

# Making a Bible Enterprise: James Thomson and the British and Foreign Bible Society in British North America, 1838–1842

Stuart Barnard

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Résumé de l'article

La lecture et l'étude de la Bible au Canada a façonné la manière dont la foi chrétienne y est pratiquée, même s'il fallut attendre le milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle pour que les bibles y soient largement accessibles. Dans cet article, j'évoque les jalons historiques qui ont marqué la distribution de bibles en Amérique du Nord britannique et m'intéresse particulièrement aux activités de la Société biblique britannique et étrangère (BFBS), qui allait devenir le plus grand distributeur de bibles du monde. Je m'intéresserai à la figure de James Thomson, agent de la BFBS en Amérique du Nord britannique de 1838 à 1842, qui, par son travail, contribua grandement à renforcer l'influence canadienne au sein de la Société, en plus d'étendre la portée de cette dernière et de veiller à ce que les colonies soient bien pourvues en matière de bibles. Sous sa gouverne, des sociétés bibliques auxiliaires virent le jour un peu partout et des réseaux de distribution furent établis. Thomson jeta les bases devant assurer le succès de la BFBS, qui allait dominer le commerce des bibles en Amérique du Nord britannique durant la seconde moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

# MAKING A BIBLE ENTERPRISE: James Thomson and the British and Foreign Bible Society in British North America, 1838–1842

Stuart BARNARD  
University of Calgary

ABSTRACT

The reading and study of bibles in Canada has shaped the ways in which the Christian faith is practiced, but it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that bibles became widely available. This article examines the historical developments of bible distribution in British North America, focusing on the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), which became the largest distributor of bibles in the world. Strengthening the BFBS's Canadian influence was its agent James Thomson, whose work in British North America between 1838 and 1842 expanded the organization's reach and ensured an ample supply of bibles in the colonies. Through the expansion of local Bible Society auxiliaries and the establishment of distribution networks, Thomson laid the foundations for the BFBS's success in establishing a successful bible enterprise that would dominate the trade in British North America for the rest of the century.

RÉSUMÉ

La lecture et l'étude de la Bible au Canada a façonné la manière dont la foi chrétienne y est pratiquée, même s'il fallut attendre le milieu du *xix*<sup>e</sup> siècle pour que les bibles y soient largement accessibles. Dans cet article, j'évoque les jalons historiques qui ont marqué la distribution de bibles en Amérique du Nord britannique et m'intéresse particulièrement aux activités de la Société biblique britannique et étrangère (BFBS), qui allait devenir le plus grand distributeur de bibles du monde. Je m'intéresserai à la figure de James Thomson, agent de la BFBS en Amérique du Nord britannique de 1838 à 1842, qui, par son travail, contribua grandement à renforcer l'influence canadienne au sein de la Société, en plus d'étendre la portée de cette dernière et de veiller à ce que les colonies soient bien pourvues en matière de bibles. Sous sa gouverne, des sociétés bibliques auxiliaires virent le jour un peu partout et des réseaux de distribution furent établis.

Thomson jeta les bases devant assurer le succès de la BFBS, qui allait dominer le commerce des bibles en Amérique du Nord britannique durant la seconde moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

In December 1838, James Thomson travelled from New York to Montreal to begin work there as an agent of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS). He had spent much of the previous six years in the Caribbean, establishing Bible Society auxiliaries and organizing shipments of bibles to local communities, and he set out to do the same in British North America. His work in the region lasted for the next several years until the spring of 1842, when he returned to Britain. While in British North America, Thomson was based out of Montreal and worked closely with the leaders of the Montreal Auxiliary Bible Society there to extend its work throughout Lower Canada. Thomson travelled to Upper Canada in the spring and summer of 1839, working his way to Toronto and a number of townships in that region. He spent the summer and fall of both 1840 and 1841 in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia before returning to Montreal where he spent each winter. Thomson had two main goals during these years. He set out to establish a reliable supply of bibles in British North America by streamlining ordering, ensuring regular shipments from Britain, establishing well-stocked depositories in major cities, and improving overland distribution. He also was concerned with expanding the reach of the BFBS in those colonies, and he established and strengthened numerous local auxiliaries and branches. This paper will examine the letters written by Thomson during these years to Andrew Brandram, the BFBS's Foreign Secretary in London. These letters demonstrate that Thomson's agency in British North America built a reliable and efficient supply chain of books from Britain to North America and a local distribution network that made it easier for colonists to obtain those books. The tensions and conflicts in Thomson's letters between the colonies and London reveal that British North Americans had their own demands and tastes regarding the Bible, but because Britain remained the principal source in supplying the books, the bibles they received were subject to the decisions made overseas. Under Thomson's agency in British North America, the British and Foreign Bible Society became the dominant supplier of bibles and represents an early and formative example of Canada's long history of receiving books by importing from abroad.

The British and Foreign Bible Society was established in 1804 with the distinct purpose of making cheap bibles available in Britain and in foreign countries. The BFBS was a non-denominational Protestant organization whose membership represented a number of church backgrounds. Central to its constitution was the proviso that the bibles it distributed must contain “no note or comment” to ensure that no position in denominational debates about particular biblical texts, often expressed in biblical commentary and notes, would be perceived to be favoured by the Society. This ensured that the BFBS could obtain support from the widest possible base and maintain neutrality in the sectarian debates over theological issues.<sup>1</sup> The BFBS was governed by a committee in London and employed three Secretaries, two of whom oversaw work in Britain. The third was a Foreign Secretary who oversaw the growing number of auxiliaries outside of Britain. These had varying levels of local autonomy but answered to the Committee and the Secretaries of the “Parent Society” in London. Local auxiliaries and branches were governed by committees that organized bible distribution and the collection of donations and subscriptions, and local Bible Society branches had lists of members and contributors who supported the BFBS.

