

**John Robson and His Faith:  
Church and State in  
Late Nineteenth-Century British Columbia**

by

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

in the  
Department of History  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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**SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY**

**Summer 2012**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis argues that it is necessary to take into account John Robson's religious beliefs and activities in order to understand more fully the ambitions and actions of this leading figure in the history of British Columbia. The work examines his advocacy of temperance and sabbatarianism, his role in Presbyterian church governance, and the relationship between his religious beliefs and his political activities. Furthermore, the analysis of this aspect of the life and career of John Robson suggests that historians need to examine the role played by religion in what has generally been viewed as an essentially secular province.

**Keywords:** British Columbia History; Robson, John 1824-1892; Religion; Temperance; Sabbatarianism

## **Dedication**

To Susan, for her love and encouragement.

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis allows me the opportunity to acknowledge two different generations of historians, separated in time, but not in the passion for their work or their students.

I would like to thank the History Department of Notre Dame University of Nelson and particularly the Department Head, Gordon Petter, for starting me on my historical journey. Notre Dame University may be gone, but it is not forgotten.

I thank the History Department at the University of Victoria and my original thesis supervisor, Dr. Reginald Roy, for his assistance to myself as a young grad student attending that institution.

I sincerely thank the members of the Faculty in the Department of History at Simon Fraser University for allowing me, as a mature student, to return to university. A special acknowledgement is owed on my part to Dr. Jack Little, who put up with “Lazarus”, as I kept arising from the dead to continue my work on John Robson.

I would also like to acknowledge Rose Sapizak, Clarence Jensen and the late Jim McClure for writing letters of reference allowing me to return to university after so many years away.

Finally, I would like to offer my appreciation to all my family and friends for their good wishes and encouragement. In particular I would like to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to my wife Susan and my daughters Sara, Megan and Jennifer for all their support.

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# Introduction

In an October 1872 letter to his brother, John Robson outlined his proposal to send his eldest son back to Ontario to further the boy's education. After discussing the more mundane details of lodging, clothing, obtaining school supplies, and other parental concerns, the British Columbia journalist and politician expressed the hope and desire that his son become "a scholar, a man and a Christian."<sup>1</sup> The importance that Robson placed on his son becoming a "Christian" is revealing. In a 1962 radio interview, Robson's grandson asserted that he could say "without any fear of contradiction" that his grandfather "was an upright Christian gentleman."<sup>2</sup> Upon his death, Robson's obituaries referred to his "pronounced religious turn of mind" and the fact that he was a "constant Christian" who "held to the teaching of his youth in old age, and trusted in the lowly Nazarene."<sup>3</sup> Religion permeated nineteenth century Canadian society, and was certainly an integral part of Robson's life. However, the role of religion as it relates to the life of such leading British Columbians as John Robson has not received the historical attention that it deserves.

With few exceptions, religious historical studies written about the last half of nineteenth-century British Columbia can be divided into two general categories. The first concentrates on various missionary efforts, particularly among the First Nations. A current theme of many of these works is to discredit these missionary endeavours as

<sup>1</sup> John Robson to Ebenezer Robson, 28 October 1872, H/D/R57, Ebenezer Robson Collection, British Columbia Archives, Victoria, B.C. (Hereafter cited as BCA).

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Douglas Hunter. Interviewed by Orchard Imbert. 29 March 1962. T1298:0001. BCA.

<sup>3</sup> *Daily Colonist* (Victoria), 30 June 1892, 1 (Various alterations in name. Hereafter cited as *Colonist*); and *Daily World* (Vancouver), 30 June 1892, 2.

detrimental to Natives' society and culture.<sup>4</sup> The second category consists of hagiographical accounts by amateur historians who celebrate the spiritual triumph of some religious individual or congregation.<sup>5</sup> Both categories fail to offer a thorough analysis of the religious experiences of the general settler population. Histories that survey religious activities in Canada do touch on British Columbia but these works treat the province's religious history as ancillary to the broader Canadian context.<sup>6</sup> Regional studies have been focussed largely on central Canada and the Maritimes. Such studies are beneficial for an understanding of religion in British Columbia only to the extent that

<sup>4</sup> For examples of missionary studies see Clarence R. Bolt, *Thomas Crosby and the Tsimshian: small shoes for feet too large* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992); Jan Hare and Jean Barman, *Good Intentions Gone Awry: Emma Crosby and the Methodist Mission on the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006); Peter Murray, *The Devil and Mr. Duncan* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1985); Susan Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing: Nineteenth Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003). Note also, Jiwu Wang, *"His Dominion" and the "Yellow Peril" Protestant Missions to Chinese Immigrants in Canada 1859-1967* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> For example: Joan Weir, *Canada's Gold Rush Church: A History of St. Saviour's Church in Barkerville, British Columbia* (Quesnel, British Columbia: Canadian Anglican Diocese of Cariboo, 1986); Stuart Underhill, *The Iron Church* (Victoria: Braemer Books, 1984); A.J. Klassen, ed. *The Church in the Heart of the Valley 1892-1992* (Abbotsford, B.C.: Matsqui-Abbotsford Ministerial Association, 1992); Ian Macdonald and Betty O'Keefe, *Quiet Reformers: The Legacy of Early Victoria's Bishop Edward and Mary Cridge* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> See for example George Rawlyk, ed. *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760-1990* (Burlington, Ontario: Welch Publishing Co., 1990); Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); John S. Moir, *Enduring Witness: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: The Bryant Press Limited, 1974); Terence Murphy and Roberto Perin, eds., *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996).

they offer a background to late nineteenth century religious concerns that also affected individuals on the Canadian west coast.<sup>7</sup>

