

“The Beginning of our Regeneration”: The Great War and Western Canadian Reform Movements

John H. Thompson

Volume 7, Number 1, 1972

Montréal 1972

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030750ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/030750ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (print)

1712-9109 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Thompson, J. H. (1972). “The Beginning of our Regeneration”: The Great War and Western Canadian Reform Movements. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 7(1), 231–245. <https://doi.org/10.7202/030750ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1972

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

“THE BEGINNING OF OUR REGENERATION”: THE GREAT WAR AND WESTERN CANADIAN REFORM MOVEMENTS

JOHN H. THOMPSON

McGill University

I know nothing about Germany. But I do know something about our own people. I know how selfish and individualistic and sordid and money-grabbing we have been; how slothful and incompetent and self-satisfied we have been, and I fear it will take a long war and sacrifices and tragedies altogether beyond our present imagination to make us unselfish and public-spirited and clean and generous; it will take the strain and emergency of war to make us vigorous and efficient; it will take the sting of many defeats to impose that humility which will be *the beginning of our regeneration*.*

The Western Canadian reform movement was not created by the enthusiasm released by the Great War. Associations advocating prohibition, woman's suffrage, and economic reform had existed in Manitoba and the North West Territories before the turn of the century. After 1900, the problems of immigration, rapid urban growth, and an expanding wheat economy gave the political, social, and economic dimensions of reformism increasing relevance. In the decade before the war, reform causes won new supporters, and became an important theme in Western Canadian life. The “reform movement” which espoused this theme was not a monolith. It was composed of a variety of pressure groups, dedicated to such diverse objectives as tariff reform, the single tax, direct legislation, prohibition, and woman's suffrage. The movement's members belonged to no particular political party, and only in Manitoba did they find it necessary to capture a party to gain their ends. The movement's common philosophical denominator was the social gospel, which swept North American protestantism at the close of the nineteenth century.¹

By 1914, Western reformers felt that they had made considerable progress toward their goals. Each Prairie Province had an active Social Service Council, committed to the eradication of the liquor traffic and prostitution, and to the amelioration of social conditions in Western cities. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union also spoke for prohibition, and was the leading force in demands for woman's suffrage. Direct Legislation Leagues promised to purify political life by using the initiative, referendum, and recall to make governments more responsive to their electorates. Grain Growers' Associations used their

voice, *The Grain Growers' Guide*, to support these reforms and to promote tariff and tax reform as well.

But as of August, 1914, none of these causes had enjoyed significant success. No Western province had enfranchised its women or introduced prohibition.² Direct legislation had been partially implemented in Saskatchewan in 1912 and Alberta in 1913, but Saskatchewan's electorate had failed to endorse the Direct Legislation Act in a referendum.³ In January, 1914, the *bête noire* of Western reformers, Premier R.P. Roblin of Manitoba, observed sanctimoniously to his Attorney General that "seemingly crime does not decrease, seemingly the world is getting no better, seemingly the efforts of social and moral reformers is [*sic*] not as effective as we would like."⁴

It was on Premier Roblin that reform eyes were fixed in July 1914. The Manitoba Liberal Party, in the grip of the provincial reform movement, was challenging Roblin's fifteen year old Conservative government. The Liberal Platform was a reformer's banquet, with direct legislation as an appetizer, woman's suffrage as the entrée, and a promised referendum on prohibition to conclude the meal. Roblin opposed each of these items, and, for the first time, reform and the status quo were presented to a Western electorate as clear-cut alternatives. C.W. Gordon of the Social Service Council described the significance of the confrontation for Western reformers:

On the one side are the Christian Churches, various [reform] organizations, social workers, and all the decent citizens, on the other the Roblin Government, the Liquor traffic, and every form of organized vice and crime.⁵

But "decent citizens" were apparently not a majority in Manitoba, for the Roblin Government was returned for a fifth consecutive term.

The defeat in Manitoba did not mean that reformers throughout the West faced a hopeless situation. The Liberals made significant gains in terms of seats and in their percentage of the popular vote. But the defeat did suggest that in a head to head confrontation with "the forces of reaction" (as Nellie McClung described those who opposed reform,) reform ideas did not enjoy the support of a clear majority of the electorate. Although the reform movement had increased both in size and vigour, it had not succeeded in winning the enthusiastic endorsement of the general public. This endorsement was necessary if such reform objectives as prohibition and woman's suffrage were to be effectively implemented. It was in their quest for this broad public support that reformers were aided by the Great War.

A modern democracy with a literate population cannot engage in a

major war without soliciting an enthusiastic mandate from its citizens. For this reason, the Great War was interpreted and described in terms very different from those applied to wars of the past. The Canadian Expeditionary Force was not fighting for territorial gain, but "in maintenance of those ideals of Liberty and Justice which are the common and sacred cause of the Allies" and for "the freedom of the world"⁶. Although "there may have been wars in the history of the British Empire that have not been justifiable", "there never was a juster cause" than the war against German autocracy.⁷

But if Canadian soldiers were giving their lives for "Liberty and Justice" in Flanders, was it not the duty of those who remained behind to see to it that these same things existed in Canada? Reformers argued that the Great War was an opportunity to accomplish this very thing, a sign given to Canada in order that "the national sins which are responsible for this awful carnage may be eradicated so righteousness and peace may be established."⁸ As Mrs. Nellie McClung told her many readers, the war was necessary for national regeneration, for "without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin."⁹ If the sacrifice was not to be wasted, the reform programme had to be implemented. Even Clifford Sifton, hardly an ardent reformer, recognized that the Great War made it necessary for both Eastern and Western Canada to "cast out everything that threatens its moral health." The war produced a transformation in public attitudes to reformism, changing them to the point that "men who scoffed a few years ago are the foremost now to demand reform."¹⁰ The transformation was particularly pronounced in Western Canada. As Mrs. Irene Parlby told the Saskatchewan Grain Growers, "before the war the real spirit of the West had been smothered in materialism," and public action had been difficult. Because of the common goal of victory, "the big broad free spirit is beginning to emerge again."¹¹