The money raised by auxiliaries and branches was sent to the BFBS Committee in London to subsidize the printing, binding, and distribution of bibles and to support the expansion of the BFBS overseas. A royal patent restricted the printing of the Authorized Version in Britain, and the Bible Society was the largest wholesaler of bibles, which were printed exclusively by the privileged university presses at Cambridge and Oxford, and the royal printer. This patent extended to all British dominions and territories, and because no printer in any of Britain’s North American colonies had obtained permission from the Crown to print the Authorized Version, colonists there relied exclusively on importing to supply its demand for bibles, adding to the importance of the Bible Society’s auxiliaries there.<sup>2</sup> The number of bibles published in the United States expanded rapidly in the nineteenth century, and although some of those bibles were imported into British North America, there was never a regular flow of bibles from American publishers. Questions of whether bibles could be legally imported and the added cost of duties paid on importing them restricted British North American access to American bibles.<sup>3</sup> These restrictions on printing the Bible domestically and in obtaining them from the United States limited the competitive market for bibles and increased the importance of

benevolent societies in supplying bibles in British North America.<sup>4</sup> Because of its focus on the distribution of bibles exclusively and its desire to involve members of all Protestant denominations, the reach of the BFBS grew and it came to dominate the bible trade in British North America. Between 1805 and 1820, only a small number of BFBS auxiliaries were established, and bible distribution was intermittent and irregular.<sup>5</sup> After 1820, more auxiliaries were established in British North America, so that by the time of Thomson's arrival in 1838, most of the colonies' larger urban centres, including Halifax, Pictou, St. John's, Quebec, Montreal, Kingston, Brockville, and Toronto, had well-established BFBS auxiliaries, each with several associated branches. Together, more than 50 auxiliaries and branches were scattered throughout British North America in 1838 when Thomson began his work there.<sup>6</sup>

James Thomson was a Scottish evangelist who was born in Creetown and educated in Glasgow. Though he was never ordained into ministry, he served as co-pastor with James Haldane in Leith Walk Baptist Church in Edinburgh. It was here that he appears to have gained interest in the monitorial schools system of the British and Foreign Schools Society and the work of the British and Foreign Bible Society in distributing bibles. He spent several months in London studying with the BFSS before embarking on a life of extraordinary travel in the Americas and Europe over the next three decades.<sup>7</sup> The Leith Walk Church supported his first year of travel to Argentina to establish monitorial schools in cooperation with the BFSS and to distribute bibles for the BFBS. Thomson officially became an agent of the BFBS when leaving Peru in 1824, and he continued to work on behalf of the organization for much of the next three decades.

Thomson was one of several agents employed by the British and Foreign Bible Society in this period. In addition to its connections with local leaders of auxiliaries around the world, the BFBS employed as its representatives in foreign countries agents who were tasked with strengthening existing networks and establishing new auxiliaries under its control. These agents answered to the Foreign Secretary and reported the progress that the BFBS was making in a particular region. Employed as a foreign agent for the BFBS between 1824 and 1849, James Thomson toured extensively throughout South America, the Caribbean, North America, Mexico and Yucatan, and Spain. Before his work in British North America began in

1838, he worked at length in South America and Mexico, made a brief tour of Upper and Lower Canada in 1830, and continued his work in the Caribbean until his journey to Montreal in 1838. On his travels in Latin America and the Caribbean in the 1820s and 1830s, he gained important experience in establishing branches and auxiliaries for the Bible Society, translated biblical texts into indigenous languages, and recruited businessmen and colonial leaders to support the BFBS. Thomson witnessed extraordinary revolutionary upheaval in Latin America, and in letters to Andrew Brandram he relayed these events as well as the friendships and connections he made with South American liberators like Bernardo O'Higgins, Jose de San Martin, Bernardino Rivadavia, Francesco de Paula Santander, and Simon Bolivar. In Mexico, Thomson saw his work for the BFBS disrupted because of uprisings in Vera Cruz and Oaxaca where political unrest became widespread.<sup>8</sup> He wrote to Brandram about the limitations on the BFBS's work, "owing to the persons in those places who had the Scriptures on sale having fled and left their affairs in confusion in consequence of the present revolutionary change."<sup>9</sup> For much of the time he was working in the region, Thomson dealt with the realities and inconveniences of political upheaval and the impact it had on his mission to establish schools and distribute bibles.<sup>10</sup>

Thomson arrived in Montreal in 1838 as the first BFBS agent to spend an extended period of time in the region. John West had toured British North America on behalf of the BFBS in 1825, a tour that was concerned with reporting to the BFBS on the state of auxiliaries and branches. Thomson's tour of the colonies in 1830 was of a similar fashion, and a letter he wrote to Brandram after his tour provided an overview of the state of the BFBS presence there to ascertain how best its work could be developed. Unlike the earlier tours, Thomson's work from 1838 to 1842 was an extended mission in which he took a much more active role in establishing Bible Society branches and shaping local bible distribution. Thomson wrote to Brandram regularly to report on the developments in his work and to explain the needs of the colonists. His letters provide extraordinary insight into the distribution of bibles in Canada in this early period, as they reveal the complex cultural, material, and social issues that Thomson faced in British North America and the challenges they presented to his efforts on behalf of the Bible Society. The letters show the conflict that arose between the BFBS auxiliaries in North America and the central Committee in

London, and reveal the way in which important connections were established with Britain to create the distribution network that provided most of the bibles in the colonies. Portions of Thomson's letters to Brandram were published each year in the BFBS's Annual Reports, which were circulated around the world to auxiliaries and their members. When Thomson began his work in British North America, many of the local Bible Society leaders knew of him, both from his previous visit in 1830 and because they had read about his work in the Annual Reports.<sup>11</sup>

Thomson arrived in Montreal at an important time in Lower Canada. The colony had recently suspended its legislative bodies because of the major rebellion that had begun in the previous year and carried on into 1838. Looking ahead to his arrival, Thomson expressed concern in a letter to Brandram that the rebellions might adversely affect his work there. Thomson noted that he had stopped in New York for a few days "to make full inquiry about the political state of the Canadas, previous to our setting out for Montreal, according to our original intention; or for Nova Scotia, should the two provinces above named be in such agitation as might hinder Bible Society work."<sup>12</sup> Having experienced firsthand the disruption of revolutionary upheaval to his work as a Bible Society agent in Latin America, Thomson knew that the uprisings in the Canadas might necessitate a move to Nova Scotia to avoid the same. Tensions were still high in Lower Canada by the time Thomson was due to arrive in Montreal late in 1838. The uprising in November of that year in the Châteauguay region and Kahnawake had been dealt with quickly by British troops, but there was anger towards government institutions.<sup>13</sup> Although Thomson does not record whether he was given assurances of social stability from contacts in Montreal, he may have received some word that the situation was satisfactorily peaceful, as he set off regardless and arrived there in December 1838.

