

In Search of a “Newer and Truer” Literature: Thomas Phillips Thompson and The Labor Advocate

À la recherche d’une littérature « plus moderne et plus réelle » : Thomas Phillips Thompson et The Labor Advocate

David Buchanan

Volume 60, 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1107277ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/pbsc.v60i1.40519>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Bibliographical Society of Canada/La Société bibliographique du Canada

ISSN

0067-6896 (imprimé)
2562-8941 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Buchanan, D. (2023). In Search of a “Newer and Truer” Literature: Thomas Phillips Thompson and The Labor Advocate. *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada / Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada*, 60, 1–26.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/pbsc.v60i1.40519>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article décrit les emplois de la littérature dans *The Labor Advocate: A Weekly Labor Reform Newspaper* (« Le défenseur syndical : Un journal hebdomadaire pour la réforme du travail ») (Toronto, 1890-91). En tant qu'éditeur du journal *Advocate*, Thomas Phillips Thompson espérait sensibiliser le public aux moyens et aux conséquences du capitalisme industriel, promouvant ainsi la possibilité de justice sociale pour la classe ouvrière. Il s'est engagé à atteindre cet objectif par le biais d'une publication périodique à format mixte comprenant de la poésie, des nouvelles littéraires et des romans-feuilletons, ainsi que des textes éditoriaux, des biographies, des avis nécrologiques, des comptes-rendus, des lettres et des chroniques. Sur quarante-quatre numéros, Thompson a mis à l'essai de nombreuses différentes expressions littéraires afin d'attirer un plus grand lectorat et encourager la réforme démocratique de l'organisation sociale. Une analyse de *The Labor Advocate* illustre l'importance des stratégies de communication aux débuts de l'histoire de la presse syndicale canadienne, ainsi qu'à l'histoire plus longue du mouvement ouvrier dans des contextes transfrontaliers.

© David Buchanan, 2023



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

In Search of a “Newer and Truer” Literature: Thomas Phillips Thompson and *The Labor Advocate*

DAVID BUCHANANⁱ
Athabasca University

Abstract

This article describes the uses of literature in *The Labor Advocate: A Weekly Labor Reform Newspaper* (Toronto, 1890-91). As editor of the *Advocate*, Thomas Phillips Thompson aimed to increase awareness of the means and consequences of industrial capitalism, and thus enhance the possibility of social justice for the working class. He did so in a mixed format periodical that included poetry, short fiction, and serialized novels as well as editorials, biographies, obituaries, reports, letters, and columns. Over forty-four issues, Thompson experimented with literary expression to attract readers and foster the democratic reform of social organization. Analysis of the *Advocate* points to the importance of communication strategies in both the early history of the Canadian labour press and the longer history of labour in transnational contexts.

Résumé

Cet article décrit les emplois de la littérature dans *The Labor Advocate: A Weekly Labor Reform Newspaper* (« Le défenseur syndical : Un journal hebdomadaire pour la réforme du travail ») (Toronto, 1890-91). En tant qu'éditeur du journal *Advocate*, Thomas Phillips Thompson espérait sensibiliser le public aux moyens et aux conséquences du capitalisme industriel, promouvant ainsi la possibilité de justice sociale pour la classe ouvrière. Il s'est engagé à atteindre cet objectif par le biais d'une publication périodique à format mixte comprenant de la poésie, des

nouvelles littéraires et des romans-feuilletons, ainsi que des textes éditoriaux, des biographies, des avis nécrologiques, des comptes-rendus, des lettres et des chroniques. Sur quarante-quatre numéros, Thompson a mis à l’essai de nombreuses différentes expressions littéraires afin d’attirer un plus grand lectorat et encourager la réforme démocratique de l’organisation sociale. Une analyse de *The Labor Advocate* illustre l’importance des stratégies de communication aux débuts de l’histoire de la presse syndicale canadienne, ainsi qu’à l’histoire plus longue du mouvement ouvrier dans des contextes transfrontaliers.

As editor of *The Labor Advocate: A Weekly Labor Reform Newspaper* (Toronto, 1890-91), Thomas Phillips Thompson never minced words. In a typically outspoken editorial, he stated: “The average workingman is a fool, so far as his interests and those of his class are concerned. He may have a fair amount of common sense in other matters, but as regards any intelligent conception of his rights and how to obtain them, he is essentially and emphatically a downright unmitigated ass.”¹ This assessment was characteristically harsh. And yet, Thompson always premised his critiques on a sustained attack on capitalism and its deforming production and reproduction of inequality and economic crisis. More specifically, the *Labor Advocate* attacked monopoly, imperialism, and those whose abuse of power resulted in social injustice. For example, Thompson also wrote: “If ‘going back to first principles’ is in order, it is easy to find among the monopolists and exploiters of labor in every country men who deserve summary execution far more than any member of the alleged Mafia.”² The aim of the newspaper was to foster consciousness of the means and consequences of industrial capitalism, and to facilitate individual and collective responses to alter the conditions of the working class. From the

¹ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “The Fool Workingman,” *The Labor Advocate*, 20 February 1891, p. 4.

² Thomas Phillips Thompson, “Going Back to First Principles,” *The Labor Advocate*, 27 March 1891, p. 4.

1860s until the 1920s, Thompson unrelentingly advocated the natural and economic rights of the working class in mainstream, reform, and radical newspapers. His own *Advocate*, situated at the mid-point of his career, best represents the many ways he employed the periodical press to carry on a tradition of rights-based criticism and radical labour reform dating back to the eighteenth century.

Thompson's early life and work in journalism indicate a clear path to the *Advocate*.³ Thompson was born in Newcastle upon Tyne on 25 November 1843 and emigrated to Canada in 1857, settling in St. Catharines, Ontario.⁴ Trained as a lawyer, he soon turned to editing and writing. His literary output included journalism, satire, songs, editorials, and books. Early work included a pamphlet titled *The Future Government of Canada* (1864). In the 1870s, Thompson wrote political satire under the pseudonym “Jimuel Briggs” for the St. Catharines and Toronto press before founding the *National* (Toronto, 1874-75), a weekly publication that commented on local politics and reform issues.⁵ After three years working as a literary editor and writer in Boston, he returned to Toronto and worked for the *Mail* (Toronto, 1872-95) and then the *Globe* (Toronto, 1844-1936), “which soon sent him overseas to cover the Irish National Land League, a mass organization of tenant farmers protesting high rents.”⁶ With his attention to social reform issues heightened by these experiences, he became assistant editor and chief editorial writer for the *News* (Toronto, 1881-1919) and later wrote simultaneously for the *Palladium of Labor* (Hamilton, 1883-86), a labour paper that was different in that it advocated for both male and female workers and offered a more radical politics that went

³ This description of Thompson's early life and career is from Craig Heron, “Thomas Phillips Thompson,” in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed 4 March 2015, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/thomas-phillips-thompson; Jay Atherton, “Introduction,” in T.P. Thompson, *The Politics of Labor* (University of Toronto Press, 1975); Christopher O'Shea and Christopher Pennington, “Thompson, Thomas Phillips,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XVI (1931-1940), accessed 4 March 2015, www.biographi.ca/en/bio/thompson_thomas_phillips_16E.html; and Ron Verzuh, *Radical Rag: The Pioneer Labour Press in Canada* (Steel Rail, 1988), 73-74.

