.

A number of reports indicate that the lending and reading of books from Sunday school libraries was not limited to children. Comments that “both young and old read the books and take much interest in them” were quite common.<sup>24</sup> Typically, children facilitated adult access to the material in Sunday school libraries. Students brought books home, allowing their parents to read independently or with their children. In the first half of the nineteenth century, this would have been a new experience for most settlers, as access to books was limited, particularly outside of major cities.

Parents were frequently mentioned in local communications with the CSSU in various ways, yet their very presence in these reports reveals an



important pattern between Sunday school libraries and family reading practices. Some reports, including one from a Lanark school in 1844, were vague in describing the extent to which parents were using the Sunday school library, stating simply that, “the parents likewise have received much benefit from reading the books.”<sup>25</sup> Other reports explain that reading was not only beneficial to parents, but was interesting as well. As an 1848 report from Mosa Township notes, at their school, “the books are read with interest by parents and scholars.”<sup>26</sup>

A more detailed report from a Chatham school in 1847 reveals the popularity such Sunday schools could have in local communities. “We have an extensive circulation of our books according to our population,” they wrote, “there is from forty to fifty books in circulation every week, they are eagerly sought after and are to be found in every house in the settlement.”<sup>27</sup>

While specific details about exactly how reading occurred within the home are not easily available, the reports to the CSSU reveal that the system of book distribution and circulation established by the Sunday school community was effective in bringing literature into settlers’ homes where both children and adults participated in reading.

The libraries provided by the CSSU also facilitated basic literacy education for both children and adults. A report from Sophiasburg in 1843 explained that in their community, “the library received at half price from the Canada Sunday School Union has increased very much the desire for reading, there is great need for instruction and for the short time that the school has been in existence there is good ground to hope that it had contributed to making up at least part of the deficiency.”<sup>28</sup> Sunday school libraries also provided instruction beyond literacy and religion. That was the case in North East Hope, where, in 1846, the school reported that after the library had been established in the heavily Dutch-speaking community, “it is pleasing to observe the progress [the children] are making in English reading.”<sup>29</sup>

The popularity of Sunday school libraries is also evident in the occasional requests that local schools put forth to obtain a new collection of books. A well-established school in Smith Falls wrote to the CSSU in 1844 and provided an update on the state of their library: “our library is getting to be rather stale, of course not so interesting as it was, yet the school is pretty well attended most of the time. I would observe that the books are eagerly sought by the children, but when they are offered one they reply they have had that.”<sup>30</sup>

Certainly, books were more prevalent in some areas than others. But, as the above examples illustrate, in at least the occasional town, Sunday school libraries facilitated instruction, practice, and, as early as 1844, preference in reading. The libraries distributed by the CSSU contained basic tracts and books within the growing genre of evangelical literature. Their readers were no doubt attracted to the dramatic stories of conversion, salvation, and spiritual purity. These publications were even more attractive, however, when they were available free of charge, as they were to thousands of settlers in Canada West in the 1840s through their local Sunday school libraries.

The local reports reprinted in the CSSU's annual publication reveal the diversity of interest and purpose these early forms of mass evangelical literature had in Canada West. The books, tracts, and periodicals of Sunday school libraries attracted many children to Sunday school who otherwise might not have attended. They allowed children to bring reading material home to their families and facilitated family reading practices, as well as independent reading for adults and children. They made literature accessible to rural communities in ways that promoted instruction in literacy and English, within an environment that was optional, and allowed an important element of choice and preference for the reader. Lay responses to the CSSU's mass system of distributing Sunday schools libraries were diverse, yet the comments found in local reports reveal an important element of lay agency in terms of reading practices.