In addition to changing public attitudes to the idea of reform, the wartime experience changed attitudes to the role of the state as the enforcer of reform measures. Many reform objectives, most notably prohibition and changes in the system of taxation, called for a previously unacceptable degree of state intervention into the lives of its citizens. The expansion of governmental power necessary to meet the wartime emergency gave government intervention a sanction which it had not had before 1914. The state became "more than a mere tax-collector or polling clerk," it became an organization capable of vigorous, positive activities.¹² An Alberta prohibitionist noted that "the European War has taught us that the State has a right to take such action as will best conserve its forces for the national good."¹³ Because of the demands of war, no truly patriotic citizen could react

to such action with "resentment or resistance"; the correct course was "a new and affectionate loyalty."¹⁴ This new willingness to grant a more active role to government combined with the wartime ideal of redeeming Canadian society to produce a climate of opinion favourable to reform. It was this climate that the reform movement exploited to gain its ends, in some facets of the movement more successfully than in others.

The reform objective which received the greatest impetus from the wartime atmosphere was the prohibition of alcoholic liquors. Despite the social problems which liquor created in the rapidly expanding West, prohibitionists had been unable to convince the Western public or their provincial governments that prohibition was the necessary cure. The events of August, 1914, introduced a new factor into the equation. The Great War provided the necessary catalyst in the public reaction which brought about prohibitory liquor legislation, not only in Western Canada, but throughout North America. More than any other reform group, prohibitionists were able to use the exigencies of the wartime situation to lend new credence to their arguments and to exploit the desire to purify society which emerged as part of the domestic side of the war effort.

Prohibitionists had long been fond of military metaphors to describe their struggle. The cause itself was "warfare waged against ignorance, selfishness, darkness, prejudice and cruelty", while a successful referendum campaign might be compared to Wellington's victory at Waterloo.¹⁵ Sara Rowell Wright of the W.C.T.U. liked to speak of her years as "a private in the rear ranks of the movement," and a book of temperance poems and songs was called *The Galling*, in reference to the way its contents were to be deployed against the liquor traffic.¹⁶ The war made these rhetorical flourishes a mainstay of temperance propaganda. The liquor traffic was clearly identified with the Kaiser and his brutal hordes as a force blocking the way to a more perfect society. Since a Westerner would "despise the Kaiser for dropping bombs on defenseless people, and shooting down innocent people", he should also despise the liquor traffic, since it had "waged war on women and children all down the centuries."¹⁷ The techniques to be employed in the eradication of both the Kaiser and the liquor traffic were made to seem exactly the same. Rev. J.E. Hughson of Winnipeg urged Westerners to "use ballots for bullets and shoot straight and strong in order that the demon of drink might be driven from the haunts of men."¹⁸ A cartoon in the *Grain Growers' Guide* carried on the analogy pictorially, depicting a 'war' on the entrenched liquor interests, with 'votes' being loaded into a field piece by the forces under the banner of "Temperance and Righteousness."¹⁹

It was not only the tone of prohibitionist rhetoric that was adapted to suit the Great War, its content was modified as well. The war provided the temperance movement with two important new arguments, with which to influence public opinion. The first concerned the moral and physical health of the thousands of young Westerners who had entered the army, many of whom were leaving home for the first time. What would happen to the decent boys from prairie farms when, befuddled by unfamiliar liquor, they fell victim to the prostitutes who haunted military camps in Canada and overseas? Blighted by horrible unnamed diseases, "thousands of clean-minded innocent young boys who would otherwise have been decent upright citizens will now be nothing but a scourge to their country when they return."²⁰

One way to avoid such a result was to keep liquor out of the hands of soldiers. As the Medical Officer of Ralph Connor's *Sky Pilot* in *No Man's Land* pointed out, "Cut out the damned beer. Cut out the beer and ninety *per cent* of the venereal disease goes . . . [Soldier's] mothers have given them up, to death, if need be, but not to this rotten damnable disease."²¹ To "cut out the beer", women's groups and W.C.T. Unions bombarded legislators and commanding officers with resolutions demanding that bars and 'wet' canteens be closed "for the sake of our soldiers."²² It was not enough to restrict such protection to the period when they were in uniform, only to allow them to become victims of the liquor traffic once they were civilians again. It was the responsibility of every Westerner to see that the veterans found "a clean pure Province for them when they return to us, in which they may rest their shattered nerves and poor wounded bodies."²³ This could only be guaranteed if prohibition became a reality.

No one thought to ask the "clean minded innocent young boys" if they wanted to be rescued from the clutches of temptation. Evidence about the soldiers' opinion on the prohibition question is contradictory. During referenda on prohibition in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta polls in military camps returned 'dry' majorities, and one Saskatchewan officer wrote Premier Scott to praise the provincial government's decision to make the liquor trade a public monopoly.²⁴ After prohibition was in force, however, a Calgary private wrote A.E. Cross of the Calgary Brewing and Malting Company that his comrades "would be solid for to have it back to the good old days again" on their return.²⁵ Soldier poets poked rude fun at both 'dry' canteens and prohibitionists. One particularly piquant rhyme entitled "From the Trenches", derided

Preachers over in Canada
Who rave about Kingdom Come
Ain't pleased with our ability
And wanted to stop our rum.

Water they say would be better
 Water! Great Scott! Out here
 We're up to our knees in water
 Do they think we're standing in beer?²⁶

Thus it would seem that soldiers were as divided in their opinions of prohibition as most Westerners had been before 1914. But among the public as a whole, the prohibitionist movement was rapidly making converts, and producing a consensus in favour of prohibition.

