

The Anti-Slavery Society
of
Canada

Fred Landon

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Title: The Anti-Slavery Society of Canada

Date of first publication: 1919

Author: Fred Landon (1880-1969)

Date first posted: Mar. 5, 2022

Date last updated: Mar. 5, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220304

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpcanada.net>

THE ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY OF CANADA

By

Fred Landon

The Anti-Slavery Society of Canada was one of the forms in which the abolition sentiment of the province of Upper Canada made its contribution to the final settlement of the great issue in the neighboring country. Though founded comparatively late in the struggle, it was, after all, rather the union of forces long active than the creation of some new weapon to aid the battle. The men and women who composed its membership were abolitionists long before the society was founded. Its purpose was solely to bring united effort to bear upon the great task and the great responsibility that fell upon Canada when the passing of the Fugitive Slave Bill drove the Negroes from the North into Canada by the hundreds, if not by the thousands. With newcomers arriving every day, destitute, friendless and more or less dazed by the experiences through which they had passed, it was no small task that these Canadian abolitionists had undertaken to care for the fugitives, give them opportunities for education and social advancement and enable them to show by their own efforts that they were capable of becoming useful citizens.

The society had its birth in Toronto in February, 1851. There had been attempts before this to found such an organization but they had come to nothing. By 1851, however, the situation in the United States had changed and the effect had at once shown itself in Canada, so that the time was ripe for the bringing into one body of the various individuals who had been showing themselves the friends of the slave. The Society of Canada continued active right through the fifties and early sixties, not resting until the aim for which it had been founded had been accomplished. With the close of the Civil War there was a large emigration of Negroes back to their own land where their freedom had been bought in blood, and the need of any large organization to look after their welfare as a race gradually ceased. During its period of active work, however, the society spread out from Toronto to all the larger cities and towns where there was a Negro

population, and in both educational and relief work showed itself an energetic body. Included in its active membership were some of the best-known men in the province and as its organ it had an outstanding newspaper, *The Globe*, of Toronto.

The meeting held in Toronto was large and enthusiastic. *The Globe* of Toronto of March 1, gives almost five columns to the report of the proceedings. The mayor of the city acted as chairman and the opening prayer was made by Rev. Dr. Michael Willis, the principal of Knox Presbyterian Theological College. A series of four resolutions were proposed and endorsed. The first of these declared as a platform of the society that "slavery is an outrage on the laws of humanity" and that "its continued practice demands the best exertions for its extinction." A second resolution, proposed by Dr. Willis, declared the United States slave laws "at open variance with the best interests of man, as endowed by our great creator with the privilege of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." A third resolution expressed sympathy with the abolitionists in the United States, while the fourth and concluding resolution proposed the formation of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada. "The object," it declared, "shall be to aid in the extinction of slavery all over the world by means exclusively lawful and peaceable, moral and religious, such as by the diffusing of useful information and argument, by tracts, newspapers, lectures and correspondence, and by manifesting sympathy with the houseless and homeless victims of slavery flying to our soil."

Rev. Dr. Willis was chosen as the first president, an office which he filled during the whole of the period of the struggle. Rev. William McClure, a Methodist clergyman of the New Connection branch, was named as secretary, with Andrew Hamilton as treasurer and Captain Charles Stuart, corresponding secretary. A large committee was also named including, among others, George Brown, editor of *The Globe*, and Oliver Mowat, later a premier of the province of Ontario.

The aims of the society, as set forth in the resolution of organization, called for both educational and relief work. No time was lost in beginning each of these. Within a month after the founding of the society it was holding public meetings, both in Toronto and elsewhere throughout the province. The speakers included George Thompson, the noted English abolitionist; Fred Douglass, the Negro orator, and Rev. S. J. May, of Syracuse. Some hostility developed, *The Patriot* charging George Thompson with being an abolitionist for sordid motives, while *The Leader* called him a "hireling." Thompson, defending himself, declared that if he had sold his

talents, as charged, he would not be found fighting the slaves' battle but would be sitting by the side of bloated prostitution in Washington. There were even some clerical critics of the society and its work. *The Church*, a denominational publication, took the ground that Canada was not bound in any way to denounce "compulsory labor." It was quite sufficient to welcome the slave when he came to Canada. To this *The Globe* replied that it was "truly melancholy to find men in the nineteenth century teaching doctrines which are only fit for the darkest ages."^[1]