The small number of articles on religion that do include the nineteenth-century British Columbia settler population tend to stress its secularism. For example, Vincent J. McNally labelled British Columbia “the most unchurched area in North America” and advanced the argument that church-state relations developed along the lines of an American model, largely as the result of American immigration into the colony.<sup>8</sup> More recently Lynne Marks took her theme from a late-nineteenth-century saying that “men left their religion behind them when they crossed the Rocky Mountains.” She examined the absence of religious belief in British Columbia through an analysis of the 1901 census returns. In a comparison of the number of actual church communicants to individuals who identified themselves with a particular denomination, British Columbia exhibited the lowest ratio of church involvement in Canada. Moreover, for the 1901 census, 1.5 percent of British Columbia’s population reported that they were either atheists or agnostics. Although this figure appears nominal, it represented over 30

<sup>7</sup> For examples see Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); John Webster Grant, *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); Sharon Anne Cook, “Through Sunshine and Shadow” *The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, Evangelism, and Reform in Ontario, 1874-1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995); William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989); J.I. Little, *Borderland Religion: The Emergence of an English-Canadian Identity, 1792-1852* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Charles H.H. Scobie and G.A. Rawlyk, eds., *The Contribution of Presbyterianism to the Maritime Provinces in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997); Michael Gauvreau and Ollivier Hubert, eds., *The Churches and Social Order in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006). For an examination of the Presbyterian Church in western Canada excluding British Columbia see Peter Bush, *Western Challenge: The Presbyterian Church in Canada’s Mission on the Prairies and North 1885-1925* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: J. Gordon Shillingford Publishing, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Vincent J. McNally, “Church-State Relations and American Influence in British Columbia Before Confederation,” *Journal of Church and State*, 34, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 93-110. See also Vincent J. McNally, *The Lord’s Distant Vineyard: A History of the Oblates and the Catholic Community in British Columbia* (Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 2000).

percent of all Canadians in this category. Marks conceded that almost 50 percent of individuals in British Columbia reporting “no religion” resided in the hard-rock mining communities of the Kootenays, where labour radicalism likely played a significant role in religious adherence. Nevertheless, she concluded that while west coast “exceptionalism” has been identified in politics, racial tensions, social welfare policies and certainly in labour history, the census data revealed that it was also evident in religion. Whereas historians such as David Marshall debate when secularism began to overcome religion in English Canada, Marks asserted that “it appears that in many ways BC was ‘born secular’”.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that British Columbia is regarded as “unchurched” or “born secular”, as claimed by McNally and Marks, does not mean that the religious activity of British Columbians such as John Robson should be ignored as a valid field of historical study.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, over the years, historians have suggested that such studies are warranted. In a 1931 article, Edith Dobie, reflecting a thesis put forward earlier by A.R.M. Lower, noted a

<sup>9</sup> Lynne Marks, “‘Leaving God Behind When They Crossed the Rocky Mountains’: Exploring Unbelief in Turn-of-the-Century British Columbia”, in *Household Counts: Canadian Households and Families in 1901*, eds. Eric W. Sager and Peter Baskerville (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 372-404. For a table summary of census returns see Table 11.1, “Atheists and those of “No Religion” of total population, BC and Canada, 1901-2001,” 373. Note also Marks’ earlier study of turn-of-the century church periodicals, where she concludes that the major concern of mainstream churches in British Columbia was the high ratio of men to non-Native women. Lynne Marks, “‘A Fragment of Heaven on Earth?’ Religion, Gender, and Family in Turn-of-the-Century Canadian Church Periodicals,” *Journal of Family History*, 26, no. 2 (April 2001): 251 – 271. For differing opinions on the debate over secularism see David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) as well as Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Other studies that examine specific aspects of religion in British Columbia include: Patricia E. Roy, “‘The Pirates of the Penitentiary’: Religion and Politics in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century British Columbia,” *CCHA Historical Studies*, 74 (2008): 7-27; Susan Dickinson, “Edward Cridge and George Hills: doctrinal conflict, 1872–74, and the founding of the Church of Our Lord in Victoria, British Columbia, 1875” (MA Thesis, University of Victoria, 1964); Patricia M. Johnson, “McCreight and the Church,” *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1948): 297-309; Patricia O’Connell Killen, “Memory, Novelty and Possibility in This Place”, in *Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia, Exploring the Spirit of the Northwest*, ed. Douglas Todd (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2008), 65-85.

certain “aristocratic conservative tendency” in the province’s political life during the late nineteenth century “may be attributed to religious trends.” Walter N. Sage’s 1948 article on the same period agreed that religious influences should be examined, but added that “No study has yet been made of the connection between politics and religion in British Columbia.”<sup>11</sup> In a 1997 book review, Gail Edwards commented, “The absence of a serious consideration of religious experience as a category of analysis is particularly acute in British Columbia history,” and concluded that it is important to answer the question: “What did it mean to be an Anglican or a Methodist in nineteenth century BC – socially, politically, culturally?”<sup>12</sup> An examination of the religious commitments of John Robson will assist in answering this question.

John Robson was arguably the leading figure in the history of British Columbia from his arrival in 1859 until his death in 1892. During this period he either commented on or participated in all aspects of colonial and provincial life: an advocate of responsible government and Confederation, a member and leader of the opposition in the first provincial legislature, paymaster and purveyor for Canadian Pacific Railway surveys and the first premier forced to contend with the changes brought about by the arrival of the trans-continental railway and the industrialization of the province. As a newspaper owner and editor, Robson influenced as well as reflected British Columbia’s public opinion, not only in respect to political matters but also regarding social concerns. More importantly for this study, Robson consistently demonstrated an allegiance to his Christian faith derived from his Scottish Presbyterian background. His faith remained as an important and integral part of his life.

<sup>11</sup> Edith Dobie, “Some Aspects of Party History in British Columbia, 1871-1903,” *Pacific Historical Review* 1 (1932): 235-251. Walter N. Sage, “Federal Parties and Provincial Political Groups in British Columbia, 1871-1903”, *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 12, No. 2 (1948): 151-169.