An important factor in producing this consensus was a second new temperance argument, again one peculiar to the Wartime situation. Canadians were told constantly by their governments that efficiency was a prerequisite for victory over Germany. Prohibitionists quickly capitalized on this theme, pointing to the production and consumption of liquor as a drain on Canada's ability to wage war. Not only did drunkenness squander the nation's human resources, it wasted its physical resources as well. A drunken soldier was unfit to fight, an alcoholic worker was unable to produce, and grain distilled into whiskey could not be used to feed starving Allies. Newspapers sympathetic to the war effort put this argument forcefully before the public, demanding that

the bar must be closed [because] the national existence is at stake. The ship must be stripped for action. All dead weight must go by the boards if we are to win.²⁷

As well as providing prohibitionists with two new important arguments, the situation created by the Great War gave them new answers to two of the most effective defences of the liquor traffic. With thousands of Westerners dying in France to serve their country, criticism of prohibition as a violation of individual liberty lost most of its impact. *Manitoba Free Press* editor John W. Dafoe reflected the popular mood when he pointed out that "the propriety of subordinating individual desires to the general good need not be elaborated at this moment, when millions of men, representing the cream of British citizenship have put aside all their individual inclinations and ambitions."²⁸ Nellie McClung was even more blunt. "We have before us," she wrote, "a perfect example of a man who is exercising personal liberty to the full . . . a man by the name of William Hohenzollern."²⁹ The second anti-prohibitionist argument routed by the Great War was the claim that prohibition would produce widespread unemployment by wiping out the liquor industry and its associated outlets. The wartime demand for manpower created a labour shortage that made this contention ridiculous.

Saskatchewan, which had been so proud of its system of government control, suddenly found itself to the rear of temperance sentiment on the Prairies. One prohibitionist warned W.R. Motherwell that the situation had changed, and that the public was

not satisfied with the working out of the Liquor Dispensary [*sic*] System.

It is true that we are tremendously better off . . . this however does not alter the fact that more is needed. This is a matter which is receiving a good deal of unfavourable comment at this time. The people are ready for a total prohibition measure at this very time, let us have it.³⁵

The Saskatchewan Liberal government responded once again to public demands, and Saskatchewan became the third Western Province to endorse prohibition by referendum, in December, 1916. The Saskatchewan majority was the largest of the three, demonstrating again that as the war against Germany became longer and more bitter, the war against booze enlisted more and more recruits.

There are several revealing similarities among the three referenda, in addition to the fact that all were resounding prohibitionist victories. In each campaign the Great War played an important rhetorical role, and temperance workers succeeded completely in convincing the Western public that prohibition and patriotism were synonymous. The referenda themselves were treated as an opportunity for those truly behind the war effort to stand up and be counted. As the Cypress River *Western Prairie* warned on the eve of the Manitoba balloting, "anyone who will vote in favour of liquor might as well enlist under the Kaiser as far as patriotism goes."³⁶

This identification helped prohibitionists overcome opposition among a traditionally hostile group, the Catholic immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe. It had been "this very heavy foreign population" which J.A. Calder had thought would prevent a 'dry' Saskatchewan, and much of the opposition faced by prohibitionists during the war did come from this quarter.³⁷ But many of these people saw the prohibition referendum as a kind of loyalty test, through which they could prove that they were good Canadian citizens, even during this time of crisis. Prohibitionists encouraged this belief, and actively sought non Anglo-Saxon votes. For the first time, their efforts were rewarded. In Manitoba, the Ruthenian Catholic Political Club and the Slavonic Independent Society "spoke fervently in favour of temperance," while *The Canadian Farmer*, a Western Ukrainian weekly, urged its Saskatchewan readers to "get organized and vote against the [Liquor] stores!"³⁸ Not all non Anglo-Saxons were converted, but enough voted for prohibition in each of the three provinces to largely neutralize the ballots of their wet countrymen. After the Alberta referendum, the W.C.T.U.'s Superintendent of Work Among

With their own rhetoric refurbished to suit the wartime situation, and with their opponents' most effective weapons temporarily silent, prohibitionist organizations intensified their efforts to put their case to the public and to the provincial governments. The traditional mainstays of the movement, the W.C.T.U. and the Social Service Councils, were joined in their campaign by groups which had not formerly been associated with prohibition. The Orange Lodge, the I.O.D.E., the Anglican Church, the Winnipeg Canadian Club; all came to the conclusion that prohibition was "the best way of dealing with the liquor traffic *at the present time*", and became war converts to the cause.³⁰ These new allies meant that prohibitionists could apply increased pressure on Western governments, and the movement began to gain concessions rapidly.

In Manitoba, for example, the antiprohibitionist Roblin government raised the legal drinking age from sixteen to eighteen and suspended the licenses of seventy-two establishments found to be flouting the liquor laws.³¹ The Liberal government of Saskatchewan engaged in the same sort of short term measures, but Premier Scott and his colleagues began to realize that the public was demanding more and that "the time [was] high ripe for action." The step on which they decided fell short of prohibition. In March, 1915, the government announced that the liquor trade in Saskatchewan was to become a state monopoly. Liquor was to be available only in provincially operated dispensaries, and all bars, saloons, and stores were to be closed. Scott viewed the decision as a frank concession to wartime public opinion, and confided to Senator James H. Ross that this opinion was so strong that "to stand still any longer meant suicide for this government."³² Scott and his cabinet regarded their dispensary system as a radical step in the direction of prohibition. J.A. Calder considered introducing the dispensaries as "having decided to go the limit", and expressed "very grave doubts" as to whether a referendum on prohibition could ever be successful in Saskatchewan.³³ The events of the next two years were to show how rapidly the war could change public attitudes to prohibition, and make a mockery of the prediction of as astute a politician as Calder.

In July 1915, with the Saskatchewan dispensary system scarcely in operation, the voters of Alberta gave a solid endorsement to a prohibition referendum. All but sixteen of the fifty-eight provincial constituencies returned prohibitionist majorities, with 'wet' victories coming only in "primarily mining or remote northern areas", beyond reach of prohibitionist propaganda.³⁵ Manitobans followed suit seven months later, with an even larger majority. Only three constituencies remained 'wet' in a prohibitionist landslide.