During his travels in Lower Canada in 1838, his concerns about the rebellion were substantiated, as he witnessed the remaining marks of the conflict. Thomson wrote of seeing burned villages and a number of sentry posts, and at one point an excitable soldier shot ahead of Thomson's travelling group "gun bayonet and all . . . ordered us to stop and return to the village."<sup>14</sup> The effects of the rebellion were still being felt not only in travel but also in the Bible meetings that had been organized ahead of

Thomson's visits. Bible meetings gave travelling agents an opportunity to meet with local Bible Society leaders and those who had been invited along to hear of the BFBS's broader work in order that they might be recruited as supporters. Thomson wrote to Brandram that at Odelltown, Bible meetings were cancelled because of "the military state of things, and some other hindrances" which required that the meetings be deferred "until some other more favourable time."<sup>15</sup> In spite of the concerns about militarism and unrest because of the rebellion, Thomson continued to tour the Canadas to gauge the need for bibles in the colonies and expand the Bible Society's reach.

To support his work, Thomson connected with leaders of the Protestant communities in the places he visited. The leaders of the Montreal Auxiliary Bible Society, which had been established in 1820, provided assistance and friendship during his time in that city. Henry Wilkes was a Congregational minister whose career in Montreal began only a few years before Thomson's arrival and spanned more than half of the nineteenth century into the 1880s. Wilkes was a staunch advocate of the Bible Society's work in Lower Canada and was a supporter of numerous benevolent and religious societies in the province.<sup>16</sup> Another Protestant minister, Rev. W. F. Curry, was an agent of the Canada Education and Home Missionary Society, who was described as having been "extensively known as a clergyman of excellent character, whose Protestantism, piety, and veracity, no responsible person has dared to question."<sup>17</sup> It was these two "valuable and esteemed friends" with whom Thomson associated most closely and toured a number of communities surrounding Montreal with a view of making connections with local ministers and establishing local Bible Society branches.

As he travelled throughout British North America, Thomson found success in establishing Bible Society branches. The formation of the Society at Cornwall offers a glimpse into the process by which an auxiliary was established on January 3, 1839. Thomson travelled to Cornwall with a resident who introduced him to local ministers. He made explicit mention in his letters to Brandram of the local clergymen, both the Scottish minister as well as the Anglican clergyman, as necessary to forming a local branch. The support of local churches appears to have been a pre-requisite for any attempt at establishing a branch in a particular location. Also necessary was the support of other local leaders "who might be of service in our Bible



cause.”<sup>18</sup> In the case of Cornwall, Colonel Philpotts was singled out as an important figure to the establishment of a local branch, because of his previous involvement as a vice-president of the Toronto Bible Society. His family connections were advantageous, as he was the brother to the Bishop of Exeter in Britain. The Colonel was residing at that time in Cornwall and desired to assist in the establishment of a local branch. Leading figures in government also commonly presided over official meetings and expressed their support for the BFBS work. At Charlottetown on Prince Edward Island, Governor Sir Charles Fitzroy presided over the meeting of the Bible Society auxiliary. There was also a Ladies’ Bible Society on the island, of which the Governor’s wife Lady Mary Fitzroy was Patroness, and in whose work she was actively involved.<sup>19</sup> Having elite members of colonial society at the helm of local branches lent prestige to the local Society and reaffirmed the authority with which the Bible Society sought to encourage its mission.

The branch at Cornwall was notable in its origins because of its close proximity to the military tension that arose from the rebellion, and Philpotts’s involvement may have exacerbated that tension. Thomson wrote that “the whole of this country at present is in a military attitude, and drilling bodies and posted sentinels are to be seen here and there in all directions. But Cornwall and other frontier spots are filled with military men and things. The state of matters was of course unfavourable to the establishment of a Bible Society,” no doubt because of the tensions and the accompanying suspicion of any gatherings of people. Nonetheless, the meeting was held “in a private way,” and three of four local colonels became office-bearers in the local auxiliary. A fourth colonel who led the Glengarry regiment was a practicing Catholic and not among those meeting to establish the branch.<sup>20</sup> The patriots’ suspicion and bad feelings towards the government forced what would otherwise have been a very public event to be muted in order that it might escape attention.<sup>21</sup> Where these types of meetings would have usually been widely advertised in other communities, the sense of rebellion and political upheaval led to a more cautious and secretive meeting at times, especially because of the common involvement of British military men in the proceedings.

The formation of Bible Societies, and indeed community members’ participation in these societies was often shaped by the seasons and the

times in which such meetings were planned. In the warmer months of late spring through to the autumn, Thomson encountered numerous scenarios where Bible meetings were conflicting with the work in the fields, owing to the long days and to the demands of planting or harvesting. At Gay's River, Thomson found that "we had but a very small assembly. The reason was obvious, the people were busy in a more than common degree in their fields with the hay crop. This same full occupation of the Farmers at the period I found to interfere with our Bible operations a good deal in other places as I moved along."<sup>22</sup> Thomson recognized that the seasons would have a large impact on the people's availability to attend meetings, but continued his travelling and visitations "both in season and out of season."<sup>23</sup>