<sup>12</sup> Gail Edwards, “Writing Religion into the History of British Columbia: A Review Essay,” *BC Studies*, 113 (Spring 1997): 101-105. The three works reviewed are: Joan Weir, *Catalysts and Watchdogs: BC’s Men of God, 1836-1871* (Victoria: Sono Nis, 1995); Michael L. Hadley, *God’s Little Ships: A History of the Columbia Coast Mission* (Madeira Park: Harbour, 1995); and Roberta L. Bagshaw, ed., *The 1860 Diaries of the Anglican Colonial Bishop George Hills* (Victoria: Sono Nis, 1996).

In spite of Robson's contribution to the history of British Columbia, historians have tended to concentrate on the activities of his more eccentric contemporary, Amor De Cosmos. General survey histories of British Columbia that do reference Robson concentrate on his political activities. Margaret A. Ormsby, in her 1958 *British Columbia: a History*, has some difficulty in assessing Robson. While acknowledging his early reform efforts, she viewed him as conservative and reactionary as Premier, before concluding that he was "the single reformer in a dreary fifteen-year period of provincial politics".<sup>13</sup> Jean Barman's study, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*, written in 1991 and reflecting more current scholarship, only briefly discusses Robson's journalistic and political activities.<sup>14</sup> This is also the case with the volume edited by Hugh J.M. Johnston, *The Pacific Province: A History of British Columbia*.<sup>15</sup> By necessity, Olive Fairholm's 1967 article in *British Columbia and Confederation*, confines her analysis to Robson's political role in achieving British Columbia's union with Canada.<sup>16</sup> The entry for John Robson written by Patricia Roy in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* offers a competent summary of his career and while referring to his religious activities in relation to Sabbath observance and temperance, again concentrates on his political accomplishments. The author does, however, conclude her discussion by asserting that John Robson was "one of the most influential British Columbians of his time."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: a History* (Vancouver: The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1958), 311.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> In particular note: J.I. Little, "The Foundations of Government," 68-96; Sharon Meen, "Colonial Society and Economy," 97-132; John Douglas Belshaw, "Provincial Politics, 1871-1916," 134-164; and Allen Seager, "The Resource Economy, 1871-1921," 205-252, in *The Pacific Province: A History of British Columbia*, ed. Hugh J.M. Johnston (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Olive Fairholm, "John Robson and Confederation", in *British Columbia and Confederation*, ed. W. George Shelton (Victoria: Morriss Printing Company Ltd., 1967), 97-123.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia E. Roy, "John Robson" in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), Volume XII, 1891-1900, 916-919.

The most detailed analysis of John Robson is represented by my 1972 thesis,<sup>18</sup> which approached its subject from a political perspective. The work was researched and written during the centenary of British Columbia's entry into Confederation, and some five years following the centenary of Canadian Confederation. The dominant theme in most Canadian histories at that time still revolved around the birth and political achievements of the Canadian nation as it evolved from colonial status to independence. This was essentially a Whig interpretation of history, related in primarily political terms. Moreover, during the 1950s and into the following decade, Canadian historical writing witnessed the publication of a number of political biographies.<sup>19</sup> My thesis, admittedly written when biographies were falling out of vogue, defined Robson's career in terms of his activities in the struggle for responsible government, the achievement of Confederation, the construction of the Canadian Pacific railway and the successes and failures of his administration. As such, the work's political theme lent itself to a linear approach, and logically commenced with Robson's birth, followed his political struggles, and concluded with his death.

In the years subsequent to the completion of the original thesis, the emphasis in Canadian historiography shifted away from its preoccupation with the political development of the Canadian nation towards new fields of study, including labour, class, race, gender and the environment. Historians also began, more recently, to re-examine the role of religion in Canadian history. Unfortunately, these different areas of historical

<sup>18</sup> Ivan E. Antak, "John Robson: *British Columbian*" (MA Thesis, University of Victoria, 1972).

<sup>19</sup> The most important biography was likely Creighton's two volume work on John A. Macdonald. Donald Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1952); and Donald Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1955). In spite of the movement in Canadian historical writing from the late 1960s onward, biographies remain a valid historical method to examine an individual's life and interaction with people, events and social movements as well as to test generally held historical assumptions. For a discussion see David Nasaw, "AHR Roundtable, Historians and Biography: Introduction," *American Historical Review* 114, No. 3 (June 2009): 573-578, and subsequent articles. Also Roderick J. Barman, "Biography as History," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 21. No. 2 (2010): 61-75.

endeavour largely operated in mutual isolation, leading to the fragmentation of Canadian history.<sup>20</sup> In response, the historian Ian McKay has proposed a strategy of integration, which he labels as a 'reconnaissance' or a 'knowing again' as opposed to a synthesis. He suggests that these diverse historical interpretations might be placed into one overall conceptual structure based on what he describes as "a certain politico-economic logic – to wit, liberalism." His 'liberal order framework' views Canada as a project of hegemonic liberal rule from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1940s, that revolves around the rights of individual liberty, equality and property ownership. The aim, then, is to re-examine Canadian history in terms of the developments surrounding the establishment of liberal values.<sup>21</sup> As an influential political reformer, Robson certainly contributed to the westward expansion of liberalism, but this study reveals that his sense of liberal order was at least as inspired by religion – a theme ignored by McKay – as it was by a commitment to acquisitive individualism.<sup>22</sup>

This present examination into Robson's religious faith and moral values involved a review of his newspaper editorials, the correspondence and documents contained in the John Robson Collection in the British Columbia Archives, as well as his missionary brother's dairies and other documents in the Ebenezer Robson Collection. Studies of