Foreigners "knelt in thanksgiving to our Heavenly Father that not all foreign-speaking people voted wet, but that right prevailed and carried the day, even in several of their own district communities."³⁹ North Winnipeg, perhaps the most aggressively 'foreign' community in the West, rejected prohibition by only sixty-five votes. The *Manitoba Free Press* made an observation which applied throughout the West when it noted with satisfaction that "the greatest disappointment of all to the wets was the foreign vote."⁴⁰

The only group completely untouched by wartime arguments on behalf of prohibition was Western Canada's French Canadians. French Canadians and prohibitionists had never enjoyed cordial relations, partly because of the movement's Protestant character, and partly because of its wholehearted support for unilingual education. Since most French Canadians had centuries of North American ancestry, the idea that they needed to prove their loyalty by accepting prohibition did not occur to them. As the French language *Le Manitoba* was careful to point out, this did not mean that French Canadians were "plus intemperant que les autres", simply that they resented the totalitarian techniques of prohibition and prohibitionists. In each Western Province, Francophones rejected prohibition in the referenda of 1915-16.⁴¹

The second important similarity between the referenda campaigns in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta was the demoralization of the traditional opponents of prohibition. The Great War not only defused the arguments used by the defenders of liquor, it sapped the strength of the defenders themselves. In Alberta, liquor dealers had "very little success" in raising funds to oppose prohibition during wartime.⁴² In both Manitoba and Alberta, the Licensed Victuallers' Association had to turn to the United States for antiprohibitionist speakers. The Manitoba Association co-operated with the Bartenders Union to obtain Clarence Darrow, who received an enthusiastic reception from 'wet' faithful, but an icy one from the general public. The Alberta Victuallers did no better with A.C. Windle, an anti-war editor from Chicago. Windle's outspoken opposition to the Great War allowed prohibitionists to reemphasize their argument that 'wet' sympathy meant a lack of patriotism, and that booze and Kaiserism were inextricably intertwined.⁴³ In Saskatchewan's referendum campaign of 1916, there simply was no opposition to the prohibitionists. The Government Dispensary system, in effect for more than a year, had decimated the ranks of hotel keepers, who generally provided the 'anti' leadership.

Because of a combination of new factors, all of them attributable to the Great War, the Prairie Provinces adopted prohibitory liquor

legislation during the first two full years of the war. Provincial prohibition was not total prohibition, however. The right to restrict inter-provincial trade belonged to the Dominion Government, and for this reason provincial Temperance Acts could not prevent individuals from importing liquor from another province for home consumption. A thriving interprovincial export business rapidly developed. Liquor dealers like William Ferguson of Brandon informed customers in the neighbouring province that "having decided to remain in business, and having still a large stock of draught Brandies, Scotch and Irish Whiskies, Rum, Holland Gin, Port and Sherries, [I] will continue to fill orders for *Saskatchewan*."⁴⁴ So much liquor came into Alberta across the British Columbia border that Bob Edwards' *Calgary Eye Opener* included the satirical "Society Note" that

Percy M. Winslow, one of our most popular and dissipated young men, left Monday morning for Field, B.C., where he has accepted a lucrative position as shipping clerk in one of the wholesale liquor houses. We predict a bright future for Percy.⁴⁵

Western prohibitionists were determined not to stop short of the ultimate goal. To plug the loopholes in provincial legislation, they turned to Ottawa. Petitions, letters, and resolutions reminded Members of Parliament of the gravity of the situation, and urged them to introduce measures to "abolish the sale and manufacture of alcoholic liquors during wartime."⁴⁶ Prohibitionists gave enthusiastic support to Unionist candidates throughout the West during the election of 1917. Dominion prohibition was one of the many reforms which they expected to emanate from Unionism, and the Union Government's bipartisan character and crusading style appealed to the prohibitionist mind. Many influential prohibitionists campaigned on behalf of Union Government, among them Dr. Salem Bland, Rev. C.W. Gordon, and Mrs. Nellie McClung. Their work was rewarded, for shortly after they took office the Unionists introduced federal prohibition as an Order in Council under the War Measures Act, to come into effect April 1, 1918.

This made the prohibitionist victory in theory complete. All that remained was the task of making certain that the hard won legislation was enforced. The war aided prohibitionists in this respect as well, and 1917-18 became the most effective years of the prohibition experiment. Even before the Dominion Government put an end to importation, Manitoba could report that "drunkenness had been reduced 87% for the first seven months of the operation of the (Prohibition) Act . . . all other crime has been reduced by 32%" and that "the support accorded the Act has surpassed the most sanguine expectations of its friends."⁴⁷ A jubilant Saskatchewan farm wife wrote to Premier

Martin that "our little town, which was formerly a drunkard's paradise, since the banishment of the bars and dispensaries has assumed an air of thrift and sobriety."⁴⁸ Alberta's Chief Inspector under the Temperance Act claimed that under prohibition arrests of drunks were reduced by ninety *per cent*, and drinking, crime, and drunkenness decreased in each Prairie Province during the last two years of the War.⁴⁹ Once the war ended, however, the prohibitionist solution to society's problems became increasingly less effective.⁵⁰ The assault on prohibition began almost as soon as the war ended, and prohibitionists no longer had the wartime situation to interest the public in their programme. By 1924 all three Western Provinces had replaced prohibition with government operated liquor stores.