The success that Thomson found in establishing new branches made it clear that a reliable supply of bibles was needed. To that end, Thomson established what would become the foundation of British North America's bible enterprise for the rest of the nineteenth century, the regular supply of bibles and extensive distribution networks that carried them. Recognizing the opportunities for expansion of the Bible Society's work in British North America, Thomson promoted cooperation between auxiliaries that had established themselves, independent of each other, with the Parent Society in London. Because of the need for continuity amongst the branches, consistency in policies, and coordination of bible distribution, Thomson encouraged broadening the existing practice of having branches associate directly with an urban auxiliary. The clearest case of this was in the autumn of 1839 when Thomson visited the Bible Society auxiliary in Toronto. At a meeting of the auxiliary's Committee on September 21, Thomson urged the leaders to shift their focus to the broader field of Upper Canada, and he wrote to Brandram that "our friends finally fixed and arranged regarding the new name and a new extent of their Society. It is to be, and now is, the Upper Canada Bible Society, and embraces all the Province, except some portions lying on the Eastern boundaries, and which may be more advantageously joined to the Montreal Society."<sup>24</sup> This was advantageous in simplifying the administration of bibles being sent to local branches and donations received from them, which created a much more organized distribution network, providing local branches stronger personal and organizational connections with leaders in urban centres.

Once the Upper Canada Bible Society was established, there was a new sense of opportunity at what could be accomplished. The Committee hired a travelling agent who would call upon all of the local branches which were associated under the leadership of the newly formed UCBS, ensuring that the necessary bibles were being supplied and that the work of the Society was being carried on in each of these locals. The Reverend James Richardson filled the position as travelling agent, earning a salary of £150.<sup>25</sup> Richardson was a staunch Methodist who, after being employed as the Bible Society agent until 1858, became a bishop in the Methodist Church. He was closely involved in the debates surrounding church establishment and the circles in which these debates played out, and he was deeply involved in the religious structures of Upper Canada.<sup>26</sup> The UCBS Committee's appointment of Richardson signaled its recognition that the Society's expansion required the attention and administrative support of a traveling agent who was well connected in religious and social circles. By encouraging the UCBS's expansion in Upper Canada through Richardson's employment as agent, and by establishing the UCBS as an administrative head over a growing number of branches, Thomson made an important contribution to its growth in the colony.

In addition to establishing effective distribution networks, Thomson aimed to provide a readily available supply of bibles to the local auxiliaries and branches. To that end, he concentrated on all aspects of moving bibles from Britain to North America, including the ordering, shipping, and overland distribution of the books. To stock depositories with a supply that was "sufficiently ample to prevent a lack at any time," Thomson wrote in detail the quantity of each style and edition to be sent directly by the Bible Society in London. Thomson listed the language of the book, the size of type, the size of the book, and the binding to be used on each book. In total, Thomson ordered 1800 English Bibles, 350 French Bibles, 100 Gaelic Bibles, 50 German Bibles, all full Bibles. Books containing only the New Testament numbered 650 in English, 300 French, 50 English and French in parallel columns, 150 Gaelic, 50 German. Finally, Thomson requested five "Scriptures for the Blind."<sup>27</sup> Thomson's orders reflected his knowledge of both the existing stock in the possession of local auxiliaries and the demands for new bibles, and Thomson aimed to order enough bibles to ensure that urban depositories would remain well stocked all year.

Thomson not only wanted an ample supply of bibles, but a supply of inexpensive bibles, and he had written repeatedly to Brandram urging the Bible Society Committee to publish cheaper editions. Thomson's experiences in the colonies revealed the need for cheaper editions, but his demands for lower priced bibles created tension between him and Brandram. Although some cheaper editions had been issued, the reductions that had been implemented in the price did not satisfy Thomson. Having written in letters in December 1838 and in February 1839 about the wide demand for a lower-priced Bible in the Canadas, Thomson wrote again in December 1839, acknowledging that prices had been lowered by the Committee, but that further reductions could be made. Thomson laid out those reductions explicitly:

What is wanted is a Nonpareil Bible say on 3rd or 4th class paper, or 5th or 6th if there are such numbers of tolerable paper, so that its original price may be a great deal lower still than your lowest. There might also be a Bible of another size or two on paper of the same sort. I humbly think you should reconsider this subject, and hope you will do so, and come down at once as low as you possibly, with any propriety, can, in the price of at least one of your Bibles, and one of your Testaments.<sup>28</sup>

Thomson was convinced that in order for the BFBS to best fulfil its role in British North America, it would have to supply bibles as cheaply as possible. The colonial demands for cheaper bibles were not being met, and whether this was the result of the London printers' unwillingness to produce such an edition or Brandram's disagreement about the significance of the demand, Thomson's pleas reflected the problems that accompanied the British North American reliance upon importing bibles rather than producing them domestically.

The demand for cheap bibles that Thomson relayed to Brandram was accompanied by a sense of taste and desire for particular types by the early 1840s. Thomson wrote to Brandram outlining Montreal Bible Society's desire for particular styles and types of bibles, requesting that the Bible Society in London publish bibles with "a few blank leaves of good writing paper between the Bible and Testament in the English [quarto] Bibles for 'family record' with these two words printed at top." Thomson cited the American bibles in the BFBS library as an example of the style desired:

“There can be no objection to the doing of this I think, and it would make the book more valued.”<sup>29</sup> The ability for families to have such pages bound into their bibles had found a favourable reception already from those in Montreal who wished that such a provision would be made by the Bible Society in its bibles.

Despite Thomson’s belief that no objection could be made to such a simple addition, the Committee refused to include such pages. This was a particularly strict reading of the BFBS’s constitutional limitations on the inclusion of any “note or comment.” A little over three years later, Thomson attempted once again to have such pages bound in the BFBS bibles, but this time accepting that if no text could be printed on those pages, that they could remain blank, but fulfil the same purpose: “I have often also received another petition to be mentioned to you, namely, that you would bind a few Blank Leaves in all your Quarto Bibles, between the Old and New Testaments. These Leaves would enhance the value of this Family Bible to every family . . . The present Petition has reference on to Blank Leaves without any printing.”<sup>30</sup> This too was rejected, to Thomson’s dismay, and he replied in a later letter. “The Blank Leaves I see you cannot give us through the hindrance of your peculiar position.”<sup>31</sup> Not even a blank page for recording family events was allowed, a policy that created conflict between the practical demands in the colonies and the policies shaped in Britain. Although there was a desire for more variety in the types of bibles in Canada, the BFBS was remarkably strict in upholding its policy of adding no material whatsoever within the bound copies it published.

