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Crusading and Conforming: the Techniques of Temperance

The movement for an end to drinking in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was joined by both sexes. When early conventions refused to seat women, they formed groups of their own.¹ Usually, these women temperance reformers came from the middle classes; drunks, everyone *knew*, came from the lower classes and were always male. The battle was long, punctuated by dramatic episodes but typified by dull insistence. Ultimately, prohibition came to the Canadian provinces and to the United States; by that time, many women leaders had moved on to suffrage and won it, too.

Prohibition proved unworkable. Age-old pleasurable habits and vigorous profitable enterprises quashed it. But The Cause had, by then, led thousands of women into the world outside the home in large roles or small, while it preserved their image as family creatures and guardians of social virtue. A temperance crusader could be wife, mother, and temperance worker all at one time. This compatibility of temperance and tradition accounts for the wide appeal of The Cause. After a brief consideration of the background of the temperance movement and its leadership, this paper will explore its techniques closely, for it is in these that one can perceive just how crusading and conforming were compatible. Thanks to the writings of Frances Willard, leader of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, we shall have no trouble in doing so.²

Background

The Temperance movement got underway in England alongside the evangelical reform campaigns in the 1830's. Alcoholism was a long-standing problem in Britain and in the U.S. Hogarth's paintings of Gin Lane showed drunken women dropping their nursing babes while

guzzling gin, and in the background, besotted men wrestled. In 1839, John Dunlop's *Philosophy of Artificial and Compulsory Drinking Usage in Great Britain and Ireland* bewailed the ubiquitous use of alcohol at meals, at markets, at fairs, at baptisms, funerals, and weddings. A drink was necessary, Dunlop complained, when a workman was fined for an error (he treated his fellow workers), when a tradesman set up in business, when an employer hired harvest help or carters.³ Drunkenness was lamented by American observers, too, from up-country preachers to urban reformers. By the 1830's, temperance had "caught on" among members of some parts of the leadership classes. Organizations grew up, such as the United Kingdom Alliance founded in 1853 and the Band of Hope Union two years later. These early groups were all male, but the temperance movement was not to remain so for long.

In 1873, the British Women's Temperance League arose when several dozen women decided they, too, must help. Already in the U.S., Amelia Bloomer's newspaper *The Lily* had carried the temperance message to the residents of Seneca Falls, New York in the era before the Civil War. In 1874, the women interested in temperance came together to found the Women's Christian Temperance Union; this was to become the vehicle on which thousands would ride to the wider world outside their homes. The W.C.T.U. was an instant success.⁴ Within a few years, all states had branches, and there were more than 200,000 members. It is not our purpose to trace the organization's history. Rather, the important question here is how did it work — what made it so effective in calling forth what a later age would call "womanpower".

Basically, the temperance crusade was acceptable to the vast majority of Victorian women because it was a *religious* movement, and religion was their province. Frances Willard articulated the religious aspect clearly:⁵

When God lets loose an idea upon this planet, we vainly set limits to its progress; and I believe that Gospel Temperance shall yet transform . . . the human heart, and . . . then society, and then . . . it shall permeate the widest circle of them all, and that is, government.

As Sochen points out, American women had always been somehow in charge of American morals;⁶ but there was more to temperance than morality in a practical, worldly sense. It was God's idea, and its activists intended to "go forward in the strength of Him who is the Prince of Peace, meeting . . . all our difficulties and dangers with prayer."⁷

Leadership in the W.C.T.U. came from Frances Willard, the vigorous president from 1879 until her death in 1898. Willard favored joining a demand for female suffrage to the demand for abstinence, and in her personal activities both issues found a place; but the juncture remained an option for W.C.T.U. local groups. Willard was only one of many women who focused on temperance: Susan B. Anthony left her teaching career to become a temperance crusader before she took up women's rights. Countless others did the same. Lucy Stone combined the two causes. E. Cora Hind, world famous agriculturalist for the *Winnipeg Free Press*, campaigned for the W.C.T.U., as did Nellie McClung whose novel *Sowing Seeds in Danny* was one of the many sentimental works produced by temperance enthusiasts. Occasionally, a Carrie Nation would go to extremes in her crusading; but the vast majority of temperance women were quiet, respectable and respected. How, thus circumscribed, did they manage to be effective? Both in drawing women into membership, and in drawing attention to their cause, the leaders of the W.C.T.U. were remarkably successful. It is in their *methods* of organizing and agitating that they found the key to such success.