How much of the prohibitionists' fleeting success can be attributed to the Great War? To describe the imposition of prohibition as a purely wartime phenomenon would do an injustice to the work done before 1914 to convince Westerners of the need for liquor restriction. The foundations laid before the war began were a vital factor in the eventual success. But it was the emotional atmosphere of wartime which completed the prohibitionists' work, and which allowed prohibition to operate reasonably effectively for two short years. It was the Great War's accompanying national reappraisal which made once indifferent citizens listen to temperance arguments for the first time. Once this was accomplished, the majoritarian zeal which marked the domestic war effort ensured the right "psychological moment to strike the blow."⁵¹ The *Saskatoon Phoenix* understood this process completely. "The temperance party," said an editorial, "has the war to thank for bringing public opinion *to a focus* on the matter of temperance reform."⁵²

The second reformist group aided significantly by the Great War was the movement for woman's suffrage. The prohibition and suffrage movements were so closely intertwined in both programme and personnel that what advanced one cause almost automatically had the same effect on the other. In the three Western Provinces, the W.C.T.U. played a leading role in both movements and an ardent prohibitionist was usually an ardent suffragette as well. In many parts of the Prairies, the pre-war suffrage movement was the Equal Franchise Department of the local W.C.T.U.⁵³

The war's favourable effect on the achievement of woman's suffrage is paradoxical, for prior to 1914, the woman's movement had thought of itself as pacifistic, and regarded war as one of woman's greatest enemies. War was part of the scheme of masculine domination which denied women an effective voice in society. "History, romance,

legend, and tradition," wrote Nellie McClung, "have shown the masculine aspect of war and have surrounded it with a false glory and have sought to throw the veil of glamour over its hideous face." It was for the "false glory" that men went to war, abandoning women to face the true responsibilities of life alone.⁵⁴

The Great War challenged these pacifistic assumptions. The wars which women had so roundly condemned had been the wars with which they themselves were familiar; the South African War, the Spanish American War, and colonial wars in Africa or the Far East. This new war was something very different. Germany was not the tiny Transvaal Republic, but an aggressive modern industrial power. Canada was not fighting for colonial conquest, but for 'liberty', 'justice', her very survival. Had it not been "the Kaiser and his brutal warlords" who had decided to "plunge all Europe into bloodshed?" And what about Belgium, gallant little Belgium where "the German soldiers made a shield of Belgium women and children in front of their Army; no child was too young, no woman too old, to escape their cruelty; no mother's prayers no child's appeal could stay their fury!"⁵⁵ Surely such inhumanity had to be checked lest it dominate first Europe, then the world.

As with the prohibitionist movement, the Great War's first effect on the suffrage movement was on its rhetoric. As Aileen S. Kraditor has pointed out, pre-war suffrage arguments can be divided into two categories, those based on justice and those based on expediency. The older, justice-oriented theme contended that women had a natural right to vote, as did all citizens. Arguments which emphasized expediency stressed instead the good effects that women's vote could accomplish in society.⁵⁶ Both types of argument were suitable to adaptation to the wartime atmosphere.

The new significance which the Great War gave to arguments based on justice is obvious. If the war were really "the greatest fight for liberty since the Dutch and English broke the power of Spain in the 16th Century", why, women asked, could they not enjoy in Canada the same liberty for which their sons were fighting and dying? Since the war was to be the "vindication of democracy", should not the democratic rights of millions of Canadian women be vindicated at the same time? Men who indulged in such descriptions of the war found themselves caught on the hook of their own eloquence.⁵⁷ As W.L. Morton has succinctly pointed out, "those who would carry democracy abroad must see that it is without reproach at home."⁵⁸

Arguments based on expediency gained more power in wartime as well. The public came to accept the idea that the war could be used to

redeem Western Canada from her pre-war materialism. This might be accomplished without women's votes, but what would happen when the war ended, and reforming zeal dissipated? Women's votes were necessary to prevent backsliding, and a return to evil in the post-war era. If this should happen, all the sacrifice, all the bloodshed, would be in vain. As a "war widow" told R.J.G. Stead,

We women, we women of the war—we have nothing left to be selfish for. But we have the whole world to be unselfish for. It's all different, and it can never go back. *We won't let it go back. We've paid too much to let it go back.*⁵⁸

To prevent this "going back", women demanded the vote.

Not only the rhetoric, but the organization of the woman's movement was profoundly changed by the war. Initially, suffragists thought that the war would postpone the achievement of their goal, since it would force them to devote less time to suffrage activities. In reality, however, women's war work proved to be the greatest organizational aid the movement had ever been blessed with. The motivation provided by patriotic work increased the membership of existing women's groups, such as the United Farm Women of Alberta and Manitoba, and the I.O.D.E. Groups not formerly concerned with suffrage were brought into contact with their more activist sisters in associations like the W.C.T.U. As these women gathered to produce incredible quantities of towels and toques, socks and shirts, balaclavas and bandages, they did not sit mute. Quiet housewives conversed with ardent advocates of equal suffrage, and while

the nimble fingers of the knitting women are transforming balls of wool into socks and comforters, even a greater change is being wrought in their own hearts. Into their gentle souls have come bitter thoughts of rebellion They realize now something of what is back of all the opposition to the woman's advancement into all lines of activity and a share in government.⁶⁰

In their Annual Report of 1918, the United Farm Women at Manitoba credited "war relief and patriotic work" with the formative role in the development of "a spirit of national sisterhood".⁶¹

It was not knitting for the Red Cross alone which produced this new frame of mind. The Census of 1911 had already revealed a tendency for increasing numbers of women to seek employment outside their homes, a tendency accentuated by the wartime shortage of manpower. More important, Western women were entering fields which had formerly tended to employ men. The number of women engaged in professional occupations, mainly teaching, increased 130% between 1911 and 1921. Alberta employed 630 more female teachers in 1916

than in 1914. Wartime vacancies also gave women an opportunity in Government Service, and Western governments employed four times as many in 1921 as they had ten years earlier.⁶² New opportunities for women did not stop with employment. Women began to infiltrate other areas regarded once as *de facto* male preserves. At the University of Manitoba, for example, the "two major honours", student presidency and newspaper editorship, went to women in 1917.⁶³

In addition to this role as men's replacements, women pointed to the fact that they bore much of the war's real suffering. They were the ones who struggled to keep farms working and families together in their husbands' absence. They were also the ones who had to carry on after husbands and sons were killed or maimed in France. Wilson Macdonald caught this sense of sacrifice in verse:

Ah! the battlefield is wider than the cannon's sullen roar;
And the women weep o'er battles lost or won.
For the man a cross of honour; but the crepe upon the door
For the girl behind the man behind the gun.⁶⁴