<sup>20</sup> Michael Bliss in his 1991 Creighton Centenary Address created a furor by suggesting that there were consequences resulting from Canadian historians moving away from the emphasis on political and contemporary history and moving toward what he regarded as the "commonplace and the seemingly trivial in history." Michael Bliss, *Writing History: A Professor's Life* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011), 296. See also J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Ian McKay, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review* 81 (2000): 617-645. McKay has further elaborated on this approach in Ian McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005) and *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> The importance of religion in nineteenth century Canada has recently been reinforced by Doug Owram's examination of Victorian thinking and the symbiotic relationship between the two dominating themes of progress and religion. When this relationship ceased, then so did the Victorian intellectual world. Doug Owram, "Progress, Science and Religion: Exploring Victorian Thought in Canada", in *Thinkers and Dreamers: Historical Essays in Honour of Carl Berger*, eds. Gerald Friesen and Doug Owram (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 225-244.

contemporary newspapers furnished accounts on Robson's religious activities. Documentation relating to Robson's St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Victoria as well as an audio interview with his grandson added additional information. Utilizing these sources it is possible to gain insight into the nature of Robson's faith. It is unfortunate that he left behind no detailed records in the form of spiritual diaries or personal written creeds. As will be seen, the lack of such material suggests that his faith reflected an adherence to Christianity and his Presbyterian church based more on perceived societal norms than any deep spiritual commitment.

This thesis argues that it is necessary to take into account John Robson's religious beliefs and activities in order to understand more fully the ambitions and actions of this leading figure in the history of British Columbia. Robson's involvement with his church and his allegiance to his faith offer a counterpoint to his actions as journalist and politician. His personal involvement in the religious and morality movements of his time demonstrate that he thought of himself as a moral leader as much as he did a political leader. This study examines his advocacy of temperance and sabbatarianism, his role in Presbyterian church governance, and the relationship between his religious beliefs and his political activities. The first chapter furnishes the background to Robson's Presbyterian faith, and the second outlines his involvement with religion and the church following his arrival in British Columbia. Chapter 3 discusses the often conflicting relationship between Robson's religious ideals and his political ambitions. The next two chapters, dealing with 'Temperance,' and 'Sabbath Observance and Community Morality,' respectively, examine the dichotomy and tension between Robson as a Presbyterian Church elder and Robson as a journalist, businessman and politician.

In short, this thesis stretches the interpretation of Robson beyond the political realm of my earlier work as it examines his religious activities and moral ideals. He owed much to his family's Scottish Presbyterian heritage. In terms of his faith, Robson struggled with the relationship between his role as an elder and a politician. His opinions regarding the division between religion and politics evolved as he pragmatically reflected the society that he lived in. In some respects he foreshadowed the religious and social movements that would emerge after his death. In his involvement with his faith, in contrast to my earlier study, a more human side to his character emerges. History's subject material is the past, but it is interpreted and written from the present. Taken

together, these two theses not only reveal the complexity of John Robson as an individual, but they also serve as a commentary on the growth and change in Canadian historical study.

# Chapter 1.

## Family and Faith

John Robson, British Columbia journalist, businessman, politician and premier, was born on 14 March 1824 in Perth, Upper Canada. The faith that was to influence him throughout his life was determined by the fact that he was born into a staunch Presbyterian family. His mother, Euphemia Richardson Thompson, had arrived in Perth, Lanark County, in 1817 as part of the Scottish immigration following the end of the Napoleonic wars. His father, John Robson, was born in the Scottish Lowland border county of Roxburg, and had preceded his parents and several of his siblings to the new world, arriving in the newly established settlement of Perth in the fall of 1816. John Robson and Euphemia Richardson Thompson were married in the home of William Bell, the local Presbyterian minister, on 26 May 1821. To this union were born eight sons and three daughters as well as three children who died in infancy. The second eldest surviving child, named after his father, was John Robson.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the younger John Robson's religious education came from his father. When the senior Robson boarded a ship in late 1816 for passage to the new world, he carried his faith with him, together with his hopes of a better life. According to the pious family history written by the younger John Robson's brothers, George and Ebenezer, their father spent much of his youth alone tending to the family's flock of sheep in the hills surrounding his home. Acknowledging the Bible as the source of all true spiritual knowledge, Robson passed most of his time studying and "committing to memory the

<sup>1</sup> George Robson, "History of the Robson Family", Manuscript, W/A/R57R, BCA; Ebenezer Robson "My Story", Manuscript, HD/ R57/R57m, BCA. Compare Roy, "John Robson" in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 916. The senior John Robson adopted Euphemia's two children from her first marriage.

great truths of God's word." His obituary would later refer to him as "an encyclopaedia of Scripture Knowledge."<sup>2</sup>

Robson's Scottish Presbyterian heritage had its origins in the teaching of the sixteenth century religious reformer, John Calvin, whose theology emphasized the all-encompassing power of God. Spreading throughout Europe during the sixteenth century, Calvinism eventually reached Scotland with John Knox. In 1647, the English parliament's Westminster Standards provided for Church governance and outlined the theology of Presbyterianism. Following the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, Presbyterianism gained recognition as the official Church of Scotland. The Act of Union between Scotland and England in 1707 thereupon guaranteed the rights for Scottish religious institutions. Presbyterians rejected the hierarchical episcopal form of church government in favour of an organization in which all members of the church were equal under Christ. Unlike the Roman Catholic or Anglican Church, Robson's Presbyterian Church was organized upwards commencing with individual congregations and their governing body or Session composed of elders and a minister. Whereas the minister, often referred to as a "teaching elder", was called by the Session to serve the congregation, the lay elders were elected by the members of the congregation and were therefore recognized as the leading members of their church. The importance of the elders within the structure of the church may be gauged by reference to the *Rules and Forms of Procedure in the Church Courts of the Presbyterian Church in Canada*, originally published in 1879 and subsequently revised:

The duty of the Session is to watch over and promote in every Scriptural way the spiritual interests of the congregation; more particularly to receive applicants for admission into the Church; to admit those who have been baptized into full communion, and to receive persons bringing certificates of membership from other congregations; to grant certificates to members leaving the congregation; to watch over the Christian deportment of the members of the congregation; to exercise discipline by admonition, rebuke, suspension, or exclusion from membership; to restore to privileges; to care for the religious instruction of the young, including the

<sup>2</sup> Ebenezer Robson, "My Story".

oversight of Sabbath Schools; to determine all matters touching the order of public worship, including the service of praise; ... and to do whatever else may, in their opinion, promote the religious interests of the congregation.<sup>3</sup>

As will be seen, John Robson and his father both played leading roles within their church as elders.