These strict regulations provide some insight into the nature of the bible trade in British North America in the middle of the nineteenth century. Although the Authorized Version was the same text that was read in the United Kingdom, the United States and elsewhere, there was limited access in British North America to other varieties of bibles including those with theological commentary.<sup>32</sup> This context in the North American colonies continued after Confederation, when Canadians continued to obtain their bibles mostly from Britain, and until the 1900s, mostly from the British and Foreign Bible Society. Although the catalogue expanded over time and the growth of other retailers began to diminish its dominant position, the Bible Society remained the single largest distributor of bibles into the twentieth

century, and played a dominant role in shaping the bible trade with the limited range of bibles it distributed.

As Thomson organized bible shipments, he recognized the dangers associated with shipping goods across the Atlantic and requested that the books be divided into two separate cases to be shipped on two different ships. “Should the whole be sent out in one vessel,” he explained, “and that vessel be lost, we should lose a good part of the season before we could replace them.”<sup>33</sup> Although the financial loss in such an event would have been significant, Thomson cites the amount of time necessary to replace them as the factor that required such diligence, reflecting the urgency with which he desired to establish and maintain a steady supply of bibles in the province. Some years earlier, a donation of Bibles made to the Port Hope Branch Society “never reached its destination but has been lost. . . . It was unanimously resolved by the Committee that another similar donation be forthwith supplied from the depository of the York Society to the Port Hope Branch.”<sup>34</sup> There was, therefore, a precedent for Thomson’s cautions about shipping bibles and ensuring that inventory would be moved with precautionary measures and that bibles would be kept with some form of insurance. Because of the costs associated with the movement of books, the Bible Society leaders had to assume the very real risks that came with shipments, and factored them into the business of the bible trade.

In spite of his best efforts, Thomson consistently struggled to ensure the timely and accurate delivery of books to North America from the London Committee. In a letter dated December 23, 1839, Thomson complained that Brandram had overlooked his order and had caused the Montreal auxiliary to spend the winter without the shipment of books on hand. He had previously emphasized the need for the Bible Society’s promptness, given the way that the “St. Lawrence navigation closes for the season,” but to no avail: “The St. Lawrence [is] shut up; nor will it break up its ice for any of us, not even for the Bible.”<sup>35</sup> Until the depositories were well established and comprised a substantial inventory, the auxiliaries and branches were dependent upon the timely shipping of bibles from Britain, and this dependence was a source of conflict between the colonies’ auxiliaries and the Committee in London.

Ordering bibles from overseas was not the only task in circulating bibles, and Thomson knew first-hand the troubles of moving goods overland to smaller communities. During his travels throughout British North America, he wrote often of the bad roads and the shaking that occurred in the carriages that took him from place to place. After the long winter freeze, the roads hardened into roughly cut ruts that made overland travel slow and rough. Thomson never saw the poor roads as something that might prohibit the movement of bibles, but nonetheless recognized that the seasons had an important role in overland distribution and that as a result the timely shipment was necessary. Thus, the shipments of bibles could be distributed if they were able to navigate the St. Lawrence before the annual cessation caused by ice.

The seasonal challenges posed by Canadian winters certainly did not privilege Montreal over any other port city, and the winter ice on the St. Lawrence required the timely and efficient shipment of books.<sup>36</sup> “You will also oblige by urging on our friends at home,” Thomson wrote, “the great importance of an early shipment, as it saves us considerable expense. Twice before they have been too late: once the books had to remain all winter at Montreal; and another time, they had to be got here by sleighs from Kingston.”<sup>37</sup> Although the harsh realities of winter made the shipment of books to major ports impossible, Thomson recognized that the frozen conditions actually made the winter the best month in which to travel overland: “The wintertime is the most advantageous and the favorite season for travelling here. It is then that the frost paves the otherwise bad roads, and the snow coming afterwards smooths [sic] them into a kind of railway.”<sup>38</sup> Each season’s conditions shaped how bibles could be obtained in Canada and the ease with which they could be moved from one place to the next.

Thomson found that bibles and correspondence were occasionally being sent from London to British North America through New York, a route which assured the quickest and most reliable delivery, but one that caused concern about duties paid on bibles coming into the British colonies through the United States. Thomson explained in his letters to Brandram that the duty to be paid on bibles from New York was 30 percent.<sup>39</sup> Shipments could be held up at Montreal until duty was paid, a case that could lead to various heads of government and officers being petitioned in

order to see if the duties could be dismissed and the shipment released. American authorities were not sympathetic to the Bible Society leaders' pleas and insisted that duties on bibles must be paid. The added cost of shipping through New York was not worth it, and this effectively shut off the trade route between Britain and Upper Canada through New York for the BFBS.<sup>40</sup>

Thomson was aware of the booming market for Bibles and religious literature in the United States, and used examples of particular bibles published in New York by the American Bible Society to explain the kinds of bibles desired in British North America. Thomson wrote requesting bibles with pages for family records "after the American fashion," and noted that "you will see how this is done in the large American Bibles in your library, for I suppose you have copies of these, as well as all of the American editions of the scriptures."<sup>41</sup> A major problem for Canadian publishers throughout the nineteenth century was the border, which was porous to material printed in the United States, and the presence of American books north of that border was somewhat common. For most Canadians, however, with the exception of occasional shipments made to booksellers like the Methodist Book Concern, there was no reliable and consistent supply of bibles from the United States.<sup>42</sup> Legal restrictions on editions of the Authorized Version printed in the United States and the proprietary control of the Crown and privileged printers on those editions in British North America played a major role in restricting this channel for bibles.<sup>43</sup> Although Thomson made reference to American editions to Brandram, he sought to establish a British supply of bibles that would mitigate the demand for those books from the United States.