All through these earlier years of the society's history the public meetings were continued, much use being made of men like Rev. S. R. Ward and Rev. J. W. Loguen, who had known at first hand what slavery meant to their race. Rev. S. R. Ward was appointed an agent of the society in 1851 and traveled the province over, giving the facts with regard to slavery to awaken Canadian sentiment against it and asking aid and kindness for the fugitives then coming to the country in large numbers. Mr. Ward was instrumental in forming branches and auxiliaries of the society at a number of places and has left on record his own impressions of the efforts that were put forth on behalf of the refugees.^[2]

The Globe, under Brown as editor, was a stout ally. Brown's personal interest in the fugitives was marked. His private generosity to the needy has been recorded by one of his biographers but greater service was rendered through the columns of his paper. He was outspoken in denunciation of anything that savored of an alliance with slavery. Canada, he believed, should stand four square against the whole system of human bondage. "We, too, are Americans," he declared on one occasion. "On us, as well as on them, lies the duty of preserving the honor of the continent. On us, as on them, rests the noble trust of shielding free institutions."^[3]

Relief work in Toronto was looked after by a Ladies' Auxiliary, this being the general practice wherever branches were organized. The wives of the officers of the general or parent society figured largely in the work at Toronto. During the first year of the work in that city more than \$900 was raised by the Ladies' Auxiliary. The report for 1853-5 says: "During the past inclement winter much suffering was alleviated and many cases of extreme hardship prevented. Throughout the year the committee continued to observe the practice of appointing weekly visitors to examine into the truth of every statement made by applicants for aid. In this way between 200 and 300 cases have been attended to, each receiving more or less according to their circumstances."^[4] A night school opened in Toronto gave to the younger men and women an opportunity to get a little education.

The Canadian Society, at an early date in its history, entered into working relations with the anti-slavery societies of Great Britain and the United States. At the first anniversary meeting, held in March, 1852, a letter was presented from Lewis Tappan, secretary of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, enclosing a resolution of the executive of the American society to the effect that the committee had heard of the formation of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada at Toronto with much satisfaction, and that they would be pleased to maintain correspondence with this society and unite their efforts for the promotion of the great cause of human freedom on this continent and throughout the world. At the same meeting there were read messages of greeting from S. H. Gay, secretary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and from John Scoble, secretary of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.^[5] At this first anniversary meeting the society was able to report a change in public sentiment toward its aims. At the start there had been coldness and some prejudice but this had largely disappeared and some who had formerly been hostile were now supporters.

The colonization question was before the society in its early period. In August, 1851, Toronto was visited by Rev. S. Oughten, a Jamaican, and later by William Wemyss Anderson, also of Jamaica. The question was also brought to the attention of the government of the province and the Governor-General asked the executive of the society to tender its opinion of the plan. Their decision was altogether unfavorable to colonization whether in Trinidad or Jamaica. With regard to Trinidad their opinion was that slavery in a modified form still existed there. Jamaica, they thought, had nothing to attract the refugee more than Canada, and the society was placed on record as approving the findings of the Great North American convention of colored people, which had met in Toronto the preceding September, to the effect that western Canada was the most desirable place of resort for colored people on the American continent, and that colored people in the United States should emigrate to Canada rather than to the West Indies or Africa, since in Canada they would be better able to assist their brethren flying from slavery. With regard to the American Colonization Society the finding of the Canadian Anti-Slavery Society was that its professions of promoting the abolition of slavery were "altogether delusive." It had originated with slaveholders and was protected by them to rid the country of free Negroes. "A colonization and a bitter, pro-slavery man are almost convertible terms," it was stated.^[6]

The attitude taken by the church bodies in Canada towards this new movement is of interest. In general there was not much active support. George Brown brought forward a resolution at the 1852 meeting, deploring

the indifference of some church bodies. Dr. Willis had been instrumental in getting the Presbyterians in line, a strong stand having been taken by the synod which declared by resolution that slavery was “inhuman, unjust and dishonoring to the common creator as it is replete with wrong to the subjects of such oppression.” A second resolution called upon churches everywhere to testify against legislation which violated the commands of God and declared that the synod must condemn any alliance between religion and oppression, no matter how the latter might be bolstered up by the use of Scripture.