⁴ Heron, “Thomas Phillips Thompson.”

⁵ This satirical work was later republished as a collection, *The Political Experiences of Jimuel Briggs, D.B., at Toronto, Ottawa and Elsewhere* (Toronto: Flint Morton & Company, 1873).

⁶ O'Shea and Pennington.

beyond co-operation between capital and labour.⁷ Aside from his many reports and articles, and alongside his involvement in politics,⁸ he wrote satirical sketches under the pseudonym “Enjolras” for the *Palladium of Labor*; a book on labour reform, *The Politics of Labor* (1887); most of the songs collected in *The Labor Reform Songster* (1892); and a 36-page pamphlet titled *Leasehold Arbitrations: How the System of Renewal Awards Results in Practical Confiscation* (1896). From about 1895 to 1905, he wrote for the Ontario legislature and contributed to the *Labour Gazette* (1900-present), which was first published in Ottawa by the newly established Department of Labour. Before and after his official retirement in 1911, he also wrote for labour papers across the country, including the staunchly socialist *Western Clarion* (Vancouver, 1903-25). In short, Thompson was prolific, and his literary output was diverse. As both an author and an editor, he was not restricted to radical outbursts denigrating working-class lethargy or slamming capitalist exploitation; as the periodical became a prominent form of literature in nineteenth-century Canada,⁹ Thompson worked actively, and often subtly, to explore the tensions between rights and responsibilities for both employees and employers.

The labour movement in Canada depended on newspapers that could communicate core issues and attract new readers.¹⁰ These papers started

⁷ Verzuh, 51.

⁸ For example, Thompson was an official delegate of the Knights of Labor at the convention of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada in 1886, and in 1892-93, he ran unsuccessfully in two provincial by-elections. See O’Shea and Pennington.

⁹ For relevant scholarship on nineteenth-century periodicals in Canada, see Robert L. McDougall, “A Study of Canadian Periodical Literature of the Nineteenth Century,” PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1950; Paul Rutherford, *A Victorian Authority: The Daily Press in Late Nineteenth-Century Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 1982); Fraser Sutherland, *The Monthly Epic: A History of Canadian Magazines 1789-1989* (Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1989); Dean Irvine, *Editing Modernity: Women and Little-Magazine Cultures in Canada, 1916-1956* (University of Toronto Press, 2008); and Faye Hammill and Michelle Smith, *Magazines, Travel, and Middlebrow Culture: Canadian Periodicals in English and French, 1925-1960* (University of Alberta Press / Liverpool University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ On the early labour press in histories of labour, see Russell Hann, “Brainworkers and the Knights of Labor: E.E. Sheppard, Phillips Thompson, and the *Toronto News*, 1883-1887,” *Essays in Working Class History*, edited by Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian (McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 35-57; Bryan D. Palmer, *Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1979); Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism 1867-1892* (University of Toronto Press, 1980); and Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

well before the Confederation and played a key role in the labour movement's response to industrialization in the 1860s and 1870s. Early English-language labour newspapers could be moderate or radical (or both)—most were published in larger urban centres like Montreal and Toronto and served regional readerships. They were also published in small industrial towns, and alongside periodicals in other languages and imported from other countries. The number of labour papers increased with the need for communication and organization, while fluctuating with general economic conditions. Some were short-lived, while others lasted for decades, with some morphing from one title to another over a longer period. Many were published weekly, were four to eight pages long, and sold for one to five cents per issue (or by yearly subscription). Circulation could be as little as a few hundred issues, and was rarely more than a few thousand. The content was diverse and designed to educate both broadly and on specific labour issues—and, in some cases, to entertain workers. Labour reform papers focused primarily on material conditions (e.g., hours and wages), although the content could be wide-ranging, including calls for systemic change (e.g., socialism) emerging in the 1880s. A typical mixed-format labour paper might include some combination of poetry and prose fiction in addition to news, editorials, essays, images, cartoons, and more. Most were international in several respects: by the involvement of people from the United States, Britain, and elsewhere (e.g., as editors, writers, and readers); by the reporting and influence of international news, movements, and events; and by the reprinting of fiction and non-fiction from elsewhere (primarily periodicals originally published in Britain and the United States).¹¹

¹¹ This overview is based primarily on the reading of nineteenth-century labour papers. The following secondary resources on the history of proletarian literature have also provided valuable knowledge and insight: Ruth I. McKenzie, “Proletarian Literature in Canada,” *Dalhousie Review* vol. 19, no. 1 (1939): pp. 49-64; Frank William Watt, “Radicalism in English Canadian Literature since Confederation,” PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1957; FrankWilliam Watt, “The Growth of Proletarian Literature in Canada, 1872-1920,” *Dalhousie Review* vol. 40, no. 2 (1960): pp. 157-73; FrankWilliam Watt, “Literature of Protest,” *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, edited by Carl F. Klinck, Alfred G. Bailey, Claude Bissell, Roy Daniells, Northrop Frye, and Desmond Pacey (University of Toronto Press, 1976), 473-90; Robin Mathews, *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution* (Steel Rail, 1988); Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (University of

Despite a relatively short life—forty-four issues published weekly in Toronto from 5 December 1890 to 2 October 1891—the *Labor Advocate* is an example of the remarkably diverse expression in the labour press. In the nineteenth century, the term “literature” encompassed a range of belles-lettristic forms. As editor of the *Advocate*, Thompson included not only poetry, short fiction, and serialized novels but also editorials, biographies, obituaries, reports, letters, and columns. In different ways, each form of expression advocated a radical politics intended for an audience that went beyond self-proclaimed socialists, resulting in a mixed-format paper that was diverse from the beginning while also sensitive to the need to shape content for wider readership. The strategies employed by Thompson over the life of the *Advocate* depended on three related factors: the goal of teaching readers how to improve their own material circumstances; a belief in print as a suitable vehicle of transmission (and persuasion); and prioritization of popular opinion as the basis of change by democratic means. By focusing on the search for what Thompson called a “newer and truer”¹² literature in a downmarket newspaper edited by one of Canada’s most influential labour advocates, this article builds upon scholarship in three branches of study: print culture, labour history, and literary studies. The objective is to better understand the use of literature in the labour press to generate knowledge of and embolden political response to capitalist conditions.

Toronto Press, 1985); Verzuh; Christina Burr, *Spreading the Light: Work and Labour Reform in Nineteenth-Century Toronto* (University of Toronto Press, 1999); Larry McDonald, “Socialism and the English Canadian Literary Tradition,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* vol. 68 (1999): pp. 213-41; Roxanne Rimstead, *Remnants of Nation: Poverty Narratives by Women* (University of Toronto Press, 2001); James Doyle, *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002); Candida Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics: Women, Literature and the Left in 1930s Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2009); and Jody Mason, *Writing Unemployment: Worklessness, Mobility, and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century Canadian Literatures* (University of Toronto Press, 2013). See also: Robin Endres, ed., *Eight Men Speak, and Other Plays from the Canadian Workers’ Theatre* (New Hogtown Press, 1976); Gwendolyn Davies and Carole Gerson, eds., *Canadian Poetry from the Beginnings through the First World War* (McLelland and Stewart, 1994); and Brian Davis, ed., *The Poetry of the Canadian People, 1720-1920: Two Hundred Years of Hard Work* (NC Press, 1976). The three-volume *History of the Book in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2004, 2005, 2007) includes sections on proletarian and working-class literature.

