

Doctors and the "Demon drink": The role of alcohol and the temperance movement in the professionalization of medicine in Nova Scotia, 1827-1929

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During much of the 19th century, the position of physicians among the milieu of other healers was far from secure. At the same time, physicians were finding themselves increasingly at odds with the growing temperance movement over the practice of prescribing alcohol for "medicinal purposes". With the advent of prohibition in Nova Scotia, physicians became the sole legal avenue of access to alcohol. The ability of physicians to maintain control over the distribution of alcohol set the medical profession apart from other healers and helped to elevate its status.

In 1827, when a group from West River in Pictou County founded the first temperance organization in North America (1), the battle against alcohol use in Nova Scotia began. Church groups, citizens and the medical profession in the province became embroiled in this debate that would last for one hundred years. The temperance movement sprang from a group of religious citizens with the earnest desire to alleviate societal ills. Temperance, "moderate" alcohol use, and ultimately legislated prohibition (the ban on public and private sale or consumption of alcohol) were part of a larger late nineteenth and early twentieth century movement of social reform. Although, social, moral and religious arguments were always paramount in the arguments of temperance advocates, medical opinion was also an additional armament used to convince the people and their elected representatives of the benefits of temperance and prohibition. However, when the views of physicians and temperance advocates began to differ, the stage was set for an ongoing battle between the two groups as the medical profession struggled to obtain its place in society.

During the middle of the nineteenth

century, medicine was undergoing a series of changes. Established Canadian physicians were facing increasing competition from new physicians and from a variety of other "healers"—quacks, homeopaths, and sellers of patent medicines, the popularity of which was soaring. In order to survive as a profession, doctors felt the need to organize and regulate themselves. They embarked on a campaign to professionalize their calling (2). Physicians became especially sensitive to any decision or policy that would affect the public's attitude towards them. To enhance their status, physicians began to modify their therapies and employ more popular ones under the guise of science. This enraged temperance advocates, because alcohol became the physicians' principal medicine. It was in this context that physicians and temperance societies, despite initial agreement, came into conflict; a conflict that played a key role in the professionalization of medicine in Nova Scotia.

ALCOHOL USE AND THE BIRTH OF "TEMPERANCE"

A new immigrant to Canada in the late 1700s observed that in Halifax, "the business of one-half of the people was to sell rum, and of the other half to drink it" (3). Within one month of Halifax's founding, on 8 June 1749, the first license

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for the sale of liquor was granted. Taverns and rum shops proliferated during Nova Scotia's first one hundred years. In fact, the census of 1861 noted that in Halifax there was one rum shop for every 13 families, while there was only one bakery for every sixty-five families (4).

Early supporters of the temperance movement felt excessive alcohol use was to blame for many of the problems that society faced. Intemperate use of alcohol was said to lead to crime, indecency, poverty, family breakdown and disease. In an address delivered to the Pictou and West River Temperance Societies in 1833, the Rev. John Maclean proclaimed, "Ardent Spirits are proving incalculable injury to mankind, more universally operative in the production of disease, crime, poverty, and misery, than any other external cause to be found in Christian countries" (5).

The promotion of moderate drinking was actively undertaken by ministers of Christian churches. Temperance was for the most part a goal shared by all denominations. Through their sermons, preachers promoted their views about the immorality of intemperance. One of the most well known religious speakers of the day was Lyman Beecher, whose published work "Six sermons on the Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils, and Remedy of INTEMPERANCE" was reprinted many times in the mid-1800s. Beecher's beliefs are representative of many temperance ministers,

Intemperance is the sin of our land, and, with our boundless prosperity, is coming in upon us like a flood; and if any thing shall defeat the hopes of the world, which hang upon our experiment of civil liberty, it is that river of fire [ardent spirits], which is rolling through the land, destroying the vital air, and extending around an atmosphere of death...But who are found so uniformly in the ranks of irreligion as the intemperate? Who like these violate the Sabbath, and set their mouth against the heavens—neglecting the education of their families—and corrupting their morals? Almost the entire amount of national ignorance and crime is the offspring of intemperance.(6)

