

## CSCH President's Address 2019

### **People of the Book? Reflections on Histories of Christianity in Canada**

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On Tuesday, 13 September 1904, over one hundred ministers and prominent laymen representing the range of Protestant churches in Toronto gathered together for an important luncheon. Held at Webb's Restaurant in the *Globe* building on Yonge Street, the luncheon was convened to honour John H. Ritson, the Foreign Secretary of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), and to celebrate the work of the BFBS in Canada and around the world.<sup>1</sup> It was a huge event in the city, bringing together some of Toronto's most important and influential ministers and laymen.<sup>2</sup> The *Globe* was there and subsequently printed an article describing the event and listing the most prominent guests in attendance.<sup>3</sup> Those men were representatives of Canadian auxiliaries and branches of the BFBS scattered across the country. John Ritson had himself traveled to Toronto from London to meet with them at this conference to discuss the coordination of the Bible Society's work in Canada. Local auxiliaries of the BFBS were established throughout British North America before Canada's Confederation in 1867, and the organization continued to expand so that, by the turn of the twentieth century, there were sixteen auxiliaries and more than a thousand branches in Canada. But throughout the nineteenth century, each of these auxiliaries worked independently of one another, raising donations, employing agents and booksellers, ordering bibles from the BFBS's Bible House in London, and sending money in order to pay for the books received and to help fund the organization's work of translating

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and distributing scriptures around the world. This 1904 conference was called with the aim of unifying these auxiliaries into a single Canadian Bible Society with shared resources for procuring books, crafting policies for distribution and sales, and promoting a common vision for expanding the network of auxiliaries and branches into Western Canada especially.

This series of meetings, held over a couple of days, took place during an important moment for the BFBS's history. That history was a crucial part of what made Canadian Christians a "People of the Book" – a characterization that suggests Canadians of many different denominations rooted the practice of their faith in the authority and direction of the printed Bible.

A relatively scarce commodity at the start of the nineteenth century, as the years passed the Bible became widely available to Canadian consumers. Material and legal circumstances determined this trajectory. There were copyright laws that made the reproduction of the Bible unique. The King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, including its 1885 revision, was the predominant and authoritative English-language version well into the twentieth century. By Royal Charter of the British Crown, only three printers were authorized to print the Authorized Version: the university presses at Cambridge and Oxford and the King's Printer (a role appointed for a set period of time). These restrictions extended throughout Britain as well as its colonies and dominions. No Canadian publisher or printer was granted the right to print the KJV and therefore, by law, its printing in Canada was done illegally. These legal restrictions, combined with the extraordinary capital outlay that was needed to establish a publishing operation with the capability of printing such a large and complicated book, and the relatively small market in British North America for bibles, prohibited the establishment of a permanent bible printing operation.<sup>4</sup>

As a consequence, the market for bibles in British North America, later Canada, had far less to do with printing and publishing than it did with importing and distribution. The single-most significant institution behind such activities was the BFBS. Formed in 1804 by the members of London's Clapham Sect, evangelicals who championed a number of social causes including education reforms and the abolition of slavery, the Society had a history almost as long as the Constitutional Act of 1791.

The Bible Society was formed with the express purpose of making bibles as widely and cheaply available as possible on the grounds that the possession of bibles, particularly by members of the lower and middle

classes, would benefit society as a whole.<sup>5</sup> In order to sidestep denominational controversies, the BFBS was committed to distributing bibles without notes, comments, or other accompanying literature. Its constitution was explicit on this point. Thus while Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists and Presbyterians might not agree on a variety of theological doctrines, this approach meant that they could at least agree to support the simple cause of making a bible available to anyone who might wish to have one.<sup>6</sup>

The BFBS expanded outside of the United Kingdom and by the 1820s had a number of auxiliaries and branches operating in British North America. Although these early years saw meagre growth and few well-established outposts for the BFBS, as the 1830s progressed, new local auxiliaries were established across the region as new branches came into being. Branches and auxiliaries were the bedrock of what grew to become an enormous network for bible distribution that reached across the entire expanse of Canadian territory. Local branches had committees that ensured the well-organized, methodical, and systematic distribution of bibles by volunteers who would visit homes selling bibles and asking for donations to support the “Bible Cause.”

Eventually, the BFBS hired paid agents to organize and expand the work. The Montreal Bible Society employed its first full-time agent as early as 1838. In that same year, the Society set itself the goal to “supply, by sale or gift, every destitute family in the Province, willing to receive the boon, with a copy of the Scriptures.” The resulting work necessitated a general agent to “manage the increasing business of the Society, to visit and form Auxiliaries and Depositories in the country, and organize and maintain a system of operations on an extended scale.”<sup>7</sup> Auxiliaries established book depositories to ensure that there were enough bibles to satisfy demand – a way of reducing their dependence on receiving regular timely shipments from Britain.