¹² Thomas Phillips Thompson [Enjolras], “Literature and Labor,” *Palladium of Labor*, 29 August 1885, p. 1.

As a mixed-format periodical, the *Advocate* continued the publishing practices of a burgeoning daily press in Canada.¹³ It followed on a tradition of so-called “literary” magazines in Canada, including the *Literary Garland* (Montreal, 1838-51) and *Saturday Night* (Toronto, 1887-2005), just as much as it followed on from earlier labour papers. As Paul Rutherford describes, by the 1890s, “Newspapers now informed, sometimes inflamed, a huge reading public about the great issues of national policy as well as the mundane round of daily life.”¹⁴ Competition was fierce; editors had to know what appealed to customers. Thompson had direct experience with the balancing act that often emerged between journalism and sensationalism as well as fiction and non-fiction, especially with his work on the *News* and the *Palladium* in the mid-1880s. By 1884, the *News* was a thriving evening daily in Toronto devoted to democracy and, initially at least, careful to separate itself from socialism. The *News* was designed to capture a wider audience, including more sensational fare and local reporting than the regular party press that served dedicated socialist readers. This meant that the socialist orientation of the paper did not always (seem to) take precedence. By contrast, the *Palladium* was dedicated to the cause of the Knights of Labor, a labour reform organization originally founded in 1869 in Philadelphia before spreading to Canada in the 1880s. The conscious purpose of describing and addressing the plight of the working class left Thompson and others freer to express more radical political views. Nevertheless, Thompson did so in part through a series of satirical sketches under the pseudonym “Enjolras,” which, borrowed from Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, pointed to the potential for popular reception by varied literary representation.¹⁵ The *News* and the *Palladium* both meant to advance labour politics while cultivating a broader readership. Foreshadowing his later work on the

¹³ See, for example, Christina Burr, “‘The Other Side’: The Rhetoric of Labour Reform,” *Labouring Canada: Class, Gender, and Race in Canadian Working-Class History*, edited by Bryan D. Palmer and Joan Sangster (Oxford University Press, 2008), 87-98.

¹⁴ Rutherford, 3-4.

¹⁵ Thomas Phillips Thompson [Enjolras], “Our Social Circle,” *Palladium of Labor*, 8 September 1883, p. 1.

Advocate, Russell Hann writes of Thompson’s contributions to the *News* and the *Palladium*: “This dual activity brought Thompson to a clear understanding of the relation of cultural activity to the working class movement.”¹⁶ Hann describes how the *News*, like “Enjolras” in the *Palladium*, argued for a new literature that was not merely the mouthpiece of bourgeois education. The *News*, for instance, applauded writers sympathetic to the plight of the working class (i.e., William Morris, H.M. Hyndman). Similarly, in an article titled “Literature and Labor” published on 29 August 1885 in the *Palladium*, Thompson commented directly on the connection between literary practices and social change. He argued that literary culture was hostile to labour reform and that false ideas filtered down to the uneducated through elite writers such as Homer, William Shakespeare, and Walter Scott. He concluded that “The hope of the coming ages must be in a newer and truer literature.”¹⁷ Positive models included novels by Charles Dickens and George Eliot, as well as poetry by Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walt Whitman. Building on a belief in the power of literature to transfer a message to readers, some literature was deemed more suitable to the cause of working-class reform.

Support of the *Advocate* by both the Knights of Labor (District Assembly 125) and the Toronto Trades and Labor Council (TTLC) might suggest a moderate approach to labour politics. The Knights of Labor took the novel approach of encouraging harmony between all those who worked for a living, and yet “they never called for the abolition of private capital or for widespread public ownership of the means of production,” and they were also “uncomfortable with strikes” and “preferred to put industrial disputes before an arbitrator whenever possible.”¹⁸ Like the Knights, the TTLC, “founded by representatives of 16 unions,”¹⁹ advocated better working conditions rather than revolution against the capitalist system.

¹⁶ Hann, 41.

¹⁷ [Enjolras], “Literature and Labor,” 1.

¹⁸ Craig Heron and Charles Smith, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History*, 4th edition (Lorimer, 2020), 20, 21, 23.

¹⁹ “Our History: Working for Justice Since 1871,” *Toronto and York Region Labour Council*, accessed 4 March 2015, www.labourcouncil.ca/our_history.

But the *Advocate* was also published by Grip, which was run by J.W. Bengough, the reformer and publisher of *Grip* (1873-94), a Toronto weekly that featured humour (especially in cartoons) as a form of social critique on a variety of topics.²⁰ The success of a labour periodical with radical intentions would require consciousness of a historical moment that was complex. On the one hand, the *Advocate* followed the popularity of Henry George’s call for a single tax,²¹ the peak of the Knights in 1886,²² the tremendous success of Edward Bellamy’s utopian novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888), and the publication of the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labor and Capital in Canada* in 1889; as Craig Heron and Charles Smith put it: “The sense of a great moral crusade hung in the air.”²³ On the other hand, the Knights were already in demise and a steep downturn in the economy hindered organization efforts, and so it also appeared that “The moment of hope and vision had passed by the end of the decade.”²⁴ In this light, the *Advocate* seems a last gasp effort to salvage the lost momentum of the Knights’ rise in the mid-1880s by straddling the conservatism of the union movement and the aspirations of utopian socialism. Thompson clearly wanted the *Advocate* to voice more radical alternatives, as suggested by the *Advocate*’s motto: “We Demand all the Reform that Justice can ask for, and all the Justice that Reform can give.” He did not do so by resorting to jingoistic slogans. Gene Homel notes that Thompson was at “the cutting edge of the radical movement,”²⁵

²⁰ For more detailed biographical information on Bengough, see Ramsay Cook, “Bengough, John Wilson.” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XV (1921-1930), accessed 4 March 2015, www.biographi.ca/en/bio/bengough_john_wilson_15E.html. For a history of *Grip*, see Carl Spadoni, “Grip and the Bengoughs as Publishers and Printers,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* vol. 27, no. 1 (1988):

<https://doi.org/10.33137/pbsc.v27i1.17697>. See also: Carman Cumming, *Sketches from a Young Country: The Images of “Grip” Magazine* (University of Toronto Press, 1997) and Christina Burr, “Gender, Sexuality, and Nationalism in J.W. Bengough’s Verses and Political Cartoons,” *Canadian Historical Review* vol. 102, Supplement 3 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.3138/chr-102-s3-006>.

²¹ Henry George, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions, and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth. The Remedy* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1880).

²² Heron and Smith, 23.

²³ Heron and Smith, 24.

²⁴ Heron and Smith, 26.