From the Session, the Presbyterian hierarchy extended to the Presbytery, which was composed of elders from several congregations and whose duty was to oversee and offer assistance to the local Sessions. Presbyteries in turn sent representatives to the district or area Synod and ultimately to the national General Assembly. An appeal process that flowed from the Church Session through to the General Assembly was designed to resolve the religious controversies that seemed to develop on a regular basis.

Scottish Presbyterianism, as exemplified by the senior Robson and presented to his son, was an austere and unyielding faith, with strict adherence to the Word of God as contained in the Bible. Education and most particularly literacy were emphasized because it was incumbent upon adherents to read and understand the Holy Scriptures. Tenets such as obeying the fourth commandment to observe the Sabbath in order to keep it holy became ingrained in Scottish society. Such rigidity did not mean that there was complete unity among Presbyterians; in fact it often tended to have the reverse effect. Various congregations broke away from the established Church of Scotland or the “old Kirk” during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What came to be known as the First Secession of 1733 revolved around the issue of patronage and whether the members of the congregation or the local lord possessed the authority to call or appoint ministers. This seceding group was itself divided by 1747 over the necessity of an oath required of civic officials that implied that the old established Church of Scotland was “the true religion professed in this realm.” Those opposed to the oath were labelled Anti-

<sup>3</sup> *Rules and Forms of Procedure in the Church Courts of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Presbyterian News Co., 1889), 16-17.

Burghers as opposed to Burghers who had no difficulty taking the oath. By 1761 another group adhering to a belief in the complete separation of church and state had broken away to form the Presbytery of the Relief Church. The issue of patronage arose yet again in 1843 with “the Great Disruption” and the establishment of the “Free Church”. With the various waves of Scottish immigration and their accompanying missionaries, the controversies within Scottish Presbyterianism were transported to the new world, influencing the beliefs of such Presbyterian families as the Robsons.<sup>4</sup>

John Robson's father generally remained committed to the Presbyterian faith of the “old Kirk”, although the religious needs for Scottish Presbyterians in the early settlement of Perth were originally met by the Secessionist Reverend William Bell. As the first Presbyterian minister in the newly established settlement, Bell became a leading figure in the community, and Robson's father became an active member of his congregation as his assistant. In this position, prior to his marriage, Robson was accepted as part of Bell's family, taking part in communal scripture reading as well as participating in the Bell family's daily worship sessions. Robson also developed the practice of canvassing the inhabitants of the settlement. Armed with a Bible in one pocket and religious tracts in another, he spread the gospel among his fellow colonists. According to Bell's diaries, in one instance Robson called upon him to assist a Native woman and her two children who were in danger of dying of exposure. In another instance he summoned Bell to visit a widow who he believed was dying and required the assistance of the minister.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Neil G. Smith, Allan L. Farris and H. Keith Markell *A Short History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, 1975), 23-25. John S. Moir, *Enduring Witness: A history of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto, The Bryant Press, 1975), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Isabel Skelton, *A Man Austere: William Bell Parson and Pioneer* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1947) 240; George Robson, “History of the Robson Family”, Manuscript, British Columbia Archives; “The condensed diaries of the Rev. William Bell,” ed. Robert Bell Douglas [http://www.electricscotland.com/History/articles/bell\\_diaries1.htm](http://www.electricscotland.com/History/articles/bell_diaries1.htm) and [http://www.electricscotland.com/History/articles/bell\\_diaries2.htm](http://www.electricscotland.com/History/articles/bell_diaries2.htm)

In addition to his father's influence, the Presbyterian community in which the young Robson was a member also contributed towards the development of his faith. In the spring of 1824 the Reverend Bell contacted George Buchanan, the Presbyterian minister in the neighbouring settlement of Beckwith, in order to assist with the communion service in Perth. Buchanan's daughter, in recounting the work of her father, describes the scene in Perth in June 1824:

Groups of people on foot, with here and there a man or woman on horseback, thronged the roads leading to Perth. The church could not hold them and scores stood around the door and open windows. Father preached in the morning from the words: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." He then served the first table in Gaelic and Mr. Bell served the others. At that period communicants left their pews and sat at long tables – rough boards covered with white cotton – in the aisles to receive the sacrament. The ministers would address each set, which was called "fencing the tables," and hand the bread and wine to the elders to distribute to the members. After another short address, those at the tables would return to their seats to make room for the next lot, continuing in this way until all had communed who wished. Everything was "done decently and in order," with no unseemly haste, communion services generally lasting several hours.<sup>6</sup>

Such large outdoor communion services were a common feature of the Presbyterian Church, having originated with the clandestine outdoor services held by persecuted Covenanters in seventeenth century Scotland.<sup>7</sup> At the time of this particular service the younger John Robson was still only four months old. Nevertheless, it was representative of the many religious meetings in which Robson would participate as he grew older.

<sup>6</sup> Jessie Buchanan Campbell, *The Pioneer Pastor: Some Reminiscences of the Life and Labors of The Rev. Geo. Buchanan, M.D., First Presbyterian Minister of Beckwith, Lanark County, Upper Canada* (Franklin, Pa.: np., 1905), 21-22. CIHM 2018.