The BFBS often funded colporteurs and Biblewomen from its own funds designated for colportage around the world. Although local auxiliaries often relied on colportage, the BFBS executive in London held the purse strings and ultimately determined what endeavours would be financed and for how long. Direction given to colporteurs illuminates the values and moral imperatives by which they were expected to abide:

As a Colporteur of the British Columbia Bible Society you are to carry on sale for cash from house to house under the direction of the

Committee at New Westminster such Bibles and Testaments as shall be instructed to your charge and for which you are held responsible. In effecting sales there will be occasion for all your skill and talent while you make it manifest that the mere sale of the Book for the sake of gain is not your object, it is proper that every consideration relating to the value and usefulness of the word of God, and its benefit to young and old should be urged to induce families to possess what in thousands of instances has brought salvation to individuals and households . . .

Journal, record of any stock, transactions, account for month's labours, receive and track donations and donors . . .

You are to bear in mind that the Society you serve is not a Missionary Society employing men to go forth simply to converse or preach, but a *publishing* institution, and that its great work and the prominent work of all connected with it and must be to *circulate printed truth*. The sale of the Bible not for the Society's sake, but for the sake of souls is the leading characteristic of your work.<sup>8</sup>

These directives gave clear guidelines for the work for which colporteurs were employed, impressing upon the booksellers the spiritual significance of the work they were undertaking.

Alongside colporteurs, Biblewomen held an important role as the "feet" of the organization, carrying scriptures into places where it could be difficult for people to obtain them. Indeed, BFBS expenditure reports classed Biblewomen as colporteurs. They became an important part of the local distribution of bibles and the public activities of auxiliaries in city centres. Like colporteurs, BFBS reports celebrated Biblewomen for their hard work and their persistence. Instead of celebrating their successes selling bibles, however, reports trumpeted a Biblewoman's ability to bring respectability and gentility to neighbourhoods and homes where the hardships of industrialization and urbanization were evident.<sup>9</sup> There is no mention of any Biblewomen travelling great distances and overcoming physical and geographical challenges, notes that are common in colporteurs' reports. Instead, Biblewomen are much more often described as entering the homes of the poor, the needy, and the sick – activities that are rarely mentioned in reports authored by male colporteurs.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Canadian auxiliaries of the

BFBS distributed more than a million bibles and testaments and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations to support the BFBS's global enterprise. Elite professionals, businessmen, lawyers, doctors, industrialists, and philanthropists joined with clergymen from numerous Protestant denominations to occupy leadership positions on the executive committees of fourteen auxiliaries and more than twelve hundred branches that had spread across the country by the turn of the twentieth century.

This brief outline provides the broad strokes of the Bible Society's story in Canada in the nineteenth century. It provides an explanation of how Canadian Christians were able to obtain bibles by supporting the BFBS financially and by purchasing BFBS bibles – thereby cementing their status as a "People of the Book." It is a story that the BFBS fashioned for itself, and, by its efforts, made true of itself. The decisions made by Canadian BFBS leaders, and the way those leaders structured branches, auxiliaries, and workers, served to promote the vision that the BFBS was the champion of the Bible Cause, the great harbinger of the Word of God in the world, and that the prestige and significance of that role was unassailable. Until it was not.

By the time the BFBS met at Webb's Restaurant on a Tuesday afternoon in September 1904, its leaders were facing a serious threat to its prestigious status as the greatest distributor of bibles in Canada. The world was changing. And that meant Protestant clergymen and businessmen had to confront a different market landscape. Until now the BFBS has cornered the market by using its branches, auxiliaries, and the wide network of merchants and trade, to provide relatively easy access to cheap bibles. Their depositories and bookstores were the easiest way for Canadians not only to obtain a bible, but to select among a vast range of editions, sizes, formats, and styles.

But the ease of access to bibles was growing – for both consumers and wholesalers. The Bible Society was no longer the only game in town. A striking example of this can be found in the popular Eaton's Catalogue that first appeared in 1884 – sometimes referred to as simply the "Prairie Bible." Offering goods to Canadians through the mail, Eaton's Catalogue featured pages full of ornate and appealing bibles, rosaries, hymnals, and other religious goods. Nothing was especially novel about the bibles featured in those pages. But the ease with which Canadians could obtain bibles from a source other than a local BFBS depository challenged the otherwise unassailable hegemony the Society enjoyed in the market –

especially in rural areas.