²⁵ Gene Howard Homel, “Fading Beams of the Nineteenth Century’: Radicalism and Early Socialism in Canada’s 1890s,” *Labour / Le Travail* vol. 5 (1980): pp. 7-32 (21).

and that “Thompson’s ideas were obviously much more rigorous and sophisticated than those of his radical compatriots.”²⁶ Thompson did not rely on a simplistic Jesus-was-a-socialist argument. His interest in theosophy, as one example, depended on a belief in the full development of the spiritual individual through brotherhood and cooperation, which could take the form of socialist organization.²⁷ Intellectual rigour never led Thompson to take his eye from the work at hand. Of the six labour papers published in Toronto from 1867 to 1892, Gregory Kealey describes the *Advocate* as “by far the most impressive,”²⁸ noting that “although of a high intellectual and literary tone, it never lost contact with the workers’ struggles.”²⁹ Similarly, while supporting short-term reforms to enhance the lives of working-class people, the *Advocate* critiqued the capitalist basis of social organization and openly supported socialism.³⁰ As F.W. Watt notes, in contrast to earlier papers, the *Advocate* outlined “a more thorough, consistent and systematic radicalism.”³¹ But it was not the blunt instrument one might expect from a radical paper.

The *Advocate* was an aggregation of working-class literature (or literature that could be read from a working-class perspective) from around the world intended to attract, inspire, and challenge working-class readers to think and act in their own best interests. The selection and framing of literature had to strike just the right balance between intellectual rigour and practical outcome. Over the life of the *Advocate*, the introduction of new, often foreign or translated, ideas took many forms, including quotations, notes, reports, reviews, articles, letters, essays, cartoons, literary extracts, more than fifty poems, at least twenty short stories, and three novels or novellas. Advertisements listed works by social reformer

²⁶ Homel, 22.

²⁷ For a related discussion, see chapter 9, “‘The New City of Friends’: Evolution, Theosophy, and Socialism,” in Cook, *The Regenerators* (University of Toronto Press, 2016).

²⁸ Kealey, *Toronto Workers*, 280.

²⁹ Kealey, *Toronto Workers*, 280.

³⁰ For another description of the politics of the *Advocate*, see John David Bell, “The Social and Political Thought of the *Labor Advocate*,” MA thesis, Queen’s University, 1975.

³¹ FrankWilliam Watt, “The National Policy, the Workingman, and Proletarian Ideas in Victorian Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* vol. 40, no. 1 (1959): pp. 1-26 (22).

William Morris and by Karl Marx. A single issue might include a review of Thorold Rogers’ series of essays, *Six Centuries of Work and Wages* (1884), and a selection from Camille Flammarion’s science fiction novel *Omega: The Last Days of the Earth* (1894).³² Pointed editorials at the heart of the *Advocate* were supplemented by literature that could be just as radical, surprisingly moderate, or something else entirely. It was not enough to shout or rant. Even though the intense condemnation of capitalist practices would remain a prominent feature of the paper, readers had to embrace the message on their own terms, and enough people had to pay for the experience.

The most obvious way to transmit a message to readers was to make a case directly. This was done repeatedly with words and images, most visibly in page-four editorials couched in the unrelentingly frank language already well known in the labour press. Thompson spared no one, calling out the working class and capitalists, and also the British monarchy, religious leaders, and politicians for “pinning their faith on the superstitions of political economy and bowing down before the gods of monarchy, militarism, the metallic basis of the currency, the divine right of the landlord, and the law of supply and demand.”³³ Although Thompson and dedicated working-class readers might have enjoyed these pointed remarks, this sort of criticism did not, or perhaps could not, stand on its own indefinitely. The repetition was as likely to tire committed readers as the hard stance was to deter a broader audience, and the expansion of socialism depended on the commitment of a wider public. Moreover, the competition for increasingly literate working-class readers was not restricted to the labour press. Typically conservative papers of the period courted working-class readers, most notably after 1882, when James Cameron shifted the anti-labour focus of the *Globe*.³⁴ Sympathetic weekly magazines, the daily press, and so-called “people’s journals” also catered to the interests of working-class readers by professing outright

³² This extract from the *Labor Advocate* (5 June 1891, p. 6) may be from an earlier serialization.

³³ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “Workingmen their Own Worst Enemies,” *Labor Advocate*, 26 June 1891, p. 4.

³⁴ Verzuh, 67.

support for the people and printing colourful or general interest stories.³⁵ Moreover, the range of reading material available expanded, including family, farm, and ethnic publications, the religious and temperance press, mainstream magazines, and the popular evening press that provided further competition.³⁶ In short, the practicalities of publishing a weekly paper for wider readership in a competitive market shaped communication practices. Radical politics had to be fleshed out or outlined in more varied ways to connect with committed reformers and a wider range of readers. The frequent publication of poetry in the *Advocate* provides an initial example.

Most issues of the *Advocate* contain at least one poem, and some feature several. The collection of authors is, like the poems themselves, eclectic: of the more than forty poets published, many are not from Canada, a few are part of the contemporary canon, and others are unknown, forgotten, or unnamed. The better-known poets include Swinburne, Morris, Ernest Jones, and Gerald Massey from Britain, as well as Walt Whitman, James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, and John Greenleaf Whittier from America. As Carole Gerson has pointed out, nineteenth-century English-Canadian writers worked in an international context in various respects.³⁷ The lesser-known or anonymous others (e.g., “Eight Hours”) were from Canada, South Africa, Germany, Australia, and elsewhere. Alexander McLachlan appears to be the only Canadian poet in the *Advocate* who was widely recognized while alive. Articles, letters, and poems by Elizabeth Johnson of Picton, Ontario, of whom little seems to be known, were more frequent. In many cases, political stance and literary content mirrored each other. Many poems were originally published in British, American, and Canadian labour periodicals, and the subjects addressed were relevant to a labour reform newspaper. “Poor Poetry but Straight Truth” ridicules the worker who fritters away his money in the pub while

³⁵ Verzuh, 68

³⁶ Verzuh, 69.

³⁷ Carole Gerson, “Writers without Borders: The Global Framework of Canada’s Early Literary History,” *Canadian Literature* vol. 201 (Summer 2009): pp. 15-33.

complaining of taxes and dues.³⁸ G.F. Stephens reflects upon the pitfalls of landlordism.³⁹ Edward J. Brady suggests that working-class vengeance is not far off.⁴⁰ Joseph Daniel Muller argues against high taxes and prices that further the hard conditions faced by working women.⁴¹ “The ‘Song of the Shop’” describes the deplorable situation faced by shop girls working up to 107 hours a week.⁴² Labour poems published in the *Advocate* were reformist in different ways, and to varying degrees: Anna R. Henderson calls for the weak to take a stand,⁴³ Edith Nesbit for gender equality,⁴⁴ and T.E. Naylor for working-class solidarity.⁴⁵ C.W. Beckett versifies about people he deemed expendable, including the “bourgeois statistician,” “smug evangelist,” “brassy rent-collectors,” “nugatory landlord,” and “boss-capitalist.”⁴⁶ Inspirational poems, such as Whitman’s “To a Foiled Revolter or Revoltress”⁴⁷ or Lowell’s “Truth Shall Triumph,”⁴⁸ look mild in comparison to overtly proletarian poetry like Michael McGrath’s “A Labor Lay”: “We are the toiling millions—we, / A righteous war we wage / Against the knaves who’d rob us of / Our rightful heritage ; / Who’d grind us down with iron heel / And keep us slaves for aye. / But mark, ye tyrants, one and all— / You’ve seen your strongest day.”⁴⁹ Many poems published in the *Advocate* are neither inspirational nor radical, and not even recognizably working-class. Some poems describe human hardships applicable to all classes; other poems are sentimental, introspective, or religious; and many poems are difficult to place other than in terms of general interest. Marie Moore Marsh’s “Peleg Jones’s Baby” is about a couple that failed to have a child.⁵⁰ E. Cavazza’s

³⁸ “Poor Poetry but Straight Truth,” *Labor Advocate*, 25 September 1891, p. 6.