<sup>7</sup> For a description of the annual communion services in Cape Breton see Laurie Stanley, *The Well-Watered Garden: The Presbyterian Church in Cape Breton, 1798-1860* (Sydney, Nova Scotia: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1983), 139-146, and Laurie Stanley-Blackwell, "Tabernacles in the Wilderness": The Open-Air Communion Tradition in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Cape Breton," in *The Contribution of Presbyterianism to the Maritime Provinces of Canada*, eds. Charles H.H. Scobie and G. A. Rawlyk (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 93-117.

The Robson family remained members of Bell's congregation until the fall of 1829 when the Reverend Thomas Wilson, a minister of the established Church of Scotland, arrived in Perth. The Reverend Bell was quite disconcerted that members of his secessionist congregation would leave to join what he regarded as the loose discipline and indulgent ways of this new body. Bell notes that of all the congregational members who left, only the senior John Robson came forward to offer an explanation for his departure. It was an explanation that a somewhat bitter Bell rejected:

He gave his reasons in writing; the principal of which was that he was dissatisfied with some of his fellow worshippers; and yet, absurd as his conduct may appear, these were the various persons going to his new place of worship with him. While he freely censured others, he readily admitted that he had been a greater sinner than any of them; and after passing the most uncharitable judgment on the church he was leaving, he concludes by recommending candour and Christian charity to them!! Such is the inconsistent conduct of those who discover motes in the eyes of others, but cannot see a beam in their own.<sup>8</sup>

In joining the new congregation, Robson's father continued as a religious role model for his family, immersing himself in its proceedings and being elected Session elder. In September 1835 he represented the Presbytery of Bathurst at the Synod of Canada held in Williamstown, Glengarry County. Controversy had arisen in regard to the constitution of the Perth Church, and the Synod was called upon to adjudicate the matter. At the hearing, following addresses by the Reverend Wilson and others, Robson demonstrated some degree of independence by making a presentation, apparently representing his own opinions on the affair.<sup>9</sup>

Together with the ministers William Bell and Thomas Wilson, another individual who played a leading role in Perth society and eventually the Robson family's life was

<sup>8</sup> "Diaries of the Rev. William Bell," ed. Robert Bell Douglas.  
[http://www.electricscotland.com/History/articles/bell\\_diaries1.htm](http://www.electricscotland.com/History/articles/bell_diaries1.htm) and  
[http://www.electricscotland.com/History/articles/bell\\_diaries2.htm](http://www.electricscotland.com/History/articles/bell_diaries2.htm)

<sup>9</sup> *Bathurst Courier* (Perth), 9 October 1835, 2; 23 October 1835, 2; 30 October 1835, 2 and 3 June 1836, 3.

the prominent businessman and politician Malcolm Cameron. Born in Trois-Rivières, in 1808, as a youth Cameron accompanied his Scottish Presbyterian parents to a location north of Perth where his father established a tavern. Possibly influenced by events witnessed in his father's establishment, Cameron became a life-long temperance advocate. By 1835 his business interests were gradually taking him westward and he purchased 100 acres of what would later become the town of Sarnia, at the foot of Lake Huron. Cameron actively encouraged his former neighbours in Perth to follow him, and, at the end of 1839, he convinced Robson's father to move to Sarnia in order to assist in the establishment of a temperance society as well as help in the construction of a church.<sup>10</sup> Taking his fifteen-year-old namesake with him, the older Robson obtained a lease at Point Edward, north of Sarnia. It was here in the summer of 1840 that work commenced on a frame house for the Robson family. In the decade that followed, the family involved themselves in mixed farming by producing vegetables and meat for sale to the surrounding settlements. They also augmented their income with other enterprises, but by 1854 the older Robson had accepted the patronage appointment of gaoler in Sarnia. The family was then able to take up residence in accommodations supplied by the county.<sup>11</sup>

Religion continued to play an important role in the life of John Robson's father. For the first year after their arrival in Sarnia, until a church was constructed, he conducted Sunday worship services in Cameron's house. A church was eventually built on land donated by Cameron and by the fall of 1842 the Reverend William McAlister arrived to take up the position of minister. The first session of Sarnia's St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church was thereupon established with the Reverend McAlister and the elders John Robson and George Waddle. The church was constituted as a congregation of the established Church of Scotland and the Synod of Canada. The first communion roll was drawn up at a meeting held in the Robson family home at Point Edward on 10

<sup>10</sup> *Perth Courier*, 22 November 1839, 3, has a notice from John Robson advertising the sale of two pieces of land in the township of Elmsby on the river Tay, about one or two miles from Perth.

<sup>11</sup> George Robson, "History of Robson Family"; and Ebenezer Robson, "My Story".

January 1844. The controversy regarding the split of the established Church of Scotland with the “Great Disruption” and the creation of the Free Church found its way to Canada by the summer of 1844. After some debate, the Sarnia Presbyterian congregation voted in September to sever its connection with the established church and join the Free Church. Again demonstrating his independent character, John Robson and his wife were the only members of the congregation to declare their intention to remain with the established church. They remained members of the Sarnia Church, but Robson resigned his position as elder.<sup>12</sup>

Guided by their father and in common with other families of the Old Kirk, the Robson family maintained strict observance of the Sabbath. According to John’s younger brother, Ebenezer, all work was done during the week in order to dedicate Sunday to the Lord. On that day the Robson household would arise early to read a chapter of the Bible, then, if at all possible, they would attend both morning and afternoon church services. This was followed by discussion of the sermons during evening family worship before retiring for the day. The family also developed the habit of praying every morning and every evening during the week. In his memoir George Robson noted that he received much of his common school education at home where he “was also taught the precepts and doctrines of the word of God, and many lessons of moral truth from my pious parents.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, John remembered that, in common with his siblings, he had been required to “repeat verses and say the Catechism, and if he were not able to repeat the lesson he had had to go to bed without his supper, to provide against which he had been accustomed to hide cakes under his pillow.”<sup>14</sup> Ebenezer, in recounting his childhood, reiterates that he “was brought up on the Shorter Catechism and porridge.” He continued that in reality, “it got to be that I could not live

<sup>12</sup> “The History of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Sarnia Ontario” Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions 16513. (Hereafter cited as CIHM).