At the turn of the century, other publishers and organizations entered the marketplace. Bibles produced by publishers in the United Kingdom and the United States were making their way to Canada in increasing numbers. Additionally, other organizations started to pursue the work of distributing bibles for religious purposes. In 1899, Gideons International was founded by two businessmen in Wisconsin with the aim of distributing bibles at no cost and, later, placing them in hotel rooms for the use of travelling businessmen. The Gideons also made bibles available through hospitals, prisons, schools, and the military.

Notes from various BFBS leaders who presented at the conference also reveal a deep anxiety about the changing marketplace for bibles, and the types of establishments that displayed the Bible for purchase. John Ritson, the Foreign Secretary of the BFBS in London, drew attention to this as particularly concerning where the quality, reputation, and respectability of a bookseller were important parts of the Bible enterprise. Citing the sale of the Bible in general stores, he asked the delegates: “Would you go into a place where corsets are made and sold if you wanted to have a Bible? I would not. What man would? You would go into a respectable book shop if you wanted a Bible. Would you go into a butcher shop if you wanted a Bible? Yet some of our depots are in butcher shops.”<sup>11</sup> Ritson urged the Canadian BFBS leaders to only engage respectable booksellers to carry the Bible Society’s books so that the prestige and reverence of the books might be protected.

As the Bible Society leaders gathered in Toronto they were faced with these unsettling realities. But this was ultimately a crisis of the meta-narrative – the questions and anxieties they faced were really about their power and influence and the place in the world that they had created for their organization. That grand narrative of their own work was very particular: it was dominated by the activities and leadership of men; it was dominated by the advancement of British culture and a European and British worldview for the betterment of all societies and peoples around the world; and it was dominated by a powerful few leaders and executives directing activities from the centre out into the fringes, from the metropolis to the hinterland. There was considerable weight behind these concerns for the leaders of the Bible Society as they looked past the BFBS’s centenary, coupled with cautious optimism. The minutes of these Bible Society meetings in Toronto in 1904 reflect enormous hope for the future of a

Canadian Bible Society while also revealing real anxiety about the changing landscape.

A good example of how the BFBS's grand story was beginning to show signs of wear can be found in the Miramichi Auxiliary of the BFBS – an Auxiliary that offered a stark contrast to what was elsewhere the usual practice of leaving the leadership and management of such organizations in the hands of men. The Auxiliary at Miramichi was run exclusively by women. Established in 1821, very early in the history of the BFBS's work in North America, the Miramichi Auxiliary continued to operate as a fully independent auxiliary under the authority of the London Committee. Nor was it in any way considered lesser or subordinate despite its female leadership. Listed alongside other auxiliaries in the BFBS's published annual reports, no other Auxiliary was ever established at Miramichi.<sup>12</sup> Although the grand narrative of the BFBS and its triumph in distributing bibles in nineteenth-century Canada is a deeply gendered one, the group of women who managed all of this Auxiliary's affairs serves to subvert powerfully what is otherwise a narrative constructed wholly around male domination in leadership. The BFBS was proud of that narrative and promoted the fact that businessmen and clergymen dominated its leadership where few women had managerial or executive influence. Although women were certainly celebrated in their roles as Biblewomen, that was a much different sphere offering a much more limited involvement in the Bible enterprise as a whole.

A second example that challenges this meta-narrative is the prominent role that First Nations actors played in the BFBS's work – particularly with respect to the work of translating the Bible into Indigenous languages. The central role that these translations played in the BFBS's "Bible Cause" is reflected both in the work of James Evans, whose syllabics became the foundation of an entire Cree language Bible in the 1860s, and in the life of Peter Jones, who travelled to London and partnered with the BFBS on completing a Chippeway translation of the Bible. Although these activities were undoubtedly directed and driven by the BFBS, openness and mutual learning characterized the tenor of the dialogue between the BFBS and these figures. In time, however, that would fade. In its place, BFBS leaders in Canada trumpeted a grand narrative of the "Bible Cause" in Canada where the role Indigenous peoples played in the effort receded over the course of the nineteenth century to the point where it became all but invisible.<sup>13</sup>

The central importance of small local branches to the successful sale and distribution of bibles serves as yet another instance where the BFBS's triumphant and centralized narrative is disrupted. Local BFBS volunteers and representatives at the grassroots level were those most responsible for creating and operating a workable bible distribution network. As times passed, however, the initiative and energy with which these local branches were operated was increasingly supplanted by a grand narrative that diminished face-to-face encounters on the ground – highlighting instead the role of the Society's central leadership. Yet it was undeniably the work of small auxiliaries that fostered critical local relationships on which the Bible Society's success rested throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

The Auxiliary at Miramichi, the central role played by Indigenous translators and translations, and the importance rural and remote BFBS branches, are all stories that were lost among the larger stories that the BFBS leaders told themselves about themselves. At the luncheon at Webb's Restaurant in Toronto in 1904, Bible Society leaders and public figures celebrated not these sites of disparate successes, but a grand narrative of triumph in the "Bible Cause." As a result, these more complex and hidden stories remained peripheral.