Thomson further ensured a consistent supply of bibles in British North America by establishing two major depository hubs, one at Montreal and one at Toronto. Thomson recognized the strategic importance of Montreal as both a shipping port that provided regular access to London and a place from which many branch societies could order their own supply of bibles with some assurance of delivery. Montreal was the best option for a central depository because of its position on the St. Lawrence River, and the depository in Toronto could service the growing number of branches in Upper Canada. These depositories were an important factor in avoiding the shortage that occurred as a result of late shipments.



In addition to streamlining the way in which British North Americans obtained their bibles through their local Bible Society auxiliaries, Thomson urged those auxiliaries to continue raising money to subsidize the cost of publishing the bibles in England and shipping them overseas, not just to North America, but to auxiliaries around the world. His desire was that the reception of bibles would be matched with donations and contributions towards the global cause. Thomson wrote of a meeting of the Upper Canada Bible Society and of its Committee's plans to ensure that "God did come into every home on the one hand, and that on the other something should be got from every house towards the grand general purpose of sending the Bible to all nations and tongues over the world."<sup>44</sup> Although the amount of money received from British North America may have been limited, there remained an important expectation of financial participation in the global project of bible distribution.

The connection between local societies and the global project of bible distribution added an altruistic note to the appeals of the Bible Society. The development of a strong domestic bible enterprise was crucial, but appeals for subscriptions to support it and to participate in it were often made with an emphasis on the efforts being undertaken globally to distribute scriptures. By appealing to the global efforts of "sending the Bible to all nations and tongues over the world," the discourse of missions emphasized the benevolence of the enterprise rather than its business operations. If there was suspicion that the bible enterprise was self-serving by focusing on the needs of Canadians at home, the ability to display the vast work of the BFBS Society overseas added another dimension to the BFBS Society's appeal.<sup>45</sup>

Bibles were frequently read in schools, and Thomson wrote to Brandram that more than 500 schools had been developed in a year in Lower Canada, and that "Bibles and Testaments will be greatly wanted for the schools, and hence heavy demands will be made on your auxiliaries in Quebec and Montreal, and I would suggest the propriety of your meeting these demands by placing more than common supplies of this class of Bibles and Testaments within their reach."<sup>46</sup> Thomson encouraged the London Committee to assist in meeting the needs of these schools, evoking the image of the Bible Society's founding legend about Mary Jones being turned away empty-handed after hiking for miles over Welsh mountains to obtain a

bible.<sup>47</sup> He wrote that “it were a pity notwithstanding that members should return from the depository unsupplied and with heavy hearts, having no other place to look. Such discouragements are feared and I am sure you will readily interpose to prevent them.”<sup>48</sup>

The bible enterprise that Thomson worked to develop was not met with unanimous support, and even within the Protestant community in British North America there was some opposition. Continuing debates about the role of the church in Britain’s North American colonies caused some Anglicans to view the interdenominational efforts of the Bible Society to be undermining the pre-eminence of the Church of England as the established church. Instead, they believed, the Church of England’s own organization for bible distribution, the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), was to be the exclusive agent for the distribution of the Bible alongside the Book of Common Prayer. These concerns were witnessed by the Bible Society at York early in its reanimation and shortly thereafter, when the Anglican Church leader John Strachan denounced the support of the BFBS by Anglican clergymen.<sup>49</sup> These debates remained salient as Thomson toured British North America and recognized the tension that these issues caused. In Nova Scotia, Thomson was warmly received by all Protestant ministers. The Church of England ministers were “all of them friendly to us,” he wrote, “but only a few of them gave us their active assistance, the major portion of them adhere closely to the Christian Knowledge Society, and see it to be their duty to give all the means they can afford, and all their active labours to that institution.”<sup>50</sup> After a separate but similar encounter, Thomson relayed thinly veiled frustration to Brandram at the continued unwillingness of the Anglican Church to support the work of the Bible Society in its mission, stating that “the body that honours [the Scriptures] the most” was absent from the platform at a meeting in support of the Society. “It is most inconsistent,” he continued, “that a Bible Meeting should not have a ministerial representative from a church in which the Scriptures are more read in public than in any other in all Christendom.”<sup>51</sup> Thomson wrote to Brandram from Halifax in the summer of 1840 affirming this opinion, stating that “the Church of England which honours the Scriptures so much in the public reading of them should always be the most prominent in the Bible cause.”<sup>52</sup> Some of the most strident opposition to his work with the BFBS came from those within the Protestant community.

Thomson also encountered opposition from a number of Roman Catholic priests who refused to allow their parishioners to receive the bibles from him. The Catholic Church published an encyclical by Pope Leo XII in May, 1824 against the Bible Society, stating that “to allow holy Bibles in the ordinary language, wholesale and without distinction, would on account of human rashness cause more harm than good.”<sup>53</sup> There was general opposition to the work of the Bible Society among Roman Catholics, as Thomson noted throughout his letters from British North America. But Thomson also wrote to Brandram on several occasions that some priests were willing to receive the Bible Society’s New Testaments. In one encounter, he wrote that he “enumerated five Roman Catholic French-Canadian Priests who have openly approved of the use of the New Testament among their people, and two Schoolmasters who use the Scriptures as a school book.”<sup>54</sup> Although there was a general opposition among French Canadian Roman Catholics to his work, Thomson expressed optimism at their reception of the Bible.