### ***Conclusion***

Research on the history of reading in early nineteenth-century Ontario remains in its early stages. Given that the majority of literature available to non-elite lay settlers was produced and distributed by Christian institutions, historians have begun to consider the records of religious organizations in the examination of early reading practices.<sup>31</sup> The Canada Sunday School Union, however, as an inter-provincial, inter-denominational organization with mass networks of publication and distribution, has consistently been overlooked. The records of the CSSU, particularly its published annual reports, provide much more than the figures of the material ordered from their book depository (though that data is also included). What is even more significant about these records is the inclusion of local reports, written almost exclusively by lay settlers themselves. These brief conversations provide particularly valuable insight

into the perspective of the laity on a number of issues concerning the history of religion, as well as related questions of literacy, social relations, leisure, education, and childhood.

It is evident from these reports that Sunday school libraries were very well received in their local communities. Children and families actively engaged with the material provided by their local Sunday school library for various religious, educational, and leisurely purposes. The role of libraries became so central to most Sunday schools in the 1830s and 1840s that very few schools could survive without a circulating library.

Future research will determine what the lay voices found within the CSSU records had to say on other religious matters in the first half of the nineteenth century, and will perhaps compare these perspectives with those found in the religious press or official church and congregational records. If this preliminary analysis is any indication, lay settlers were involved in local religious practices in diverse ways, yet in most communities they were consciously participating in order to meet personal and family needs which were determined on their own terms.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Upper Canada became Canada West in 1841 and Ontario in 1867.
2. *Canada Sunday School Union Annual Report 1846* (Montreal: Canada Sunday School Union, 1846), 26. (Hereafter, *CSSU Annual Report*).
3. *CSSU Annual Report 1843-9*.
4. Mary Dawson, *The First 150 Years: The Richmond Hill Presbyterian Sunday School* (Richmond Hill, J.E Smith, 1961), n.p; Holly S. Seaman, "The Rev. William Smart, Presbyterian Minister of Elizabethtown," *Ontario History V* (1904): 178.
5. *Christian Guardian*, 27 November 1830.
6. As late as 1849 the CSSU reported more non-denominational Sunday schools than those that were denominational-specific. Both were counted in their annual reports. *CSSU Annual Report 1849*.
7. Janet Friskney, "Christian Faith in Print," in *History of the Book in Canada, Volume 1: Beginnings to 1840*, eds. Patricia Lockhart Fleming and Gilles Gallichan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 139-40.
8. Friskney, "Christian Faith in Print," 140.

9. *Kingston Chronicle*, 22 January 1819.
10. *Report of the Sunday School Union Society of Canada* (Montreal: Sunday School Union Society of Canada, 1824), 16.
11. *Canadian Temperance Advocate*, 5 (January 1840), 72.
12. *CSSU Annual Report 1845*, 9.
13. *CSSU Annual Report 1843*, 18.
14. Aileen Fyfe, "A Short History of the Religious Tract Society," in *From the Dairyman's Daughter to Worrals of the WAAF: The Religious Tract Society, Lutterworth Press and Children's Literature*, eds. Dennis Butts and Pat Garrett (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2006), 15.
15. Fyfe, "A Short History of the Religious Tract Society," 18.
16. *CSSU Annual Report 1846*, 11-12.
17. *CSSU Annual Report 1846*, 15.
18. *CSSU Annual Report 1848*, 13.
19. *CSSU Annual Report, 1843*, 18.
20. *Journal of Education for Upper Canada* (January 1851), 12.
21. *CSSU Annual Report 1843*, 40.
22. *CSSU Annual Report 1847*, 37-8.
23. *CSSU Annual Report 1848*, 29.
24. *CSSU Annual Report 1843*, 40.
25. *CSSU Annual Report 1844*, 34.
26. *CSSU Annual Report 1848*, 27.
27. *CSSU Annual Report 1845*, 37.
28. *CSSU Annual Report 1843*, 43.
29. *CSSU Annual Report 1847*, 33.
30. *CSSU Annual Report 1844*, 35.
31. The leading scholarship in this field can be found in Fleming and Lamonde, eds., *History of the Book in Canada*.