temperance movement.

Temperance was the most passionate of all reform movements in 19th-century Canada, and the most tenacious. Part of the passion sprang from the movement's origins in millennial religion, fostering utopian projections that crime, poverty, disease, and domestic violence would disappear as dry mankind attained perfection. Another invigorating force was the movement's genuine success in curbing alcohol abuse. Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists spearheaded the voluntary or 'moral suasionist' campaign in the first half of the 19th century, and remained active throughout the century. After 1850, influenced by the more secular approaches of fraternal societies and lobby groups, the movement threw its weight behind the drive for prohibition.

The modern temperance movement originated in early-19th-century America in response to abuses arising in new settlements where it was more profitable to distill grain for local sale than to ship it to distant markets, and where taverns were the prevalent social institutions. Such conditions also affected settlements in Canada West and Red River, while the Atlantic colonies and Canada East were inundated with cheap imports of rum from the British West Indies. Moreover, it was widely believed that workers, travellers, nursing mothers, and even children needed alcohol to keep up strength, ward off cold and heat, and as all-purpose medicine and tonic.

British North Americans received temperance publications and heard the word from various preachers, religious and lay, American and Canadian. The first known Canadian society was founded at Russeltown, Lower Canada, in 1822 by Presbyterian Mrs John Forbes, who was troubled by inebriate teachers and pastors. Some 30,000 pledged temperance in Nova Scotia in the 1830s, and the Maritimes gradually became the driest region of the country. Political tensions interfered with work in the Canadas until 1840, when Scottish and Canadian mercantile families in the Montreal Temperance Society financed a campaign to unite people of all persuasions in a mighty Temperance Reformation. Travelling agents preached abstinence to audiences at chapels, schoolhouses, and crossroads from Gaspé to Lake Huron. In 1844 the Canada Temperance Advocate was able to report over a 100,000 teetotallers in the united province and a drop in workplace drinking. By the end of the decade there were higher liquor taxes, more tavern restrictions, and many other community-gathering places besides taverns.

Catholics too awoke to the cause in the 1840s. In the final years of the decade, a crusade led by the charismatic Father Charles Chiniquy addressed fears raised by heavy British immigration. Some 400,000 French Canadians pledged abstinence, assured it would make them sufficiently industrious and progressive to survive on an anglophone continent. Chiniquy fell from grace by pursuing female converts, literally. In Quebec, Atlantic Canada, and the West,
temperance remained parish-based throughout the century.

Among Protestants the campaign became more secular around 1850. The Sons of Temperance and other fraternal groups offered inducements such as insurance schemes, clubrooms, and colourful parades. The Sons spearheaded the drive for prohibition, a measure narrowly defeated in the Province of Canada but briefly in effect in New Brunswick in 1855. The movement tended thereafter to focus on winning local option elections, though there were serious problems with enforcement. The Canada Temperance Act (Scott Act) of 1878 established common standards for municipal and county votes on whether to license the sale of liquor. Though the North-West Mounted Police were desultory in enforcing stiff liquor laws west of Red River, vigorous nationwide activity came from the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (1874) and the Dominion Alliance for the Total Suppression of the Liquor Traffic (1876). They secured a mighty victory in a 1898 national plebiscite, when every province save Quebec voted for prohibition. Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier snatched it away by declaring the margin too narrow and the turnout too low, leaving prohibitionists to await nationwide enactment as a wartime measure in 1917. Temperance and prohibition have been excoriated as wellsprings of underground activity. Historians nonetheless acknowledge that they did reduce alcohol consumption and its associated physical and social ills.

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