³⁹ G.F. Stephens, “The Song of the Land Title,” *Labor Advocate*, 25 September 1891, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Edward J. Brady, “A Vision of the Future,” *Labor Advocate*, 15 May 1891, p. 6.

⁴¹ Joseph Daniel Muller, “Song of the Shirt,” *Labor Advocate*, 20 March 1891, p. 7.

⁴² “The ‘Song of the Shop,’” *Labor Advocate*, 2 October 1891, p. 1.

⁴³ Anna R. Henderson, “Taking Sides,” *Labor Advocate*, 19 December 1890, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Edith Nesbit, “A Last Appeal,” *Labor Advocate*, 2 January 1891, p. 2.

⁴⁵ T.E. Naylor, “The British Workman,” *Labor Advocate*, 28 August 1891, p. 6.

⁴⁶ C.W. Beckett, “They Wouldn’t Be Missed,” *Labor Advocate*, 23 January 1891, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Walt Whitman, “To a Foiled Revolter or Revoltress,” *Labor Advocate*, 12 December 1890, p. 6.

⁴⁸ James Russell Lowell, “Truth Shall Triumph,” *Labor Advocate*, 18 September 1891, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Michael McGrath, “A Labor Lay,” *Labor Advocate*, 12 December 1890, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Marie Moore Marsh, “Peleg Jones’s Baby,” *Labor Advocate*, 20 March 1891, p. 5.

“A Kitten’s Mourners” is about two children mourning the death of their cat.⁵¹ Poetry about infertility or the death of a family pet may seem at odds with the radicalism of a labour lay or the often-stated political intentions of the *Advocate*, and in a Canadian labour periodical, one might readily expect a more consistent parade of songs of the shop or visions of the future. This conclusion discounts the importance of what might be called “reading for everyday life,” a characteristic that the mixed-format periodical epitomizes. The *Advocate* had to be more than just a hard lesson in radical politics. Narrower attempts to hammer home historical materialism would come later with the likes of the *Western Clarion*, which became the official organ of the Socialist Party of Canada. At this earlier juncture in the history of labour and the labour press in Canada, the formation of a “newer and truer” literature in a mixed-format periodical is something other than the straight talk of a radical manifesto; the *Advocate* attempted to cast the wider net necessary to garner reader interest and political success. Effective communication, and thus democratic change, depended on winning “the public ear.”⁵² Accordingly, the diversity of both verse and prose indicates a more complicated juxtaposition of popular reading and political purpose—the newer and the truer—than might be expected of a “radical rag.”⁵³

The increasing popularity of prose fiction posed a difficult problem: to what extent and in what ways could prose be productively incorporated into a radical paper? Martin Foran’s novel *The Other Side*, serialized in the *Ontario Workman* (Toronto, 1872-75) from 1872-73, was as politically moderate as the journal in which it was published, and therefore unlikely to confuse or dissuade readers who might otherwise be interested in following the novel from one issue to the next. Could the same sort of novel successfully speak to the interests of working-class readers nearly twenty years later, and in a far more ambitious paper? Thompson seems to have thought not, at least initially. The serialization of Ignatius

⁵¹ E. Cavazza, “A Kitten’s Mourners,” *Labor Advocate*, 29 May 1891, p. 6.

⁵² Harry Lyman Koopman, “The Public,” *Labor Advocate*, 27 March 1891, p. 8.

⁵³ The term is from Verzuh.

Donnelly’s *Caesar’s Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century* (1890) in the first twenty issues of the *Advocate* is striking for several reasons. First, it is an apocalyptic portrayal of a proletarian uprising. Second, it was current and popular, thus providing a neat fit between the political targets of the *Advocate* and the related need to develop a broader readership (and electorate). Third, it provides a baseline with respect to the more moderate fiction that followed.

Thompson introduced *Caesar’s Column* as a dystopian view of uprising that complements Edward Bellamy’s popular portrayal of utopian social transformation in *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888). In *Caesar’s Column*, a passionate reformer from Africa named Gabriel Weltstein travels to New York, where the aristocrat Arthur Phillips, the enigmatic Caesar Lomellini, and an unnamed Jew lead the Brotherhood of Destruction, a secret organization of workers preparing to rise up and destroy the Oligarchy, or Council of the Plutocracy, headed by Prince Cabano. After ten chapters of setting and romance, the lesson for contemporary readers is spelled out: chapter eleven, “How the World Came to be Ruined,” is a collection of excerpts from periodicals dating back one hundred years, indicating warning signs of potential chaos and anarchy; chapter twelve, “Gabriel’s Utopia,” is a list of socialist reforms. Accordingly, the ensuing melodrama shows what will happen if social, political, and economic reforms do not occur. The Brotherhood manages to buy the loyalty of the military, which holds the balance of power by way of the Demons, or military airships. The oligarchy is powerless as a result, and the onslaught begins. Detailed descriptions of death and destruction follow. Anarchy ensues and the leaders of the Brotherhood run amok. Caesar orders a column to be constructed from the dead—a monument to revolution. It is the end of the world, in America at least, described as a historical moment of biblical proportions. Gabriel and Arthur, nevertheless, escape the attacking mob by airship and return to Africa, where they build a garden in the mountains—an isolated socialist community with the entryway blocked by a wall and otherwise secured by weapons. In short, *Caesar’s Column* does not support collaboration between the proletariat and

capitalists or moderate social reform; just the opposite—it describes revolution leading to social collapse, with the remote possibility of socialist regeneration. Whereas Thompson’s incorporation of poetry varied from socialist to humanitarian, the publication of *Caesar’s Column* over several months set a consistently radical undertone.

Fear of anarchy in the face of capitalist oligarchy was expressed in several ways in the *Advocate*. For example, in a damning review of Ward McAllister’s *Society As I Have Found It* (1890), Hugh O. Pentecost writes, “The Four Hundred are living off the products of slave labor as much as ever the Southern planters did, and I know that as surely as chattel slavery was abolished, so surely must coupon slavery disappear or society will, and barbarism ensue.”⁵⁴ Similarly, Thompson framed *Caesar’s Column* as a genuine portrayal of the conditions of future savagery requiring an immediate socialist response. He notes the novel’s “realistic power as a narrative” and how “The author draws a fearful and lurid picture of the state of society which will probably prevail in a few generations, supposing the present tendencies continue unchecked.”⁵⁵ The novel was positioned as a warning intended to spur action. That being said, the challenge of communicating radical politics and generating a larger readership were not met by such bold portrayals alone. *Caesar’s Column* got the *Advocate* off to a roaring start, but the moderate works of fiction that followed reflect a balance that did not scream revolution on every page.