Suffragists enjoyed this image of the noble woman, quietly continuing with her duty and bearing her grief in silence. In reality, however, everything done for the war effort by woman was given the widest possible publicity and described in the most heroic terms possible. Women's pages of western dailies were filled with stories on patriotic service done by women. The caption accompanying a series of pictures featured in the *Winnipeg Tribune* provides an example:

It is the men-warriors who reap all the material rewards of war; it is the men who have medals pinned upon their breasts; it is the men whom the world lauds as heroes. What of the women who labor and suffer at home in the cause of justice and freedom? In Winnipeg there are thousands of women who are doing as much to win battles as their soldier fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. There are women who are devoting every waking hour to the provision of comforts for boys at the front, and to planning for their care when they return.⁶⁵

Magazine articles publicized the female side of the war effort, making it clear that women "count it an honour to engage in an occupation that strengthens the hands of our Empire."⁶⁶ Politicians especially were not allowed to forget women's contributions to the struggle with Germany. Letters reminded them how "truly and nobly our women have shown themselves equal to any emergency", and urged that women be given still greater responsibilities.⁶⁷

Because of this surge of publicity, and partly by direct contact with the new woman, the image men held of women began to change. Some resented the fact that the Red Cross and other activities fell

largely into female hands. F.W. Rolt, secretary of the Edmonton Red Cross, found woman's new assertiveness so alarming that he resigned his position, claiming that although "I don't wish to control the ladies, still less do I wish to be controlled by them."⁶⁸ But most men, even if they shared Rolt's fears about female domination, were grudgingly forced to concede that women were proving that they deserved equal citizenship. When the Dominion Parliament debated the question in 1917, for example, R.B. Bennett reversed his former opposition to woman's suffrage. Since women during the war were "discharging their full duties with respect to service", he felt that they must be admitted, "side by side with the male population . . . to exercise the highest rights and highest functions of citizenship." Two Western members from the other side of the House voiced enthusiasm for Bennett's conversion. W.A. Buchanan stated simply that he was "in favour of women [sic] suffrage . . . because I believe the women have earned the right to that franchise since the war commenced." Michael Clark added that Bennett's opinion would be well received in the West, since it was "in accordance with the opinions of the vast majority of the people of Western Canada."⁶⁹

It was the provincial governments, however, which acted first on the suffrage question. During the opening months of 1916, each Western Province granted its women the provincial franchise. Manitoba came first in January, and in March Alberta and Saskatchewan followed suit. Only one vote was cast against woman's suffrage in all three provinces, that by a French Canadian member of the Alberta House. Albertans made up for this by returning Mrs. Louise McKinney to the Legislature in the provincial election of the following year, and by naming Mrs. Emily Murphy as the first woman magistrate in the British Empire.⁷⁰

The federal franchise was not to come as suddenly or as completely. The Dominion Government's grant of woman's suffrage came in stages. It was established in principle by the Military Voters Act, which gave the vote to women serving in the Armed Forces, or as nurses. The controversial Wartime Elections Act, enfranchising close female relatives of men serving overseas, established it further, but still not completely. Those women who gained the ballot, especially those in Western Canada, used it to vote for the government which had given it to them. Complete woman's suffrage, like prohibition, was one of the many things reformers hoped for from the newly elected Unionists. Suffragists were not disappointed. Prime Minister Borden personally introduced a franchise bill in April, 1918, and parliamentary assent followed rapidly. On January 1, 1919, less than two months

after the war ended, the crusade for woman's suffrage was over, as far as the Prairie Provinces were concerned.

Woman's suffrage would have come without the Great War. There can be little doubt that the women of the Western Provinces would have gained the provincial franchise before too many years had passed, and the federal franchise would have followed eventually, although probably after a much longer struggle. But the Great War, with its impact on the suffragists' rationale, organization and public image, speeded the victory at both levels. Perhaps, however, the war's real importance to the woman's movement extends beyond the primary question of the right to vote. The dislocations of war won for women a foothold in fields of endeavour formerly reserved for men, and the traditional pattern of domestic service as the working woman's principal occupation. With these new opportunities came a new self-respect. By changing the average woman's image of herself and her position in a world dominated by men, the war advanced the cause of women in ways not simply political.

No other reform group was able to exploit the wartime situation as successfully as were the advocates of woman's suffrage and prohibition. The direct legislation movement enjoyed a brief moment of elation in 1916, when Manitoba's Norris government introduced an Initiative and Referendum Act. The Act was not accompanied by any large-scale campaign based on the mid-war enthusiasm for democracy, but was the fulfilment of a commitment Norris had made while Leader of the Opposition. The Saskatchewan Conservative Party attempted to resurrect the direct democracy issue during the 1917 Provincial Election, but were unable to use it to gain any political advantage.⁷¹ This was in part because of the fact that a substantial number of those who had originally supported the initiative and referendum had done so as a means to obtain prohibition, not because of a strong belief in direct legislation for its own sake. By 1917 these people were satisfied, and saw no need to campaign for a tool they no longer needed to use.

The economic reforms sought by Western reformers proved even more difficult to obtain. Unlike prohibition, woman's suffrage, and direct legislation, most of these had to come from the Dominion Parliament, a body not as easily influenced as a provincial government. The war did pave the way for some specific objectives. During 1917 the first Canadian tax on incomes was imposed, and the principle of railway nationalization as exemplified by the case of the Canadian Northern was also well received in the West. Western support for Union Government was based on the assumption that more such

action would be forthcoming, most particularly a reduction in the tariff. In this respect, and on the question of economic reform in general, Westerners were to be sadly disillusioned during the final year of war.

NOTES

* Edith Duncan to Dave Elden, R.J.C. Stead, *The Cow Puncher*, 1918.

¹ A. Richard Allen, *The Social Passion* (Toronto, 1971) Chapter 1, *passim*.

² In Saskatchewan, for example, only six of the twenty-six local option referenda conducted in December, 1913, resulted in prohibitionist victories. Erhard Pinno, "Temperance and Prohibition in Saskatchewan", (unpub. M.A. Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1971) p. 29.