<sup>13</sup> George Robson, “History of the Robson Family”.

<sup>14</sup> *Colonist*, 1 May 1890, 5.

without the Catechism; for until I said that and said it correctly, I could not get the porridge.”<sup>15</sup>

Both George and Ebenezer ascribed much of their religious awareness to their father. In describing his own conversion experience, George referred to a “Methodist protracted meeting” that he attended. He noted that although his father was Presbyterian, “it was through his instrumentality that the meeting was commenced”, and that he took an active part in its proceedings.<sup>16</sup> According to Ebenezer his father “spent much of his time and not a little of his money in efforts for the moral and religious welfare of the people of Sarnia.” The senior Robson also assisted in a series of union revival services held together with the Congregational Church. It was during one of these revival meetings held in the early 1840s that Ebenezer notes that his older brothers and sisters were brought into “the spiritual fold.”<sup>17</sup> This would have included his brother John.

In all likelihood, as one of the older sons, the young John Robson assisted his father in his religious endeavours, and would have been expected to monitor the younger members of the family in their religious duties. Accompanying his father in early 1840 to prepare a new home for the family in Sarnia, he aided in the construction of the new settlement’s Presbyterian Church. It appears that by 1842 he was helping with Sunday school. In addition, both “John Robson, Sr.” and “John Robson, Jr.” are listed in the church history as being among the principal speakers at the annual Total Abstinence Society meetings held in Sarnia in the early 1840s.<sup>18</sup>

The depth of religious emotion generated within the Robson family, particularly on a youthful mind, may be discerned by an incident related by Ebenezer Robson. As a youngster he was helping his older brother John spear fish in a stream near their home in Perth. After spearing a couple of bass, John speared a large turtle and brought it to

<sup>15</sup> Ebenezer Robson “My Story”.

<sup>16</sup> George Robson, “History of the Robson Family”.

<sup>17</sup> Ebenezer Robson , “My Story”.

<sup>18</sup> History of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Sarnia, 24 and 36.

the surface. Not having seen such a creature before Ebenezer cried out “John what’s that?” John’s reply, “Mawn, it’s the deil!”, caused Ebenezer to leap out of their canoe, run home and hide under his bed where he became physically ill. It took some time for him to be coaxed out to examine the object of his fear.<sup>19</sup>

This episode, while demonstrating the effect of religious emotion upon the youthful members of the Robson family, also reveals a playful and perhaps independent attitude on the part of the young John Robson. As further evidence of John’s character, Ebenezer describes the circumstance when John, as a young teenager, attempted to catch one of the family’s horses by the tail. The result was that John was kicked to the ground, his cheek gashed and the bridge of his nose smashed. As he lay on the ground bleeding profusely, Ebenezer feared that he was dead, but following a visit from the doctor who stitched up the wound, no permanent injury resulted. Instead, as pointed out by Ebenezer, the accident gave John “a somewhat aquiline nose such as was possessed by no other member of the family, thus adding to the dignity of his appearance.”<sup>20</sup>

While the religious convictions of his family were to influence John Robson throughout his life, it may be a reflection of his independent nature that he decided not to emulate three of his brothers in choosing the ministry as a profession.<sup>21</sup> Instead, it appears that at some point in the mid 1840s he determined to follow a career in business. From Sarnia, he returned to Perth where he found temporary employment in a

<sup>19</sup> Ebenezer Robson, “My Story”.

<sup>20</sup> Ebenezer Robson, “My Story”. Comments on Robson’s “somewhat aquiline nose” would be made later in his career. See letter titled “The Correspondent of the Columbian and his Roman (Roaming) Nose.” *Colonist*, 20 January 1869, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Robert, the third eldest son, expressed his intention to become a Presbyterian minister. Unfortunately his eyesight failed and he was compelled to forgo his studies. He taught school and by 1854 was in partnership with John in a dry goods store in London. Ebenezer, born in 1835 entered the Methodist-affiliated Victoria College at Cobourg in 1856. Following a short stay at St. James Methodist Church in Montreal, he was selected as one of the first four Wesleyan Methodist missionaries to travel to colonial British Columbia in late 1858. Following in Ebenezer’s footsteps, George Robson, born in 1838, appears to have commenced studies at Victoria College by 1860. He later obtained the position of Methodist minister in Castleton, Ontario where he died in 1870. George Robson, “History of the Robson Family.”

store before moving to the major commercial metropolis of Montreal. In common with other young men of the period, Robson apprenticed himself as a store clerk in order to gain experience prior to starting his own business. He returned to what was then known as Canada West in 1848 to sell fire insurance for the St. Lawrence Mutual Insurance Company.<sup>22</sup> He also gained some journalistic experience by working as an agent for the *Provincialist* newspaper published in Cobourg. That paper had apparently folded by 1850 and John next moved to Brantford where he opened a dry goods establishment. He remained there for less than a year before he moved his operation to London where, by 1854, he had entered into a partnership with his brother Robert. Their business benefited from the economic growth experienced by Canada during the early 1850's. The period was characterized by increased exports to Britain as well as a boom in railway construction. The Reciprocity Agreement of 1854 guaranteeing free trade in raw materials with the United States also added to the general economic prosperity.<sup>23</sup> Certainly by 1854 Robson felt financially secure enough to start a family, for he entered into marriage with Susan Longworth.

