PROHIBITION IN ONTARIO

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PREFACE

After a long history of agitation by temperance workers, the movement to prohibit the consumption of intoxicating beverages reached its peak in Ontario during, and in the years immediately following, the First World War. In 1916 the provincial government, under Sir William Hearst, enacted the Ontario Temperance Act, which forbade the selling of liquor for beverage purposes and the keeping, giving, or having of liquor except in a private dwelling. Intended as a wartime measure, to promote economy and Ontario's fighting ability, it was to last only for the duration of the war. In October 1919 a referendum was held to determine whether the act should be repealed or retained on a peacetime basis. The citizens of Ontario, including the recently enfranchised women, voted by a majority of over four hundred thousand to establish 'prohibition' as the permanent law of the province. A further referendum in April 1921 resulted in the termination of the private importation of liquor ordered from outside the province. The legislation which followed proved to be the greatest success that the prohibitionists would achieve in Ontario.

The Ontario Temperance Act, the legislative expression of prohibition, made it unlawful to possess beer or liquor, except in one's own home, and to sell liquor in the form of a drink. Taverns, bars, and all liquor outlets, except the government dispensaries, were closed. It was, however, possible for a doctor to prescribe alcohol to any patient he felt was in need of it, and the usual way for a man to legally obtain liquor was to be 'ill' and therefore require a doctor's prescription.

Fearful of destroying the grape growing industry in Ontario, and apparently hoping that such an allowance would make the law seem less drastic, native wines were exempted from the provisions of the Temperance Act. Until the referendum in 1921, it was also possible to order a supply from Montreal or elsewhere; however, in that year the voting resulted in the cutting off of external sources, while at the same time the Quebec government decided to stop shipments to 'dry' provinces.

Thus the net was tightened. But it was never forbidden to manufacture alcoholic beverages in Ontario and brewers and distillers continued to operate throughout the period, making substantial profits selling their wares to Quebec and to the United States--which was supposed to be 'dryer' than Ontario. The Canadian government, which controlled the exporting of liquor, never seriously tried to stop the flow across the border. Tiny rowboats--indeed anything that would float--were given clearance by Canadian customs officials to sail to 'Mexico' with cargoes of liquor destined to be smuggled across the line--or back into Ontario!

Needless to say, a great deal of this liquor, legally floating around the province, inevitably found its way into the homes of Ontarians who were otherwise denied its pleasures. And illicit stills and illegal drinking outlets grew apace. The difficult task of enforcing the Ontario Temperance Act in 1919 fell upon the shoulders of the newly elected United Farmers of Ontario government, led by Premier E. C. Drury and Attorney-General W. E. Raney. Untried but undaunted, and firm in their prohibitionist convictions, they attempted to enforce the liquor laws, resolutely and impartially.

Despite the practice of referring the question to the people

by means of referenda, the temperance issue continued to be a major subject of discussion in the press, in the legislature, and on political platforms; it remained an important political question largely because the prohibitionists were aware that the government responsible for the enforcement of the Temperance Act must be fully behind it. Each political party claimed to be the only group capable of properly administering the act and of handling the problem of intemperance; because of the prominence of the issue, each political leader, at the very least, had to promise to carry out the will of the people as expressed in the referenda.

This book is concerned with the study of prohibition as a public issue and as a factor in the politics of Ontario from 1919 to 1923, the years which saw the astonishing rise and fall of a farmers' government in the province. The first chapter attempts to provide a background by exploring some of the reasons for the tremendous strength of the prohibition movement in Ontario. It is a subject upon which an entire book could and should be written, and is thus necessarily a cursory examination. Chapter II discusses prohibition as a factor in the 1919 provincial election, which resulted in the unexpected defeat of the Hearst administration and the surprising UFO victory. The next two chapters describe the 1919 and 1921 temperance referenda campaigns, while the following chapter is concerned with the administration of the OTA under Drury and Raney. Chapter VI discusses the role of prohibition in the return to power of the Conservatives under Howard Ferguson in the election of 1923. The final chapter explains briefly the fall of prohibition. It is hoped that the reader will enjoy exploring one of the stranger periods in our history.