The temperance movement also relied very heavily on purely religious arguments. Many people debated whether the Bible advocated the use of alcohol, such as wine. It seemed, however, that despite widespread use of wine by the church for many centuries and references to wine use in the bible, this was not an insurpassable obstacle for those who spoke out against alcohol. For example, in the 1850s, when the debate had evolved from a temperance question to a prohibition question, a book was published by Rev. Charles Tupper (father of Sir Charles Tupper), who advocated prohibition, and John Bent who presented an anti-prohibition viewpoint. In their series of letters, Rev. Tupper stated that God did not give approval of rum, brandy, whisky, or other spirits, and, he argued, that often the "wine" referred to in the Bible was sometimes an unfermented grape juice.

John Bent was quick to dispute Tupper's interesting contention which was not an uncommon mid-nineteenth century interpretation of the bible (7).

PHYSICIANS JOIN NOVA SCOTIA'S TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT

The early temperance movement used these arguments of evil, vice and sin, religion and morality to great effect to gather popular support, but it was not these subjects that brought physicians into the growing debate. Physicians around the world, including those in Nova Scotia, recognized the number of pathological conditions caused by immoderate alcohol consumption, particularly liver disease and insanity. Temperance advocates, most of whom in the early stages were religious men, also discovered the concept of intemperance as a "disease".

The excessive amounts of alcohol that the public consumed, especially in the form of spirits, was certainly a concern for doctors; they wanted to lower consumption to improve general health. However doctors did feel that some level of alcohol use was still necessary. In Pictou, in 1833, Rev. Maclean cites a famous physician to indicate the poor health caused by alcohol use,

Sir Astley Cooper of London, one of the most celebrated surgeons of the present day, says, "no person has greater hostility to dram drinking than myself; inasmuch as I never suffer any ardent Spirits in my house, thinking them Evil Spirits;—and if the poor could see the white livers, the dropsies, and shattered nervous systems, which I have seen as the consequence of drinking spirits, they would be aware that Spirits and poisons are synonymous terms."(8)

Dr. William Bayard of New Brunswick, however, clarifies that it is alcohol abuse and not responsible use that is the problem,

I emphasize abuse, as I am unwilling to believe that the moderate and proper use of them has relation to Public Health. It will not be disputed that the Abuse of them, with its attendant consequences, disease, insanity, crime, poverty, and premature death, is the greatest evil of the Age, and that it calls loudly for remedial measures...They (the public) must be made to believe that they are swallowing a poison, which, if taken at improper times and in improper quantities, will sooner or later inevitably create disease of body and mind and who can educate them so well on these points as the physician?(9)

Bayard's comments indicate a clear distinction drawn by many physicians between suitable levels of alcohol use and excess levels. After all, physicians, in the mid-1800s, continued to rely heavily on alcohol as a therapeutic agent. It was a popular belief that alcohol was something one took when sick.

Medical beliefs and practices had undoubted effects on the fortunes of the temperance movement. For ex-

ample, historian Stephen Ferguson suggests that temperance support, which suffered a decline between 1835 and 1836, may have waned because of the cholera epidemic that hit Halifax in 1834 and then swept through the rest of the province. Alcohol was thought to be the most effective preventative measure against cholera, so people may have resorted to using liquor (10).

Despite the widespread and continued use of alcohol as a prescription medication, physicians did recognize the health benefits of temperance and supported the movement. This view was supported by testimonials of physicians from all over the world often found in the many temperance newspapers, daily newspapers and medical journals of the era.