These examples provide some direction for us as contemporary scholars and members of the Canadian Society for Church History. These stories, which offer a more subversive narrative about the BFBS's successes (and failures) in Canada, encourage us to face new challenges in the historiography of Canadian Christianity. They hold out a challenge to look past the well-known grand narratives of the history of the Christian faith, churches, and religious experiences in Canada, if we allow them to so challenge our work. Beyond those familiar stories and framings are new ways of understanding power dynamics, social cohesion, and counter-cultural communities. By being attentive to those framings, we can uncover how these stories were constructed and the choices that were made to privilege certain figures and events above others.

In these examples from the history of the Bible Society in Canada, we can heed a call to be all the more critical and generous in our scholarship. These are two of the greatest attributes of this Society. Its members are rigorous in the scholarly research and the level of analysis that is represented in the papers presented at each annual meeting. Papers delivered in this venue are met with insightful questions, and, where a key premise is flawed or a key piece of evidence is missing, the presenters will



be challenged and pushed to think critically. We must turn that critical lens on ourselves, welcoming self-examination of our own methods, biases, and blind spots in our research and approaches to history. Let us continue to challenge and deconstruct the very powerful grand narratives we encounter. We must look for the people who are hidden in the sources we research.

There are compelling stories about the role of women in Protestant and Catholic churches and in all Canadian religious institutions that must continue to be examined through the lens of power and the tensions between men and women in these places. There are powerful stories that have been hidden from us by our methodologies and our epistemological approaches. Listening to and welcoming dialogue with Indigenous scholars will open up new ways to see the history of Christianity in Canada and beyond. There are emerging scholars and graduate students whose research questions and methods can help this Society expand its character and identity. May we welcome these new scholars with the generosity and scholarly rigour that has characterized this membership in the past.

### *Endnotes*

1. The restaurant was founded by Harry Webb “where 300 diners could be seated at once.” See Mary F. Williamson, “‘Prime Minister to the Interior’: Thomas and Harry Webb, for eighty years bakers, confectioners, caterers and restaurateurs,” *Culinary Chronicles* No. 50 (Autumn 2006): 5-7.
2. The proceedings of the luncheon, the two days of the conference, and the final public meeting were all recorded and bound for the British and Foreign Bible Society. The bound copy is held in the British and Foreign Bible Society library among John Ritson’s notebooks from his tours in Canada at Cambridge University Library. BSA/D1/2/49, 1 (hereafter, Proceedings).
3. *The Globe* (Toronto), 15 September 1904.
4. The role of patent holder and an explanation of the current owner of Royal Letters of Patent as The Queen’s Printer in relation to the Authorized Version can be found in “The Queen’s Printer Patent,” Cambridge University Press, <http://www.cambridge.org/about-us/who-we-are/queens-printers-patent>.
5. Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 35

6. Roger Steer, "'Without Note or Comment': Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," in *Sowing the Word: The Cultural Impact of the British and Foreign Bible Society, 1804-2004*, eds. Stephen K Batalden, Kathleen Cann, and John Dean (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2004), 63-80.
7. *The Forty-Fourth Report of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1848), cxli.
8. Minutes of the New Westminster auxiliary of the British and Foreign Bible Society, Provincial Archives of British Columbia Q/R/B77n, 23-27.
9. Bettina Bradbury provides important analysis of the urban settings in which Biblewomen worked in *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993); See also the classic study of urban challenges in Montreal in Herbert Ames, *The City Below the Hill* (Montreal: The Bishop Engraving and Printing Company, 1897).
10. For an example of the BFBS featuring the work of Biblewomen, see *Report of the Montreal Auxiliary Bible Society* (Montreal: John Lovell & Son, LTD., 1907), 89.
11. Proceedings.
12. Minutes of the Upper Canada Bible Society, 15 October 1872, Library and Archives Canada, MG17F1 V1, 186.
13. For an analysis of Bible translation in Cree taken on by Peter Jones at the River Credit mission, see Donald B. Smith, *Sacred Feathers: The Reverend Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) and the Mississauga Indians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
14. Reports of the British and Foreign Bible Society, printed and distributed annually, provided comprehensive lists of auxiliaries and branches in foreign territories, and included notes regarding unique or special developments in a particular region.