Temperance Techniques

Temperance techniques were developed on the local level at first, and then with more sophistication they were used on a broader front. A typical beginning of a local unit is described by one of Willard's correspondents.⁸ A circuit-riding temperance speaker would visit a town (Dr. Dio Lewis was a particularly effective one) and at the end of his public address, he would call for the use of prayer to close down local saloons. Some of the most important ladies in his audience would be moved to *do something*, and they would then organize a Prayer Band. Often the local minister's wife would be prominent among them, always the pillars of the Methodist and Baptist churches. As one such Band was starting off on its first mission, "every heart was throbbing, and every woman's countenance betrayed her solemn realization of the fact that she was going about her Father's business."⁹

This mission, like most, consisted of an orderly procession in a line, two by two, small women in front, with the ladies singing good old hymns as they filed out of their church meeting place (later, temperance societies built their own halls). Solemnly, in silence or softly singing, they processed toward the town's drug stores. These

were a normal first target, for respectable ladies could easily enter them, yet they dispensed spirits of all sorts freely. While the majority of the women waited outside, the leaders would enter the drug store and seek out its owner. He would be politely but firmly persuaded, if humanly possible, to sign the Pledge forever eschewing trade in liquor. Although there were local variations in the Pledge, the following is representative:¹⁰

The Pledge

Knowing, as you do, the fearful effects of intoxicating drinks, we, the women of Washington, after earnest prayer and deliberation, have decided to appeal to you to desist from this ruinous traffic, that our husbands, brothers, and especially our sons, be no longer exposed to this terrible temptation, and that we may no longer see them led into those paths which go down to sin, and bring both body and soul to destruction. We appeal to the better instincts of your own hearts, in the name of desolated homes, blasted hopes, ruined lives, widowed hearts, for the honor of our community, for our happiness; for our good name, as a town; in the name of the God who will judge you, as well as ourselves; for the sake of your own souls, which are to be saved or lost, we beg — we implore you, to cleanse yourselves from this heinous sin, and place yourselves in the ranks of those who are striving to elevate and ennoble themselves and their fellow-men; and to this we ask you to pledge yourselves.

Even if they could persuade all the drug store operators in their town to get out of the liquor trade, and often there would be a few holdouts, the ladies were not yet finished with their mission. Next they would turn to the saloons and hotels. Here they were getting into deeper waters, for they had to approach places never before frequented by a respectable woman and talk with men whose means of livelihood covered them in ignominy.

The procedure, again with local variations, was to process in groups from an inspirational meeting toward the saloon in question. There, if admitted, they would conduct a prayer meeting and call upon the owner and his patrons to sign the Pledge. If admission were refused, the prayer meeting was held on the sidewalk outside. One can imagine the speed with which barroom conviviality dissipated as patrons caught the strains of "Give to the Winds Thy Fears" or heard themselves the object of tearful, fervent prayer.

Although these saloon prayer meetings became rather common with time, they were, in fact, an almost accidental and very ingenious local invention. Frances Willard provides, again through her correspondents,

a record of the first saloon prayer meeting.^{1 1} Because it demonstrates the elation and trepidation with which these ladies undertook their crusading, and gives us a between-the-lines glimpse of their opposition, the account is worth careful perusal:

... our band slowly and timidly approached the first class saloon of Robert Ward on High street, a resort made famous by deeds the memory of which nerved the heart and paled the cheek of some among the seventy as they entered the open door of the 'witty Englishman,' as his patrons were wont to call the popular Ward. . . . He not only propped the door open, but, with the most perfect suavity of manner, held it until the ladies all passed in; then, closing it, walked to his accustomed stand behind the bar.

Experiences such as this one might have been enough to pale a lady's cheek, but they certainly did not rob her of her status as "lady". Therefore, no taint would attach to those who participated in temperance actions of this sort; if their world still considered them ladies, and treated them as such (even opening doors and always showing deference), ladies they were — even as they stood in a saloon! The thousands of women who participated in temperance crusades were learning that their womanliness did not necessarily confine them to their homes. It might, in fact, require them to leave those sacred precincts and insist upon entry into the manly world of the saloon. It might require them to argue with men instead of submit to their preferences, as the following excerpt demonstrates:^{1 2}

"Mr. Ward, this must seem to you a strange audience. I suppose, however, that you understand the object of our visit." Robert by this time began to perspire freely, and remarked that he would 'like to have a talk with Dio Lewis.'

"Dr. Lewis has nothing to do with the subject of our mission. As you look upon some of the faces before you and observe the furrows of sorrow, made deep by the business that you ply, you will find that it is no wonder we are here. We have come not to threaten — not even to upbraid — but in the name of our Heavenly Friend and Saviour and in His spirit, to forgive and to commend you to His pardon, if you will but abandon a business that is so damaging to our hearts and homes."