The next novel serialized in the *Advocate*, *A Whitechapel Mystery* (c. 1890) by S.M. Jones, presents a problem-solution typical of British social problem novels of the 1850s and 1860s and reminiscent of Canadian novels such as Agnes Maule Machar’s *Roland Graeme: Knight* (1892) or Albert Carman’s *The Preparation of Ryerson Embury* (1900). *A Whitechapel Mystery* is the story of a young, disillusioned son of a baronet and Conservative MP who wanders from home, marries a working-class girl, educates himself as a radical socialist, becomes a journalist, and represents working-class residents in parliament. Whatever the take-home message was for readers

⁵⁴ Hugh O. Pentecost, “McAllister’s Book,” *Labor Advocate*, 5 December 1890, p. 6.

⁵⁵ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “Our Story,” *Labor Advocate*, 5 December 1890, p. 5.

of the *Advocate*, it is a long way from end-of-the-world socialist communities in the hills of Africa. Seemingly even further afield, the next longer work of fiction serialized in the *Advocate* was Francis Charles Philips’ *As in a Looking Glass* (1889), a British society novel depicting modern life among the upper classes that seems inconsistent with the more radical direction of the paper. The reprinting of society novels was not unheard of in the Canadian labour press. *The Trades Journal* (Springhill, Nova Scotia, 1880-91), for instance, regularly published popular fiction by authors such as Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. More importantly, a trajectory from *Caesar’s Column* (a radical novel) to *A Whitechapel Mystery* (a social-problem novel) to *As in a Looking Glass* (a society novel) overlaps with other efforts to increase circulation. The first instalment of *Looking Glass* coincided with a reduction in the price of the *Advocate*, from \$1.50 to \$1.00 per year and from five cents to two cents per issue. Thompson wrote directly of the change: “In accordance with the advice of many friends of the LABOR ADVOCATE who desire to see its circulation and influence largely extended, we have decided to make a considerable reduction in the subscription and selling price of the paper, in order to bring it within the means of all.”⁵⁶ Then as now, pricing was critical to the circulation of a paper; moreover, the cost reduction did not occur in isolation.

The integration of popular literature, as well as the shift from *Caesar’s Column* to *Looking Glass*, should be understood with respect to the larger objectives of the paper, the popular tastes of readers, and reinvention of the mixed-format periodical to facilitate a connection between the two. Thompson could not refrain from framing the reading of literary works. He describes *Looking Glass* as a powerful, realistic sensation novel and argues that it “exposes the natural consequences of the idleness, luxury and frivolity of the privileged classes.”⁵⁷ This reading may seem self-serving, or at least idiosyncratic. More crucially, the introduction as

⁵⁶ Thomas Phillips Thompson, ““The Labor Advocate’ Reduced in Price,” *Labor Advocate*, 29 May 1891, p. 4.

⁵⁷ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “Go Slow,” *Labor Advocate*, 29 May 1891, p. 4.

framing mechanism points to an underlying distrust of readers. Thompson would no doubt have commented on the serialization of more obvious selections for a labour paper, whether *Les Misérables* (1862) or *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1866), but the message had to be spelled out with a work of literature that did not represent radical politics or even labour reform. Thompson seems to have felt compelled to include literary works that were not distinctly working-class in orientation to attract new readers. When he notes that *Looking Glass* was “not written with a distinctly ethical purpose,”⁵⁸ he was informing committed reformers that he knew it was a poor match for a paper seeking “all the Justice Reform can give.” The compromise was made public, however subtle the expression.

In between “The ‘Song of the Shop’” and poems about everyday life, between Donnelly’s apocalyptic novel of social revolution and Philips’ depiction of upper-class decadence, the down-to-earth stories of American writer Jacob Abbott perhaps best represent the balance sought for in the *Advocate*. Although “Rollo and His Pa” appears to be a simple series of comical sketches built upon nostalgia for small-town America, the reprinting of nine instalments in the *Advocate* had as much to do with the subject matter as it did with folksy popularity. These short stories align well with the emphasis the Knights of Labor placed on the “honest workingman” who was self-improving and decent and cooperative.⁵⁹ They also show how the aristocracy will be overthrown;⁶⁰ advocate for local, working-class history;⁶¹ describe the condition of the working class in a capitalist system;⁶² and criticize the notion of self-made men.⁶³ These were easy reads and entertaining lessons that were continuous with the social themes and political objectives of the *Advocate*. “Rollo and His Pa” was exactly the integration of political content and popular expression that Thompson worked to cultivate through fiction.

⁵⁸ Thompson, “Go Slow.”

⁵⁹ Heron and Smith, 22.

⁶⁰ [Jacob Abbot], “Rollo and His Pa,” *Labor Advocate*, 10 April 1891, p. 7.

⁶¹ [Jacob Abbot], “Rollo and His Pa,” *Labor Advocate*, 1 May 1891, p. 6.

⁶² [Jacob Abbot], “Rollo and His Pa,” *Labor Advocate*, 19 June 1891, p. 6.

⁶³ [Jacob Abbot], “Rollo and His Pa,” *Labor Advocate*, 14 August 1891, p. 5.

Thompson’s experiments with non-fiction, or with what would perhaps better be called historical fiction, also attempted to vary the representation of consistent themes. The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 and the Paris Commune of 1871 were favourite historical subjects in the labour press throughout the period.⁶⁴ A more eclectic historical account is Elizabeth Johnson’s essay on Peruvian socialism in the fifteenth century, which describes “A Land Where Poverty, Idleness and Vagrancy Were Unknown,”⁶⁵ followed on the same page by her poem about the French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat.⁶⁶ In these selective narratives, events are set long in the past and located elsewhere. Thompson’s inclusion of biographies and obituaries hit closer to home. Biographies of prominent local figures of the working-class movement appeared frequently; tasteful images were accompanied by a description of achievements couched in flattering language. Rather than strikers or rabble-rousers, the *Advocate* featured educated, well respected, and accomplished men and women from Canada (and elsewhere) working to improve the lives of working-class people. The account of a peasant revolt in the fourteenth century established a longer history of working-class rebellion. The timelier personal histories cast positive light on the contemporary labour movement; encouraged workers to respect, support, and follow in the footsteps of local reformers; and filled out (or challenged) Canadian history with new perspectives of labour.