³ E.J. Chambers, "The Plebiscite and Referendum in Saskatchewan", (unpub. M.A. Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1965) Chapter 1.

⁴ Provincial Archives of Manitoba (P.A.M.) Colin H. Campbell Papers, R.P. Roblin to Colin H. Campbell, 9.1.14.

⁵ *Canadian Annual Review (C.A.R.)*, 1914, p. 598.

⁶ The first phrase is from a resolution passed by the Manitoba Legislature on the third anniversary of the War's declaration, while the second is included in a circular written by W.R. Motherwell on behalf of the 1918 Victory Loan. P.A.M., Norris Papers, Box 2. Archives of Saskatchewan (A.S.), Motherwell Papers, p. 26267.

⁷ Rev. Canon Murray, "Canada's Place in the War", in Canadian Club of Winnipeg, *Annual Report 1913-14*, p. 71.

⁸ Mrs. Louis McKinney, "President's Address", in Alberta W.C.T.U. *Report of the Annual Convention 1915*.

⁹ Nellie L. McClung, *In Times Like These* (New York, 1915), p. 161.

¹⁰ Clifford Sifton, "Foundations of the New Era", in J.O. Miller, *The New Era in Canada* (Toronto, 1918), pp. 37-38.

¹¹ A.S., Saskatchewan Grain Growers Association, *Convention Report*, 12.2.17.

¹² Mrs. H.V. Plumptre, "Some Thought on the Suffrage", in Miller, *New Era*, pp. 328-9.

¹³ Archives of the Glenbow Foundation (Glenbow) Alberta W.C.T.U. Collection no. 1, f.35, *Report of the Annual Convention, 1915*, p. 30.

¹⁴ Plumptre, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

¹⁵ McClung, *In Times Like These*, p. 5, R.E. Spence, *Prohibition in Canada* (Toronto, 1919), p. 71.

¹⁶ Sara Rowell Wright, "The W.C.T.U. Program" in *The Social Service Congress of Canada* (Ottawa, 1914), p. 322.

¹⁷ McClung, *In Times Like These*, p. 165.

¹⁸ *Manitoba Free Press*, 6.3.16.

¹⁹ *Grain Growers' Guide*, 16.6.15.

²⁰ Frances M. Beynon in *Ibid.*, 30.5.17.

²¹ Ralph Connor, *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* (New York, 1917) pp. 149-50.

²² A.S., Martin Papers, Ladies of North Battleford Methodist Church to W.M. Martin, 7.11.16, p. 31654. See also Alberta W.C.T.U. Minute Book, 2.1.15; and P.A.M., Manitoba W.C.T.U. Collection, Winnipeg District Minute Book, 9.12.14.

²³ Motherwell Papers, Mrs. W.R. Motherwell, Address at Lemberg, Sask. 5.12.16, f.123.

²⁴ A.S., Walter Scott Papers, Capt. J.L.R. Parsons to Scott, 25.3.15, p. 59695. See also Pinno, *op. cit.*, p. 121; John H. Thompson "The Prohibition Question in Manitoba, 1892-1928", (unpub. M.A. Thesis University of Manitoba, 1969), p. 2; and R.I. McLean, "Temperance and Prohibition in Alberta, 1875-1915", (unpub. M.A. Thesis, University of Calgary, 1970); p. 134.

²⁵ Glenbow, Calgary Brewing and Malting Collection, W. Towers to A.E. Cross, 1.1.18, f.577.

²⁶ *Manitoba Free Press*, 7.3.16.

²⁷ *Edmonton Bulletin*, 20.7.15. See also *Regina Leader*, 24.2.15.

²⁸ *Manitoba Free Press*, 7.3.16.

²⁹ McClung, *In Times Like These*, p. 170.

³⁰ This quotation is from a resolution of the Manitoba Rural Deanery of the Church of England, *Manitoba Free Press*, 1.3.16. The Anglican conversion to prohibition is discussed in McLean, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-112. For the Orange Order's opinion see *C.A.R.*, 1915, p. 665 and P.A.M., R.P. Roblin Papers, J.J. Stitt to R.P. Roblin, 3.3.15. For an I.O.D.E. attitude see Provincial Archives of Alberta (P.A.A.), Beaverhouse I.O.D.E. Minute Book, 1.10.14. The Winnipeg Canadian Club's views are expressed in its *Annual Report*, 1913-14, pp. 6-7.

³¹ Lionel Orlikow, "A Survey of the Reform Movement in Manitoba, 1910-1920", (unpub. M.A. Thesis, U. of Manitoba, 1955), p. 150.

³² Scott Papers, Scott to Willoughby, 1.12.14, p. 48455; Levi Thomson to Scott, 8.4.15, p. 48503; Motherwell to Scott, 18.12.14, p. 12889; Scott to S.G. Hill, 1.7.15, p. 13300; Scott to J.H. Ross, 12.4.15, p. 13650.

³³ A.S., J.A. Calder Papers, Calder to G.H.V. Bulyea, 23.3.15, G4, p. 11.

³⁴ R.I. McLean, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

³⁵ Motherwell Papers, T.A. Mitchell to Motherwell, 22.1.16, f. 71(2).

³⁶ *The Western Prairie* (Cypress River, Manitoba), 2.3.16.

³⁷ Calder to Bulyea, 23.3.15. Calder Papers, G. 4, p. 11. Opposition to prohibition during wartime was notable among those of German birth or descent. The German language *Der Courier*, *Der Nordwesten*, and *St. Peters Bote* all editorialized against prohibition, and the German Canadian Alliance of Saskatchewan publicly denounced the "aggressive and unscrupulous agitation" of the prohibitionists. See Erhard Pinno, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-3. Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-9, and *C.A.R.*, 1914, p. 630.

³⁸ *Manitoba Free Press*, 6.3.16; *Canadian Farmer*, November, 1916, translation in Martin Papers, pp. 31616-8.