Admittedly, Mr. Ward was something of a straw man in this debate, but a man nonetheless and as such, not to be gainsaid. Yet God approved of this kind of opposition: "As a seal of God's approval upon the self-sacrificing work there inaugurated, the Spirit came down and touched all hearts."^{1 3}

Still in the saloon, and now encouraged by heavenly approval, the ladies were led in prayer by one of their own, in song by another, and ended "in tearful pathos pleading with this deluded brother to accept the world's Redeemer as his own."¹⁴

This description and others like it reported to Frances Willard require only a moment's consideration to reveal the tremendous potential for expansion of the female horizon afforded by the temperance crusade. Surrounded by other women of unassailable virtue,¹⁵ enveloped in a church-like atmosphere, employed in prayer and hymn-singing,¹⁶ convinced of the holiness of her activity and of its potential social benefits, the nineteenth-century woman had, in the case of most temperance crusaders, her first practice at appearing in public in a conspicuous fashion, taking a visible stand on a matter of opinion, and standing up to groups and interests opposed to her own. These experiences alone would have been sufficient to inspire her with a sense of public duty and the courage necessary to pursue it in the future. Most women never went so far as to lead, but even mere followership in The Cause was bound to have these effects to some degree.

The local W.C.T.U. units went on holding prayer services within saloons (or outside if entry was prohibited). They also sponsored Gospel meetings centered on temperance, often daily for a spell of some weeks, at local churches or in halls.¹⁷ These meetings were carefully orchestrated and provided yet another opportunity for mastering techniques not yet a part of most women's repertoire.¹⁸ Placards and signs were made by the ladies to advertise the meeting. Local talent was asked to provide piano interludes, songs, or recitations; very often, children performed these offices, but some women were willing, too. The meeting place was carefully decorated with banners, flowers, candles, etc., by those with a flair for design. Committees of retiring ladies would write out invitations for local dignitaries; delegations of courageous ones would wait upon a particularly eloquent preacher or a well-known temperance speaker to request their participation at the meetings. Even the women who were home-bound by duty or disease were called into service — they could hostess speakers, babysit with the offspring of the women preparing the meetings, or write articles for publication in the local temperance news sheet. The overall effect of these efforts was to produce a lovely, *entertaining*, well-organized public meeting. In the process of doing so, the women involved learned much about public relations, image management, and

crowd psychology to use current phraseology. Instead of being passive members of an audience, they were directors, producers and sometimes actors. Once again, as with prayer band visits to saloons, the thousands of W.C.T.U. members who helped to prepare this kind of activity came away from it with new knowledge and a new understanding of the world beyond home.

There was a third kind of action undertaken on the local level by temperance women. Persuasion was necessary, but often prohibition offered an alternative. Local units could work toward passage of a dry law for their area, a law which would prohibit some or all kinds of liquor trade. One after another, W.C.T.U. chapters set up committees to approach the enemy on this flank.¹⁹ What an education these ladies received! Their correspondence reveals their gradual mastery of practical politics. Sometimes they could persuade a local candidate to promise a dry law if elected. Sometimes they could persuade a local gentleman with strong temperance convictions to run for office. Occasionally it was possible to form a viable party on the temperance platform. And always, one could canvass votes. A few women had done these things in connection with the anti-slavery campaigns, but for most of the ladies working for prohibition, the techniques of politics were new and enlightening.

It was from such experiences as these that Frances Willard and many others in the W.C.T.U. drew the conclusion that women must have the vote.²⁰ Without it, their political activities were seriously crippled. They had made, Willard said, "the strange discovery that the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount are voted up, or voted down, upon election day."²¹

Moving from the local level outward, the temperance crusade came to involve conventions on the state, national and international levels.²² One such convention, held at Louisville, Kentucky in 1882, inspired an observer to compliment the ladies in a report in the *Evening Post*:²³

The suavity and dignity of the presiding officer. . . , the mild and even affectionately respectful manner of each sister to all the others, impressed me. . . . Business was done decently and in order. . . .

Conventions afforded many temperance crusaders an opportunity to travel some distance from their homes for a purpose of their own — not merely visiting or touring, but doing. And in the course of conven-

tioneering, some of these women learned the techniques of “parliamentary ethics”, as one put it. Designing an agenda, drafting resolutions, working toward a consensus among divergent views, exchanging ideas and solutions to similar problems, planning far in advance and with a view of the larger scene – all of these skills were acquired by the ladies sent as representatives empowered to co-ordinate temperance efforts. Not only the official delegates, but the women who attended these conventions as observers also learned what must be done, and how, if strangers are to accomplish objectives. Before temperance work, most women had confined their efforts to projects sponsored by groups of intimates (church societies, families, neighborhood gatherings).²⁴ Now they were discovering that friendship might follow *after* mutual effort, and was certainly not a necessary prerequisite to it.