Similarly, obituaries introduced a new, truer representation of Canadian politics. In the appropriately titled “Epitaffy” that followed Sir John A. Macdonald’s death, Thompson criticized other journals for honouring Macdonald as a statesman and a great man, and thus supporting Tory mythology: “The death of Sir John Macdonald is the beginning of the end

⁶⁴ See J. Morrison Davidson, “The Peasants’ Revolt,” *Labor Advocate*, 30 January 1891, p. 3; R.W. Burnie, “The Paris Commune. An Epoch that the Toilers Everywhere Have a Right to be Proud Of. The Workingmen’s Government—Brave Men and Women Who Died for Freedom—Bourgeois Slanders Refuted,” *Labor Advocate*, 27 March 1891, p. 5.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Johnson, “Peruvian Socialism. The Idea of an Industrial Commonwealth Is No Utopian Dream. The Realm of the Incas in the Fifteenth Century a Land Where Poverty, Idleness and Vagrancy Were Unknown,” *Labor Advocate*, 17 April 1891, p. 3.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Johnson, “Jean Paul Marat,” *Labor Advocate*, 17 April 1891, p. 3.

of the system of Imperialism and commercial isolation, to the building up of which he devoted the latter part of his life.”⁶⁷ In the *Advocate*, there was no extended discussion of his passing. In direct contrast to lengthy reflections on the careers of prominent labour reformers, Macdonald’s role in the oppression of working-class people was a part of Canada’s past that should not be held up as an example. The message was twofold: the record matters; the people will not forget. Underlying this message was an unstated focus on empirical evidence that underpinned other parts of the *Advocate*.

Behind much of Thompson’s criticism of the media was a view of labour journalism as fundamentally different from “party and capitalist journalism.”⁶⁸ In “City Clothing Contracts,” Thompson calls out the contract system, arguing that it drives down prices and creates poor conditions, particularly for non-unionized women. He states further, “There is no valid reason why sewing women employed on city work should get less than day laborers, simply because they are women.”⁶⁹ In addition to the vital point of gender equality in the workplace, which was reinforced in the *Advocate* by the inclusion of a woman’s column written by E. Day Macpherson, the argument for justice is based on investigation of the material experience of workers in the factory system rather than the abstract application of political economy. Other examples of Thompson’s support for on-the-ground examination, or what would later be called “muckraking,” include calls for enforcement of the Factory Act,⁷⁰ inquiry into the sale and distribution of poor-quality bread to the poor,⁷¹ and improved inspection mechanisms and state pensions to relieve widows and children following the Springhill mining disaster on 21 February 1891.⁷²

⁶⁷ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “Epitaffy,” *Labor Advocate*, 12 June 1891, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “As Others See Us,” *Labor Advocate*, 8 May 1891, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “City Clothing Contracts,” *Labor Advocate*, 13 March 1891, p. 4.

⁷⁰ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “[We understand that ...],” *Labor Advocate*, 13 February 1891, p. 5.

⁷¹ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “[The statement made ...],” *Labor Advocate*, 20 February 1891, pp. 4–5.

⁷² Thomas Phillips Thompson, “Spring Hill Disaster,” *Labor Advocate*, 27 February 1891, p. 4.

The *Advocate* nurtured this connection between recent history and collective action with the addition of “Aldermanic Record” on 10 July 1891. Reporting on the decisions of city council was not new. The greater emphasis on accountability provided by a separate section was a straightforward way to increase voter knowledge and promote transparency. When city council resolved to hand over the railway to the Keily-Everett syndicate, Thompson did not attempt to hide his disdain for the people responsible: “The solidity, stupidity and prejudice of the people of Toronto, more especially those of the wealthy and self-styled intelligent and respectable classes, have proved too much for the efforts of the few who cared enough about the public interest and the rights of labor to make a stand for the principle of civic operation.”⁷³ The publication of a political record easily became another expression of Thompson’s abhorrence for the indifference of the citizens to corrupt officials, or “boodlers,” as they were sometimes called. But Thompson’s persistent focus on the street railway issue in Toronto also illustrates his insistence on social responsibility.⁷⁴ Reiterating his call for civic management, which dated back to his days with the *News*, Thompson spoke directly to citizens and constituents—namely, the working-class people who depended on the street railway or were otherwise impacted by its administration daily. The call to action was based on arguments for new ways of doing things, and on a promise to never forget the neglect, inefficiency, and corruption of Frank Smith’s thirty-year monopoly. This issue was as much about remembering the past from the perspective of the people as it was about taking democratic action towards further collective responsibility (i.e., through ownership). Noticeably, the final section in the last issue of the *Advocate* was “Aldermanic Record”—a simple record of political (in)action.

From *Caesar’s Column* to “Aldermanic Record,” Thompson tried repeatedly and in distinctive ways to interest the people of Toronto in

⁷³ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “The Street Railway,” *Labor Advocate*, 4 September 1891, p. 4.

⁷⁴ For more on the street railway in Toronto, see Christopher Armstrong and H.V. Nelles, *The Revenge of the Methodist Bicycle Company: Sunday Streetcars and Municipal Reform in Toronto, 1888-1897* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

alternative visions of social organization. In some cases, this involved attacks on well-known figures. Of his contemporary, the historian and journalist Goldwin Smith, a favourite target, Thompson writes: “His radicalism is the radicalism of a quarter of a century ago or more, and he is as impervious as any moss-backed Tory to the significance of changed conditions and to any sense of the real perils and needed safeguards of society at the end of the century.”⁷⁵ Tennyson, whose work was reprinted in the *Advocate*, is described as follows: “Like many other literary men who began life with some measure of sympathy with the people and faith in the progress of humanity, he has long since succumbed to social pressure and become a mere sycophant and narrow-minded pessimist.”⁷⁶ In other cases, getting readers to recognize a political system that prioritized capitalist exploitation over the well-being of working-class people involved attempts to create dialogue. Letters from readers were another step toward a collective voice. The correspondence section started on page eight of the third issue on 19 December 1890 and continued in all subsequent issues. The letters could be as polemical as any other content in the *Advocate*—they often read like short essays, and always supported key topics addressed elsewhere in the same issue. On 27 February 1891, for instance, “Eight Hours” wrote a strongly worded letter calling on workingmen to take a firm stand in the upcoming election,⁷⁷ and on 24 April 1891, “Workman” described how national insurance would function.⁷⁸ Letters by authors published elsewhere in the *Advocate*, as well as by friends of the *Advocate*, were also featured: for example, by Jones,⁷⁹ Johnson,⁸⁰ and Bengough.⁸¹ The letters, then, rarely deviated much from

⁷⁵ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “Prof. Goldwin Smith on ‘Aristocracy,’” *Labor Advocate*, 15 May 1891, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “Meaningless Cant,” *Labor Advocate*, 8 May 1891, p. 4.

⁷⁷ Eight Hours, “My Brother’s Keeper,” *Labor Advocate*, 27 February 1891, pp. 4-5.

⁷⁸ Workman, “National Insurance,” *Labor Advocate*, 24 April 1891, p. 6.

⁷⁹ S.M. Jones, “Labor and Politics,” *Labor Advocate*, 20 March 1891, p. 6; S.M. Jones, “What Has a Working Man to Do with Art?” *Labor Advocate*, 20 March 1891, p. 6; S.M. Jones, “Mr. S.M. Jones and the Ministerial Association,” *Labor Advocate*, 29 May 1891, p. 7.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Johnson, “Labor Reformers and Free Speech,” *Labor Advocate*, 7 August 1891, p. 6; Elizabeth Johnson, “Liberty of Speech,” *Labor Advocate*, 14 August 1891, p. 6.