In spite of the opposition Thomson encountered, his efforts both in organizing new branches of the Bible Society and structuring bible distribution networks seem to have paid dividends. The BFBS’s Annual Report highlighted those dividends, publishing statements from local leaders which claimed that:

the people here, since the visit of Mr. Thomson, take much more interest in the Bible cause. This is no doubt, owing, in a great measure, to the diffusing of information on the subject, and suggests the propriety of a more liberal supply of reports and pamphlets in a country like this, being destitute of the means of information so abundantly supplied by the periodical press in your country.<sup>55</sup>

Thomson himself felt positive about his time in British North America. Writing to Brandram for the last time from British North America, he stated that “the impression made in respect to the state of our Bible cause during this tour is favourable. There is in most places a decided improvement on former operations since my previous visitation, and that is also prospect of further advance.”<sup>56</sup> Thomson was optimistic in his assessment of his work, and rightfully so. In 1838, on the eve of his arrival in Lower Canada, the British colonies of North America were still served by a fledgling and

modest supply of bibles and a scattered network of Bible Society auxiliaries and branches that were largely independent of one another. During the four years that Thomson was in the North American colonies and several years after, the Bible Society's work had expanded into what emerged as the modern network of bible distribution that continued into the twentieth century. In the year after Thomson's departure, the Bible Society's reach was growing enormously and increasing its influence over the bible trade. More than 230 branches and 16 auxiliaries were operating in 1843, which demonstrated the organization's enormous growth during his agency. That growth continued, and by 1865, more than 630 branches were operating in British North America.<sup>57</sup> The network that Thomson established laid the foundation of a modern bible enterprise, as local auxiliaries continued to add new branches under their supervision. This network allowed a more regular and dependable supply of scriptures where a single missed shipment or a lapsed auxiliary would no longer result in a season of "Bible destitution."

The work that James Thomson undertook in his travels throughout British North America between 1838 and 1842 shaped the bible trade in Canada. Thomson's efforts to establish new Bible Society branches and to revitalize dormant ones created an extensive distribution network that continued to expand for the rest of the nineteenth century. The Bible Society had branches in hundreds of communities, and ensured that bibles became commonplace. Thomson's letters offer an important lens into the types of bibles that were available at this time, and the ways in which he tried to meet the demands for bibles he encountered on his travels. His letters also explain the way in which the British and Foreign Bible Society came to dominate the bible trade. That dominance was made possible in large part because of the proliferation of local Bible Society branches and the distribution networks and supply chain that supported them, both of which were his primary focus in British North America. In ensuring a reliable supply of bibles from Britain to the most remote communities in the region, the success of the Bible Society's expansion contributed to the unwillingness for any printer or publisher to undertake the enormously challenging and risky venture of obtaining both the stereotype plates and the license to print a Bible in Canada. This regular supply of British scriptures had a profound and lasting impact on the development of a domestic print culture in Canada. No publisher was aided in the production of Canadian books by

the resources that would have been invested in printing and publishing bibles, and this perpetuated the colonial dependence on Britain and contributed to the broader situation of Canadians commonly obtaining their books from abroad. The BFBS's success may have also stifled the development of a competitive commercial market for bibles in Canada. It was not until the rise of department stores and their mail-order catalogues at the end of the nineteenth century that a commercial enterprise could match the reach and the purchasing power that the Bible Society had developed. The bible trade in many ways reflected the problems of Canada's broader twentieth book trade, which George L. Parker argues "had their origins in Canada's unique nineteenth-century situation, first as a group of separate colonies and then as an underpopulated, rather poor, and economically dependent Dominion in the last third of the century. 'Importation' was the name of the game."<sup>58</sup> Whatever its impact on the broader publishing industry, the success of the BFBS's work provided a vast number of bibles for British North Americans. The foundations of the British and Foreign Bible Society that were strengthened by Thomson between 1838 and 1842 not only had a significant role in the development of that institution in British North America, but also left an indelible imprint on Canada's religious and print culture into the twentieth century.

Stuart Barnard is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at the University of Calgary. His research interests include the history of the book in Canada, Canadian cultural and religious history. His doctoral research examines bible distribution in Canada in the nineteenth century, with a particular focus on the Canadian auxiliaries of the British and Foreign Bible Society. He was recently the Royal Bank of Canada-Bodleian Libraries Visiting Fellow at the Centre for the Study of the Book at the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6–7.

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<sup>2</sup> The one exception appears to be John Henry White, who published a colonial edition of the Authorized Version of the Bible. See Marianne Murrow, “John Henry White, the Unknown Printer,” *Island Magazine* 22 (fall–winter 1987): 29–30. For difficulties in printing the Bible in British North America, see Raymond Brodeur, “Religious Books,” in *History of the Book in Canada*, eds. Patricia Fleming, Gilles Gallichan, and Yvan Lamonde, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) 262–63.

<sup>3</sup> Though they did not recognize the patent restricting the printing of the Authorized Version, it was the most popular version sold by American publishers in the nineteenth century. See Paul Gutjahr, *An American Bible: The History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 89–92.

<sup>4</sup> The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge was founded in 1698 and was a branch of the Church of England, whereas the BFBS was established in 1804 and maintained policies that ensured no denomination could dominate its leadership. See Scott Mandlebrote, “The Publishing and Distribution of Religious Books by Voluntary Associations: From the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge to the British and Foreign Bible Society,” in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, eds. Michael F. Suarez, and Michael L. Turner, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 613–30. See also Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles*.

<sup>5</sup> See Judith Fingard, “Grapes in the Wilderness: The Bible Society in British North America in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 9 (April 1972): 5–31. See also E. C. Woodley, *The Bible in Canada* (Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1953).

<sup>6</sup> *The Thirty-Fourth Report of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1838), 33.

<sup>7</sup> James Thomson went by the name of Diego for much of his time in South America, but made important connections with British nationals throughout his travels. See Bill Mitchell, “Diego Thomson: A study in Scotland and Latin America,” *Bulletin of the Scottish Institute of Missionary Studies* 6–7 (1991): 66–75. See also Eugenia Roldán Vera, “Thomson, James (1788–1854),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/100750>.

<sup>8</sup> James Thomson to Andrew Brandram, Mexico, December 18, 1828. Thomson’s letters to Brandram are found in the British and Foreign Bible Society Archives, Cambridge University Library, and are filed in BSA/X/T.

<sup>9</sup> Thomson to Brandram, Mexico, January 30, 1829.

<sup>10</sup> For more on Thomson’s work in Latin America both for the BFBS and in establishing Monitorial schools, see Webster E. Browning, “Joseph Lancaster, James Thomson, and the Lancasterian System of Mutual Instruction, with Special Reference to Hispanic America,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 4, No. 1 (February 1921): 49–98; and Marcelo Caruso and Eugenia Roldán Vera, “Pluralizing Meanings: The Monitorial System of Education in Latin America in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Paedagogica Historica* 41, no. 6 (2005): 645–54.