Lest we give the impression that temperance work was *always* entirely “safe” for ladies, one additional incident must be recounted.²⁵ Once again, it brought the participants into a new milieu and contributed to their sense of accomplishment and importance, but this time the experience was even further from those usually open to Victorian ladies. In May of 1874, 43 ladies, including wives of clergymen and leading citizens, found themselves in jail. Following their arrest, they were locked into a corridor and left to mingle with the other prisoners until arrangements could be made for their release. The cause of this shocking, “strange and thrilling story”, lay in the ladies’ insistence on holding their religious temperance service on the sidewalk outside a saloon which had barred their entry. The mayor warned them that they could not thus obstruct the passageway, but The Cause had to be served and they proceeded.

Just as Mrs. Leavitt began singing, “Rock of ages, cleft for me,” a burly policeman laid his hand on her shoulder saying, “You are my prisoner.” “Let me hide myself in thee,” sang on the clear, untroubled voice, and they marched to jail, continuing the hymn.²⁶

Admittedly, few temperance crusaders could count a jail term among the crosses born for The Cause, (perhaps this would have served a purpose, as suffragettes were to discover a generation later) but most would have known about such incidents via temperance newsletters and daily newspapers. Knowing, they would empathize, and discover at least in their imaginations how far from conformity one might go and

still be deserving of respect. Knowing this, they themselves would be all the more ready to opt for duty and service in the hope that they would exchange being "respectable" for being respected.

Conclusion

Comparing the temperance movement to the abolition crusade insofar as they affected women is instructive. Although some earlier abolition leaders transferred their efforts to temperance work, in general the temperance movement furnished experience for many more women than abolition had done. And by the 1870's, women could join this movement and still stay "within bounds." ("Bounds" had been slightly expanded by the Grimke sisters' public speaking for abolitionism a generation earlier.) And the temperance movement left its opponents less room for argument. It sought to better all aspects of life and to spread religious commitment. The Crusade had a high tone and a visibly evil enemy — no one could protest that drunkenness was beneficial to the drunkard and contributed to the nation's economic productivity, as anti-abolitionists had insisted. So, Temperance could claim to be more widely accepted, more respectable, and more beneficial, as well as less divisive than abolitionism had been.

The women's temperance movement became Everywoman's club and creed in middle class, agrarian America and Canada. Temperance activity initiated thousands of women into the joys of social action and the rewards of leadership. And through the movement, participants from the highest levels to the lowest learned to think with realism:²⁷

. . . Something more than tears and prayers [are] needful to the task. Financial and political power must be combined with moral and social influence, all bound together in one earnest, energetic, persistent force.

Footnotes

1. Details of the early groups and realignments are given in Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment* (Univ. of Minn., 1944), Ch. 16.
2. Primary material in this paper is taken from Frances E. Willard, *Woman and Temperance: or the Work and Workers of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union* (Park Publishing, 1883). The definitive biography of Willard is by Mary Earhart, *Frances Willard: From Prayers to Politics* (U. of Chicago, 1944).
3. Cited in J.F.C. Harrison, *Society and Politics in England, 1780-1960* (Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 202-06.
4. For a brief summary of its accomplishments, see Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle* (Atheneum, 1974), pp. 182-86.
5. Willard, *Woman and Temperance*, p. 29.

6. June Sochen, *Herstory* (Alfred Publishing, 1974), pp.180-81.
7. Willard, *Woman and Temperance*, p. 30.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-56.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
11. *Ibid.*, pp.58-9.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
14. *Ibid.*,
15. *Ibid.*, Ch. XIX, "W.C.T.U. in Society".
16. *Ibid.*, pp.206-07, "How to Prepare Bible Readings".
17. *Ibid.*, pp.223-25, "The First Temperance Camp Meeting".
18. *Ibid.*, Ch. XXXV, "How to Organize a W.C.T.U. Meeting".
19. *Ibid.*, p.357, "Plan for Local Campaign 'to Carry No License'".
20. Willard's July 1, 1879 address detailed her reasons for linking temperance and the vote for women. She called for more than the "temperance ballot" — a vote for women on liquor questions only — and argued that women needed the ballot, period. *Ibid.*, pp.354-55.
21. *Ibid.*, p.326.
22. *Ibid.*, pp.441-49 records a typical convention (1881).
23. *Ibid.*, p.37.
24. Willard compares the W.C.T.U. to other societies and finds them excessively exclusive, too denominational, confined to local interests only, dominated by men, or lacking in scope or cohesion. *Ibid.*, pp.39-40.
25. *Ibid.*, pp.92-93.
26. *Ibid.*,
27. Susan B. Anthony quoted in Aileen S. Kraditor (ed.), *Up From the Pedestal* (Quadrangle Books, 1968), p.160.