³⁹ Alberta W.C.T.U., *Annual Report*, 1915, p. 60.

⁴⁰ *Manitoba Free Press*, 14.3.16.

⁴¹ Pinno, *op. cit.*, p. 122; *Le Courier de l'Ouest* (Edmonton), 1.7.16; *Le Manitoba*, 13.4.16. The comparative effectiveness of patriotic arguments for prohibition on French Canadians and non-Anglo Saxon immigrants can be demonstrated by an examination of referendum results in the Alberta Constituencies of Victoria, Whitford, St. Albert, and Beaver River. All four rejected prohibition, but Victoria and Whitford, with heavy Ukrainian populations, did so by the relatively narrow margin of 1392 to 1022. St. Albert and Beaver River, with largely French Canadian electorates, recorded a combined majority of 889 against prohibition, 1484 to 595.

⁴² Calgary Brewing and Malting Collection, A.E. Cross to D.R. Ker, 24.3.15, f. 550.

⁴³ *Edmonton Bulletin*, 6.7.15.

⁴⁴ Advertisement in Motherwell Papers, f. 71(2).

⁴⁵ *Calgary Eye Opender*, 8.7.16.

⁴⁶ Manitoba W.C.T.U. Collection, Recording Secretary's Book, 15.2.16.

⁴⁷ Province of Manitoba, *Annual Report on the Temperance Act*, Sessional Paper no. 13, 1917.

⁴⁸ Martin Papers, Mrs. G.V. Jewett to Martin, 23.4.17, p. 31759.

⁴⁹ R.E. Popham and W. Schmit, *Statistics of Alcohol Use and Alcoholism in Canada* (Toronto, 1958), pp. 48-53. See also James H. Gray, *The Boy From Winnipeg* (Toronto, 1970), p. 126 and *Red Lights on the Prairies* (Toronto, 1971), pp. 149-151.

⁵⁰ Alberta W.C.T.U. Collection no. 1, Social Service Council Convention Minutes, 18.2.19, f. 7.

⁵¹ Scott Papers, Levi Thomson to Scott, 8.4.15, p. 48503.

⁵² *Saskatoon Phoenix*, 19.3.15. Richard Allen has suggested that prohibition was "almost predictable" in Manitoba and Saskatchewan before the war began in 1914, (*Social Passion*, p. 22). This judgment seems exaggerated, given the lack of success of local option ballots, the defeat of the Norris Liberals in Manitoba, and comments such as those of Calder and Scott cited above, p. 10.

⁵³ See June Menzies, "Votes for Saskatchewan's Women", in N. Ward ed., *Politics in Saskatchewan* (Don Mills, 1968), p. 90, Thomson, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60, and C.L. Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto, 1950), pp. 49-64.

⁵⁴ McClung, *In Times Like These*, p. 14. See also Carol Lee Bacchi Ferraro, "The Ideas of the Canadian Suffragists, 1890-1920", (unpub. M.A. Thesis, McGill University, 1970) pp. 109-111.

⁵⁵ McClung, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁵⁶ Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement* (New York, 1965), p. 38-63.

⁵⁷ The first phrase is from P.A.C., Dafoe Papers, Clifford Sifton to J.W. Dafoe, 21.9.14. The second is from Stephen Leacock, "Democracy and Social Progress", in J.O. Miller, *New Era*, p. 13.

⁵⁸ W.L. Morton, "The Extension of the Franchise in Canada; A Study in Democratic Nationalism", *Canadian Historical Association Report*, 1943, p. 79.

⁵⁹ R.J.C. Stead, *The Cow Puncher* (Toronto, 1918), p. 342.

⁶⁰ McClung, *In Times Like These*, pp. 28-29. For some examples of the effects of the war in increasing the membership of women's organizations, see Glenbow, United Farmers of Alberta Collection, f. 35; Scott Papers, Eva Sherrock to Scott, 14.2.16, p. 59505; *Manitoba Free Press*, 27.2.15. For a good example of the cooperation among organizations promoted by the war, see Alberta W.C.T.U. Collection no. 2, North West Calgary Union, Minutes, 4.11.15, f. 5.

⁶¹ P.A.M., United Farmers of Manitoba Collection, United Farm Women Report, 1918.

⁶² The Census of 1921 revealed a sixty-three percent increase in the number of women in the western provinces employed outside their homes. For comparative figures see Canada, *Fifth Census*, 1911, vol. VI, p. 10, *passim*, and *Sixth Census*, 1921, vol. IV, p. 10 *passim*. The statistics on women teachers in Alberta are taken from Alberta Department of Education, *Annual Report*, 1916, pp. 16-17.

⁶³ *Manitoba Free Press*, 4.10.17.

⁶⁴ Wilson Macdonald, "The Girl Behind the Man Behind the Gun", in *Song of the Prairie Land* (Toronto, 1918), pp. 124-6.

⁶⁵ *Winnipeg Tribune*, 9.10.15.

⁶⁶ P.A.A., Miriam Elston Scrapbooks, "The Home Shall be an Honoured Place", *Everywoman's World*, November 1916.

⁶⁷ Scott Papers, Ella B. Carroll to Scott, 1.2.16, p. 59492; Norris Papers, W.R. Wood to T.C. Norris, 26.1.18, Box 2. In his work on the domestic impact of the war on Great Britain, Arthur Marwick describes British women as "a gigantic mutual-admiration circle" during wartime. Marwick, *The Deluge* (London, 1965), p. 96. Marwick's comment can be applied to their Canadian counterparts as well.

⁶⁸ University of Alberta Archives, Henry Marshall Tory Papers, F.W. Rolt to H.M. Tory, 15.15.15, f. 14082A.

⁶⁹ Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 1917, vol. II, pp. 1515-19.

⁷⁰ L.G. Thomas, *The Liberal Party in Alberta* (Toronto, 1959), p. 165. For a detailed description of the passage of each suffrage act, see Cleverdon, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-83.

⁷¹ Chambers, "Plebiscite and Referendum", p. 63.