One such testimonial is a "Declaration Regarding Alcohol" signed by 254 English physicians,

They are also of the opinion that many people immensely exaggerate the value of alcohol as an article of diet, and since no class of men see so much of its ill effects, and possess such power to restrain its abuse, as members of their own profession, they hold that every medical practitioner is bound to exert his utmost influence to inculcate habits of great moderation in the use of alcoholic liquids...the undersigned would gladly support any wise legislation which would tend to restrict, within proper limits, the use of alcoholic beverages, and gradually introduce habits of temperance.(11)

TEMPERANCE'S "NEW" IDEOLOGY AND THE WITHDRAWAL OF PHYSICIANS' SUPPORT

In the early period of temperance in Nova Scotia, physicians and temperance societies were allied in a common goal. They sought to decrease alcohol consumption to improve the general health and moral fibre of the individual and the community. The partnership, however, did not last long. As the mid-nineteenth century approached, and temperance grew in popularity (12), the zeal for moderate drinking rapidly became a push for total abstinence. Doctors, of course, still used alcohol as a commonplace therapy. Physicians found themselves caught between a growing movement toward teetotalism and their own belief in the benefits of, and the need for, prescribing alcohol.

Medical testimonials were again a popular method to promote the move towards total abstinence. The temperance societies were effective in exploiting the split between what some physicians were saying elsewhere and how physicians in Nova Scotia were practising. A temperance newspaper reported testimonials that total abstinence provided relief from nervous irritation, more clarity and uniformity of mind and spirits, and a strengthened family structure. It also reported doctors in the United Kingdom as saying, "the most perfect health is compatible with total abstinence" (13) and that "total and universal abstinence from alcohol liquors and intoxicating beverages of all sorts would greatly contribute to the health, the prosperity, the morality, and

the happiness of the human race" (14).

Nova Scotian physicians, however, felt that the question of abstinence, and its pros and cons, should be decided by them, because it was they, whose "speech is judicial and scientific" (15). Indeed, they continued to see the need to prescribe alcohol and were not convinced that abstinence was conducive to the best health. In a correspondence to the *Montreal Gazette*, one physician wrote,

"That total abstinence from intoxicating liquors, whether fermented or distilled, is consistent with, and conducive to, the highest degree of physical and mental health and vigour...it follows that Mohammedan nations are superior in every respect to those which profess Christianity. They are not generally considered so...I disagree with the declaration...I have uniformly maintained the benefit of beer, wine and spirits, in certain kinds of mental malady. I am therefore bound in self-defence, to protest publicly against what I regard as an ill-considered concession to mere sentiment, unworthy of men of science."(16)

From a scientific and clinical perspective, Nova Scotian physicians continued to argue that there was a need for alcohol as a therapeutic agent, despite the international studies that were increasingly disputing its benefits.

The Canada Lancet, the Canadian edition of the influential British medical journal, *The Lancet*, in 1883, seemed to agree that alcohol's benefit in therapy was no longer to be believed, and, ironically, foreshadowed its future,

In its royal march, science has swept aside many an ancient cobweb. Many articles once prized as medicines of extraordinary power now have no place in materia medica, and are only spoken of as monuments of the folly of our forefathers. In the light of the past history of therapeutics, who is bold enough to assert that alcohol shall not have a similar fate. We cannot close our eyes to the fact that leading scientists and foremost investigators keep affirming and reaffirming, that alcohol is a poison under all circumstances and never remedial.(17)

To justify their position that alcohol had a therapeutic benefit, Nova Scotian physicians found other scientists whose views conflicted with those of temperance societies, scientists, and teetotaling physicians. A Scottish physician, John Brown, was a strong supporter of beverage alcohol as medicine (18), as was Robert Bentley Todd, a practicing London physician who held the chair in physiology and morbid anatomy at King's College. In the 1850s, "Todd provided the 'scientific physician' with a clearly articulated theoretical justification for the use of alcohol, firmly grounded in the doctrines of contemporary physiology" (19). Despite the polarized opinions and studies, alcohol remained firmly part of therapy among Nova Scotian physicians in the late 1800s, and an essential ingredient in their quest to establish their profession (20).