⁸¹ J.W. Bengough, “Socialism vs. Single Tax,” *Labor Advocate*, 18 September 1891, p. 5.

the editorials in content. The milder tone and multiple voices added shades of complexity, and dialogue of at least two types occurred when Thompson responded directly to letters. His response to Johnson, who challenged him on the issue of free speech, was polite and collegial, supporting further exchanges with a frequent contributor. Nonetheless, perhaps showing signs of frustration as the *Advocate* came to an end, he also wrote forcefully in defence of the paper and critically of readers (i.e., dissenters). When a worker named Scott wrote of his displeasure with the *Advocate's* stance on the church, Thompson denounced such workers as “contemptible small-souled carpers,” and “as little use to the church as they are to the labor movement.”⁸² He also defended the *Advocate's* position in no uncertain terms: “So far as Christianity is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ—who was Himself a workingman and a Socialist—[the *Advocate*] is in harmony with these principles, and a powerful influence on our side.”⁸³ The correspondence section provided the space for dialogue, but debate was limited, to say the least—it was the page-four editorial in a different format.

Although measured “dialogue” might have interested some readers, the “Casual Comments” section started on 20 February 1891 developed into a more nuanced discussion that could have attracted a wider readership. Ostensibly, the column commented upon the events of the day, addressing a range of subjects related to material elsewhere in the same issue. Signed collegially with the pen name “Ben” (acknowledged as George A. Howell in the final issue), the more significant function was to forge a connection with working-class people. Ben wrote in the first column: “I want to feel at home with my readers, and they with me, and hope that, if they differ from me sufficiently to justify it, they will write and let me know the why and wherefore of their objections.”⁸⁴ Initially, separating Ben from Thompson is difficult. The issues addressed are the same as in the editorials, and the sense that so-called “brainworkers” were

⁸² Thomas Phillips Thompson, “Two ‘Sample Copies,’” *Labor Advocate*, 25 September 1891, p. 4.

⁸³ Thompson, “Two ‘Sample Copies.’”

⁸⁴ George A. Howell [Ben], “Casual Comments,” *Labor Advocate*, 20 February 1891, p. 8.

speaking to or about the working class remains strong. The sense of top-down condemnation of the proletariat changed with the column of 10 July 1891, in which Ben describes how his involvement in the labour movement had affected him personally. His comments come across as a sincere expression of the sacrifice that reformers may endure in the fight for political reform. The piece ends with the suggestion that sometimes a little silence is beneficial, which was perhaps something of an admission that easing up on the hard rhetoric in the page-four editorial might be an advantage to the movement. This softer approach continued the following week with a lively description of Ben’s five-day holiday in Muskoka. Ben continued to reference labour issues such as civic administration and pay inequality. Comments on the thoughtlessness of everyday life, which were inspired by a lunch counter scene in Toronto, demonstrate the evolution of “Casual Comments” from a reiteration of page-four polemics to a more balanced conversation about modern life reminiscent of the sensible tone achieved by “Rollo and His Pa.” Still a one-way mechanism, this section could be meaningful to most readers, whether they were committed radicals or not. This development at least coincides with the shifting experiments with fiction in the *Advocate*. Unfortunately, just as Ben started to find his voice, the *Advocate* came to an end.

In the early labour press in Canada, reports, articles, essays, and editorials were frequently educational—the purpose of such literature tended to be obvious. Representation more often construed, however vaguely, as “literary” (i.e., poetry, short fiction, novels) was commonly employed, sometimes to further social and political messaging and at other times for less clear reasons. The mix of literary forms had a larger purpose: social revolution depended on the grassroots organization of a popular movement. Thompson wrote in *The Politics of Labor*: “We have to create a revolution in public opinion before we can hope to revolutionize the system.”⁸⁵ Print was considered a tool for democratic reform—a way to shape thoughts and actions. An increase in the number of periodicals by

⁸⁵ Thomas Phillips Thompson, *The Politics of Labor* (New York: Belford, Clarke, 1887), 83.

1900 made the newspaper the obvious medium of communication. The integration of news and fiction in a weekly paper was common in the mainstream press, and there were local precedents within the labour press to draw on. As previously noted, the *Ontario Workman* serialized *The Other Side*, a novel of capitalist critique outlining cooperative organization, in 1872-73. A decade later, for the *News* and the *Palladium*, diversifying content was critical to reaching a wider, increasingly literate audience. As Hann notes, “The growth of the reading public was seen as a positive, energizing feature of cultural life, giving birth to new perspectives on social problems.”⁸⁶ The opportunity to capitalize on this growth within the borders of an eight-page mixed-format periodical led to many interesting experiments in the *Advocate*, a microcosm for the exploration of literary practices at a moment when labour reform was at the forefront of Canadian society.

In the final issue of the *Labor Advocate*, in a revealing editorial titled “The Labor Advocate Ceases,” Thompson notes that “Nothing has been left undone to popularize the paper, and urge its claims upon the working people,” but also that “subscribers are only numbered by hundreds.”⁸⁷ As usual, he commented on the blindness and stupidity of the working class with respect to their own interests, in this case citing it as reason for the *Advocate*’s demise. He added, though, that the *Advocate* was closing at a point of transition, when unions and strikes had run their course and only socialism would do, even if it would take years to materialize. He might also have added something about the importance of literary representation and reading practices in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Ron Verzuh points out that “some historians have argued that the *Advocate*’s failure was as much due to Thompson’s individual style and political expression as to the absence of labour support.”⁸⁸ Although Thompson could be severe in his own writing, literary expression in the *Advocate* was varied. Moreover, it was in line with a longer history of proletarian

⁸⁶ Hann, 54.

⁸⁷ Thomas Phillips Thompson, “The Labor Advocate Ceases,” *Labor Advocate*, 2 October 1891, p. 4.

⁸⁸ Verzuh, 80.

literature attuned to the historicity of production and reception. From radical chapbooks to Chartist poetry and industrial novels, labour reformers on both sides of the Atlantic had long employed print to represent social issues and urge political action. The use of popular literature, histories, and other forms of representation to engage wider publics in the radical aims of the *Advocate* should not be overlooked as an important contributor to this complex, transnational history. The *Advocate* had to reach beyond direct political messaging to include literature that entertained, that was more broadly relevant to the everyday concerns of most people, and that could potentially be read in any number of ways. It was, at best, an uneasy balance: one that not all reformers would embrace in the twentieth century, but that was essential to Thompson’s search for a transformative literature that served his commitment to labour reform.

Author biography

David Buchanan teaches English literature and language at several universities in Edmonton, Alberta. His research interests include the nineteenth-century novel, popular adaptation, and proletarian literature. He is the author of *Acts of Modernity: The Historical Novel and Effective Communication, 1814-1901* (Routledge, 2017), as well as articles on the downmarket adaptation of novels by Walter Scott and the early labour press in Canada.

Copyright © 2023 David Buchanan. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

ⁱ A Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Postdoctoral Fellowship at Simon Fraser University provided the financial support necessary to carry out the initial research for this article.