At the 1857 meeting the attitude of the churches was again to the front. Dr. Willis thought it was time that every church synod and conference in Canada should give up one day of its sessions to prayer and humiliation over the presence of human slavery so nearby. It was the duty of all the churches to remonstrate on this question. Rev. Dr. Dick, who followed, declared that the church was “the bulwark of the system.” There were churches in Canada which fraternized with those in the United States that patronized slavery. He was equally outspoken on the attitude of the Sons of Temperance in deciding, against his protest, to shut out Negroes from its membership. There were several protests at this 1857 meeting against some slight evidences of race prejudice. Rev. Mr. Barrass said that, as the Negroes in Toronto set an example to the whites in morality, there was the less reason for any prejudice. Thomas Henning, the secretary of the society, probably put the matter right when he pointed out that talk of prejudice must not be understood as general. Negroes were not excluded from the schools, and the laws were administered to white and black alike. He drew attention to the dismissal of a magistrate who had been suspected of conniving at the return of a fugitive, as also to the case of a member of Parliament who had sought to have Negro immigration stopped and had been simply laughed at.

Necessity for action along industrial lines to provide suitable employment for the fugitives was emphasized by the Canadian Anti-Slavery Society and efforts were made to give the black man a fair chance in his new home. The question of cheap land for the immigrants was also kept to the front with the idea of making the refugees more self-dependent and preventing them from congregating in the cities and towns. Some idea of the extent of the relief work being carried on at this time may be gained from the statement presented at the 1857 meeting which showed disbursements of more than \$2,200, a total of over 400 having been relieved.

Reference has been made to the support given the society by *The Globe*, of Toronto. For this George Brown was given the credit but it must be said

in justice that no small share of the credit for *The Globe's* attitude should go to the lesser known brother, Gordon Brown, who was regarded by many as really more zealous for abolition than George Brown. This was tested during the Civil War period when the turn of sentiment against the North in Canada brought much criticism upon *The Globe*. There was a disposition on the part of George Brown to grow lukewarm in his support of the North, but Gordon Brown never wavered and is said to have threatened on one occasion to leave the paper if there were any more signs of hauling down the colors. When the war was over American citizens in Toronto presented Gordon Brown with a gold watch suitably inscribed, an indication possibly of the opinion of that day with regard to his services.

One duty of the American anti-slavery societies which fell but lightly on the Canadian society was the watching of legislation and the courts to see that the Negro obtained his rights. It was rare indeed that anything of this kind called for action in Canada, the only case of any importance that arose being that of the Negro, Anderson, whose return to Missouri was sought on a charge of killing his master in 1853. A slave catcher from Missouri recognized him in Canada in 1860 and had him arrested. The case was fought out in the courts, twice going against the Negro and then being appealed to the English Court of Queen's Bench, which granted a writ of habeas corpus. Anderson was defended by Gerrit Smith and the case attracted great attention throughout Canada. The executive of the Canadian Anti-Slavery Society kept the case well under observation and made its position quite clear by a resolution declaring that principles of right and humanity should prevail. In the end Anderson was acquitted.

The sentiment that was created in Canada by the friends of the fugitive in the decade before the Civil War had its effect when that struggle began. Sir John Macdonald, premier of Canada, made careful investigation to find out how many Canadians were in the northern armies and placed the number at 40,000.^[7] The spirit that animated the youth of the North in this moral struggle was powerful in the minds of many of these young Canadians. There was present in Canada not a little of the feeling of responsibility for the honor of the continent that George Brown voiced and both by peaceful means and by the sword the people of the British-American province to the North had their part in striking off the shackles from the slave in the South.

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- [1] *The Globe*, April 1, 1851.
- [2] Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Slave*.
- [3] Lewis, *George Brown*, p. 114.
- [4] Drew, *North Side View of Slavery*, p. 328.
- [5] Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, First Annual Report, p. 10.
- [6] First Annual Report, pp. 12-13.
- [7] *Letters of Goldwin Smith*, p. 377.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Anti-Slavery Society of Canada* by Fred Landon]