PHYSICIANS ORGANIZE TO ESTABLISH THEIR ROLE IN SOCIETY

Medicine in Nova Scotia, in the mid-1800s, was at a cross-roads. Physicians were faced with increasing competition from a variety of other healers. Physicians were not viewed as being above the fray, they were simply another alternative for the public. The province's medical elite viewed professionalization as a means by which a change in their fortunes could be brought about, and prescription alcohol, replacing unpopular heroic therapies, was a main ingredient in this endeavour. As a result, they received a great deal of criticism from the temperance movement.

In his discussion of the development of scientific medicine and its role in the development of the medical profession (21), historian Colin Howell observes that only a "very narrow difference between quacks and established practitioners [existed] in the middle decades of the 19th century" (22). The profession was in a difficult position as it had a limited number of effective therapies and heroic therapies, including bloodletting and arsenic use, were not popular by the 1860s and 1870s, so the public often sought help elsewhere. Physicians, particularly the elite, wanted "to institutionalize a difference between so-called scientific medical practice and unscientific pretenders" (23). Science was the adopted ideology used to distinguish the orthodox medical profession from the "alternative" practitioners. Howell points out that by adhering to a dogma (scientific medicine), medicine was distinguished from quackery which was "irrational and experimental" (24).

The use of more popular therapies, like alcohol, was another avenue by which physicians hoped to establish themselves as the dominant "healers" in the province. The practice of "heroic" medicine that had been employed by physicians in the first half of the nineteenth century had become quite unpopular, by the middle of the century. Heroic medicine included substances that produced strong and unpleasant reactions in the patient, like lead, mercury, arsenic, hemlock and turpentine or practices such as bloodletting (25). Alcohol, with its partial "scientific" support was a particularly gentle option; a practical and popular alternative for the physician striving to maintain a satisfied "clientele",

...medicine suffered from a vacuum which was filled in different ways. Alcohol, unlike the stronger purges, was a drug that had clear results but obtained them in a pleasant fashion. Objectively, it had certain beneficial effects such as the reduction of tension, the dilation of blood vessels, the increase of appetite and the reduction of pain.(26)

Physicians also tried, but with less success, to control the competition resulting from the rising trade in

patent medicines, whose business was booming in post-Confederation Canada (27). Howell notes,

Patent medicine's popularity reveals the lack of public confidence that accompanied the medical profession's inability to establish an effective system of medical therapeutics. Doctors were obviously right to suggest that the patent cures were worthless and fraudulent. Unfortunately, while attacking 'this mad fashion for self-drugging', doctors themselves administered drugs in a manner that could hardly be considered scientific.(28)

PRESCRIBING POISON - ALCOHOL, AND CRITICISM BY TEMPERANCE

Alcohol as a therapeutic agent, in the mid 1800s, quickly became a very popular remedy amongst Nova Scotian physicians. However, alcohol's liberal prescription by physicians was the source of much criticism by temperance advocates. Physicians maintained that alcohol distribution, via prescription, should be the sole affair of those trained in the field of medicine. However, the exclusive right of physicians to prescribe, ultimately served to detract from the respectability the medical profession had struggled for many years to attain. As Nova Scotia officially entered legislated prohibition, it was physicians who were forced to play the role of "provincial bartender".

...alcohol became, for many physicians, a panacea for acute disease, reaching the zenith of therapeutic fashion in the late 1850s and 1860s. Physicians "brandied" patients suffering with conditions as diverse as pneumonia, typhus, and rheumatic fever. For the more zealous votaries of "alcoholic therapeutics," prescription of as much as three pints of brandy a day, administered for between several days to over a month, were not uncommon.(29)

This common practice of recommending several drinks per day raised the ire of temperance members. Temperance advocates were outraged and criticized physicians publicly in newspapers and sermons. They spoke of physicians as irreligious - a claim they were forced to refute (30) - and also incompetent,

Our complaint is that too many Doctors prescribe Alcoholic beverages to their patients without sufficient care...But the indiscriminate use by Doctor's advice of Alcohol for so many complaints, to a careful thinker betokens ignorance, or what is far worse, a pandering to the depraved appetite of the patient.(31)