Prohibition in Ontario

CHAPTER I

'THE GREAT AND IRRESISTIBLE WAVE OF MORAL ADVANCE'

Dominion Rally Song

(Tune—The Maple Leaf)

O Canada, our homeland dear,
Scion of proud Britain Thou!
We come with loyal hearts to plead
The loyal British vow
That to thy broad domain no more
King Rum may have admission,
And with our loved old flag may float
The ensign 'Prohibition.'

CHORUS

Then rise as freemen staunch and true,
Our Country calls! Defend her!
For God and Home and Native Land
Stand Guard! Make no surrender.

Too long beneath Rum's iron yoke
We, of boasted liberty
Submissive bowed, nor scorned the bonds
Of cruel tyranny.
Now hear our prayer, that law be framed
Without the least condition,
To break the shameful rule, and grant
Our Nation Prohibition.

A common liberty we claim,
In spite of party, clan, or creed
A common enemy we fight
A common cause we plead.
Then storm the citadel of Wrong
With Votes as ammunition,
And usher in the welcome dawn
Of Total Prohibition.

Mrs Lottie Moore, Teeswater

Canadian White Ribbon Tidings, July 1919

An anonymous Liverpudlian once said to Blanche Read-Johnston of Barrie, honorary secretary of the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union: 'We want to know about Canada; we in England cannot understand British people tolerating prohibition.'[1] From the perspective of the 'new morality' and relative 'decadence' of Canadian society in the 1970s, it is not difficult to understand this Englishman's incredulity concerning this amazing North American phenomenon. How could any population vote itself out of one of its fundamental privileges—a man's (or a woman's) right to a drink? Why did the drinking of beer and liquor assume such importance as to become one of the leading public controversies of the day, discussed on almost every political platform and written about in almost all issues of the daily press? How indeed did the movement to prohibit the sale and use of intoxicating beverages gain so much support and become so successful in Ontario that the honest consumption of alcohol was no longer possible? How did it happen that all taverns, bars, pubs, saloons, and liquor shops were firmly closed, and everyone—from war-weary veterans to urban socialites—was reduced to drinking near-beer, native wines, and tea?

In the early twentieth century there was a need for temperance in drinking which is difficult to understand today. There were plenty of examples of homeless waifs whose fathers had turned to alcohol and whose mothers had died or given up through unhappiness—with no welfare state to take charge of society's wretched. Taverns abounded in towns and cities and incapable drunks on the street were not an uncommon sight. It was not

[1] *Pioneer*, Toronto, April 1, 1921.

surprising that a largely abstaining middle class blamed alcohol and drunkenness for the social problems of poverty, vice, and crime. It was a fact that liquor usually did play a part in such misfortunes.

But it was also an era of 'prohibitions': all manner of things were disapproved of, and attempts were made to legislate against the offenders. On an Ontario Sunday in 1919, for example, it was forbidden to buy ice cream, newspapers, or a cigar; to play baseball, tennis, or golf; to fish or take a steamboat excursion. The Lord's Day Alliance carefully guarded against the breaking of the Sabbath. Horse-racing suffered from restrictions; 'moving pictures' were heavily censored or prohibited; the use of tobacco was increasingly attacked. In the Michigan State legislature a bill was introduced to make the wearing of high heels a crime; the Farmers' Sun of Toronto, January 29, 1921, suggested they should go a step further and put the ban on 'drug store complexions.' The Citizens' Liberty League, an organization formed to fight restrictions on individual freedom in Ontario, complained that the personal liberty and pride of Canadians were suffering unnecessarily: 'The Woman's Christian Temperance Union are already framing up a number of prohibition laws whereby Canadians will wear bibs and tuckers, curtsy to the Methodist Preacher and be supervised the same as our Anglo-Saxon brothers supervise the inferior races of niggers, Indians, and Coolies. Canadians will be officially placed on a similar footing—a nice standing for a race who proved their fighting value on the Fields of France.'[2]

[2]Public Archives of Ontario, Drury Papers, 1920, Temperance Act: Referendum; proselytizing quotation on Liberty League notepaper used in letter to Drury.