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<sup>11</sup> For an example, see news of Thomson's work in the West Indies in *Reports of the British and Foreign Bible Society* vol. 10, 1831–1833 (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1833), lxxvii.

<sup>12</sup> Thomson to Brandram, November 26, 1838.

<sup>13</sup> See Allan Greer, *The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 350ff.

<sup>14</sup> Thomson to Brandram, January 6, 1839.

<sup>15</sup> Thomson to Brandram, January 31, 1839.

<sup>16</sup> See Philippe Sylvain, "Wilkes, Henry," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 11 (Toronto: University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003), [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/wilkes\\_henry\\_11E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/wilkes_henry_11E.html). Wilkes's memoir provides more insight into his ministry in Montreal: John Wood, *Memoir of Henry Wilkes, D.D. L.L.D. His Life and Times* (Montreal: F.E. Grafton & Sons, 1887).

<sup>17</sup> *Quarterly New Haven Christian Perspective*, vol. IX (New Haven: Stephen Cooke, 1837), 264.

<sup>18</sup> Thomson to Brandram, January 31, 1839.

<sup>19</sup> Thomson to Brandram, September 29, 1840.

<sup>20</sup> Thomson to Brandram, September 29, 1840.

<sup>21</sup> Allan Greer, *The Patriots and the People*, 151.

<sup>22</sup> Thomson to Brandram, September 29, 1840.

<sup>23</sup> Thomson to Brandram, September 29, 1840.

<sup>24</sup> Thomson to Brandram, November 15, 1839. See also, Minutes of the Upper Canada Bible Society, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) MG17F1 vol. 1, October 27, 1828.

<sup>25</sup> Minutes of the Upper Canada Bible Society LAC MG17 F1 vol. 1, May 25, 1840.

<sup>26</sup> G. S. French, "Richardson, James (1791–1875)," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 10 (Toronto: University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003), [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/richardson\\_james\\_1791\\_1875\\_10E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/richardson_james_1791_1875_10E.html).

<sup>27</sup> Thomson to Brandram, December 21, 1839.

<sup>28</sup> Thomson made his orders from the standard catalogue listed in the British and Foreign Bible Society's Annual Reports, which were published and distributed for BFBS members and subscribers. Thomson to Brandram, December 21, 1839.

<sup>29</sup> Thomson to Brandram, December 20, 1838.

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- <sup>30</sup> Thomson to Brandram, February 19, 1842.
- <sup>31</sup> Thomson to Brandram, May 27, 1842.
- <sup>32</sup> Comparisons with other colonies would be fruitful, though little has been done to compare the colonial experiences of Bible Society. For some background, see George Brown, *The History of the British and Foreign Bible Society, from 1804 to 1854*, Volume 1 (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1859), 261.
- <sup>33</sup> Thomson to Brandram, December 20, 1838.
- <sup>34</sup> Minutes of the Upper Canada Bible Society, LAC MG17F1 vol.1, December 12, 1831.
- <sup>35</sup> Thomson to Brandram, December 23, 1839.
- <sup>36</sup> For the limitations on shipping on the St. Lawrence, see Gerald J. J. Tulchinsky, *The River Barons: Montreal Businessmen and the Growth of Industry and Transportation, 1837-53* (University of Toronto Press, 1977), 81–83.
- <sup>37</sup> Thomson to Brandram, February 22, 1839.
- <sup>38</sup> Thomson to Brandram, December 20, 1838.
- <sup>39</sup> Thomson to Brandram, December 20, 1838.
- <sup>40</sup> Minutes of the Upper Canada Bible Society, LAC MG17F1 vol. 1, January 3, 1839.
- <sup>41</sup> Thomson to Brandram, December 20, 1838.
- <sup>42</sup> Scott McLaren, “Books for the Instruction of the Nations: Shared Methodist Print Culture in Upper Canada and the Mid-Atlantic States, 1789–1851” (dissertation, University of Toronto, 2011).
- <sup>43</sup> For an early example of William Lyon Mackenzie’s protestations to the importing of American bibles, see his article in *Colonial Advocate*, York, August 6, 1827.
- <sup>44</sup> Thomson to Brandram, November 15, 1839.
- <sup>45</sup> The BFBS’s Annual Reports often featured excerpts from agents like Thomson from around the world.
- <sup>46</sup> Thomson to Brandram, August 31, 1830.
- <sup>47</sup> See William Canton, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (London: John Murray, 1904), 465–70.
- <sup>48</sup> Thomson to Brandram, August 31, 1830.



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<sup>49</sup> See John Strachan, *A Letter to the Rev. Thomas Chalmers, D.D., professor of Divinity in the University of Edinburgh, on the Life and Character of the Right Reverend Dr. Hobart, Bishop of New-York, North-America* (New York: Swords, Stanford and Co., 1832). See also the response by Joseph Harrington Harris, *A Letter to the Hon. & Ven. Archdeacon Strachan: In Reply to Some Passages in his "Letter to Dr. Chalmers on the Life and Character of Bishop Hobart," Respecting the Principles and Effects of the Bible Society* (York: Correspondent Printing Office, 1833).

<sup>50</sup> Thomson to Brandram, August 3, 1840.

<sup>51</sup> Thomson to Brandram, February 16, 1839.

<sup>52</sup> Thomson to Brandram, July 3, 1840.

<sup>53</sup> "Ubi Primum, Encyclical of Pope Leo XII on Assuming the Pontificate, 5 May 1824," in *The Papal Encyclicals 1740–1878*, ed. Claudia Carlen (McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), 202.

<sup>54</sup> Thomson to Brandram, June 1, 1840.

<sup>55</sup> *Thirty Ninth Annual Report of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1843), civi.

<sup>56</sup> Thomson to Brandram, May 27, 1842

<sup>57</sup> *Thirty Ninth Annual Report of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, (London: British and Foreign Bible Society), 1843.

<sup>58</sup> George L. Parker, *The Beginnings of the Book Trade in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), ix.

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