In Nova Scotia, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.) presented a petition to Dr. George J. McKenzie, President of the Pictou County Medical Society at the annual meeting on July 15, 1890, which asked physicians to take into account the subject of the prescription of alcohol. In response, the society unani-

mously adopted the following, somewhat patronizing, resolution,

Having read the communication from the W.C.T.U., we find ourselves in cordial sympathy with the objects of their Association, and desire to reaffirm our resolution, adopted at the annual meeting of 1882, that alcohol should be regarded as a drug, and its sale restricted to the drug store as is done with other poisonous drugs.(32)

The contention of physicians, that alcohol was a drug and therefore they should be the ones to control it, was critical to the profession's desire to prescribe this popular therapy. In 1887, physicians at the International Medical Congress, deemed that alcohol should be considered as other powerful drugs and prescribed with a "conscientious caution and a sense of grave responsibility"(33).

The success with which the medical profession was able to convince the public of its need to oversee alcohol ultimately placed physicians in an unfortunate position. When, after years of petitions, plebiscites, and lobbying, prohibition was adopted by the entire province of Nova Scotia, physicians, as sole legal dispensers of alcohol, were "asked" to bear the brunt of this law by circumventing the law to fulfill the province's alcohol needs. This position as "the peoples' bartenders" (34), however, was viewed by physicians as a service that undercut the principles of their practice and the respect they felt their profession deserved.

...when prohibition was forced upon this province the government, with the consent of the temperance workers, foisted the entire responsibility of saying who was and who was not to have liquor upon our profession. We accepted it. There seemed very little else we could do. Those few of us who had strong wills and decided convictions were able to refuse to write a prescription except in such rare cases as those in which it was indicated.(35)

Under these circumstances, physicians viewed the legislated prohibition, for which temperance societies had struggled for a century, as a farce of significant proportions.

The doctors did not ask to be put in the position where one might point to some of them and call them the 'peoples' bartenders'. The prohibitionists know that liquor is being used for beverage purposes; the doctors who write one or a hundred prescriptions know the same thing; the people in Nova Scotia who spend over a million dollars each year for liquor (and perhaps not more than one-half appears in official returns) know why they get it; and finally the Provincial Government, that needs the money, is quite aware of the conditions. Isn't it all a farce! Are we not making a laughing stock of ourselves as an honest, intelligent people!(36)

From its humble beginning, in West River, Nova Scotia, to a province-wide crusade, the temperance

movement failed to achieve its ultimate goal. Although, for many years most of Nova Scotia was under "dry" legislation, with the Scott Act, and abstinence had a strong constituency indicated by large majorities in several plebiscites (37), when prohibition was officially put on the books in all of Nova Scotia, on September 15, 1916 (38), it never attained its desired effect; crime did not decrease nor was society appreciably better (39). Many blame this on the law's poor enforcement in the province, the large numbers of rum runners throughout Nova Scotia, and the excessive prescription of alcohol by physicians. Temperance, however, was a popular movement whose time had come and gone, without ever achieving its ambitious goals, and eventually, in 1929, Nova Scotians cast their ballots, unequivocally, in a plebiscite which got rid of prohibition forever (40).

The temperance movement in nineteenth century Nova Scotia was an important feature of the province's history and more particularly in the development of the medical profession. The temperance movement changed the medical profession in Nova Scotia forever. It forced doctors to reevaluate their practice in a period when circumstances were changing quite rapidly. Physicians recognized the benefits of temperate use of alcohol, but they could not separate this aspect of temperance from their own, more personal and immediate concerns. The competitiveness and unpopularity of medicine in the mid to late nineteenth century forced physicians to act strategically and not be swept aside by the temperance movement's abstinence ideology. Physicians managed to keep medicinal alcohol use legal and under their control. In doing so, they were able to establish a role for themselves in the health care system—a system in which they ultimately managed to, through professionalization, ascend to its higher ranks. Therefore, despite the "humiliation" doctors faced as the "province's bartenders" through prohibition of the 1920s, physicians eventually emerged in the early twentieth century as an organized, regulated, and well-respected profession.

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