Susan was the daughter of John Longworth, an Irish immigrant and a veteran of the Napoleonic wars who had apparently served in Spain and then participated in the battle of Waterloo. Arriving in Canada in the spring of 1830, it was not long before Longworth made connections with his former commanding officer, Sir John Colborne, the Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada. He secured the position of civil engineer in the employ of the Canada Company, which was selling land to immigrants in the Huron Tract along the eastern shore of Lake Huron. Longworth was responsible for the construction of the bridge across the Maitland River north of the Canada Company settlement of Goderich that collapsed soon after it was built, calling his proficiency as a

<sup>22</sup> *Bathurst Courier* (Perth), 9 June 1848, 3.

<sup>23</sup> J.M.S. Careless, *The Union of the Canadas: The Growth of Canadian Institutions, 1814-1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967), 132.

civil engineer into question.<sup>24</sup> In 1840, Daniel Lizars, one of the earlier settlers, described Longworth as being “mean” and “of disreputable origin,” possessing “the most despicable acquirements in point of education,” and concluding that he was “a public arsoner, a lawless ruffian and convicted Felon.”<sup>25</sup> It did not help Longworth’s reputation that when he departed Ireland he left behind his first wife and their six children. Arriving in Canada, he married Ellen Maxwell who, according to some sources, was a barmaid in York. On 4 January 1833, Ellen, who was some twenty-five years younger than Longworth, gave birth to Susan, the future Mrs. John Robson. When his first wife and some of their children arrived in Canada two years later, Longworth was charged with bigamy. The case went to trial and Longworth was convicted, but his conviction was appealed and then the case seems to have simply disappeared. It is possible that his political connections with Colborne assisted in glossing over the charge. It is also possible that his first wife died soon after the trial, thereby allowing the charges of bigamy to be dismissed.<sup>26</sup>

The dynamics of the Longworth family are rather confusing. The bigamy scandal was obviously public knowledge and it could be assumed to have had some bearing on both the social status of the Longworths as well as that of the newly married Robson couple. However, it appears to have had little if any effect, and Robson family ties with the Longworths remained strong. John and Susan Robson’s first son, John Longworth, was obviously named after her father. Esther, a daughter of Longworth by his first wife, married Judge Daniel Home Lizars, the son of Daniel Lizars, who was the author of the 1840 report so damning of Longworth. John and Susan Robson retained close connections with Daniel and Esther Lizars throughout their lifetimes. In 1872, in order to further his education, Robson’s oldest son was sent from British Columbia to Ontario to live with the Lizars family. Kathleen, Esther’s daughter, acted as John Robson’s

<sup>24</sup> W.H. Graham, *The Tiger of Canada West* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1962), 130-131. See also Robert C. Lee, *The Canada Company and the Huron Tract, 1826 – 1853: Personalities, Profits and Politics*. (Toronto: National Heritage Books, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Graham, *Tiger*, 135.

<sup>26</sup> Graham, *Tiger*, 134-135; Clarence Karr, *The Canada Land Company: The Early Years* (Ottawa: Ontario Historical Society, 1974), 95.

personal secretary during the last years of his life. It is also ironic that Robson, who came to be regarded as a leading reform politician in British Columbia, was married to the daughter of an individual with such close ties to the conservative “Family Compact” of Upper Canada.

There remains an uncertainty as to how John Robson, operating a dry goods establishment in London, met and courted the daughter of an individual who, although touched by scandal, retained the position of one of Goderich’s elite. As the Longworth family were adherents of the Church of England and Robson remained Presbyterian, it is doubtful that they met through Church activities. It may be possible that business took Robson to Goderich. John Robson’s future nieces by marriage, Robina and Kathleen MacFarlane Lizars, describe a somewhat lively social scene that was led by the Canada Company Commissioner’s wife. The daughter of Family Compact stalwart Archbishop Strachan, Elizabeth Mary Jones, held court in Goderich with numerous balls, picnics and parties that attracted the younger set. It is possible that Robson, as an eligible and rather attractive bachelor, and in spite of his temperance advocacy, participated in some of these social events which would have no doubt been attended by the daughters of John Longworth.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the circumstances, Sarnia’s *Lambton Observer* reported that the Reverend Alexander MacKid married John Robson and Susan Longworth, daughter of John Longworth, in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland in Goderich, on 5 April 1854.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately it was not long after his marriage that Robson’s financial prospects began to suffer. The period of economic growth experienced by Canada entered a downturn by 1857. One casualty of the recession was the business partnership of the Robson brothers. They moved their enterprise to the town of Bayfield located south of Goderich in the hope of improved business, but dissolved their partnership at the end of March 1859 when John decided to seek his fortune in British Columbia. Robert

<sup>27</sup> Kathleen MacFarlane Lizars and Robina Lizars, *In the Days of the Canada Company: The Story of the Settlement of the Huron Tract and a View of the Social Life of the Period, 1825-1850* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1896). Some photographs of Robson taken in the early 1860’s show him as a bit of a dandy.

<sup>28</sup> *Lambton Observer* (Sarnia), 13 April 1854, 3.

attempted to carry on the business, but he died on 1 March 1860. Their father found it necessary to travel to Bayfield to wind up Robert's affairs. Upon his arrival, it was found that the brothers' business had been over-extended, and as a result, they had fallen behind in payments to their creditors. In order to dissolve the business the elder Robson had to reimburse debtors the sizable sum of nearly \$5,000.<sup>29</sup>

The financial woes of the Robson brothers were no doubt behind Robson's decision to seek his fortune as part of the Fraser River gold rush. He was now thirty-five years old and had a wife and two small children to support. His son, John Longworth, had been born in 1855, followed in January 1858 by a daughter, Frances Ellen. Robson's family responsibilities probably meant that his decision to move west was not taken lightly, in spite of the fact that his movements from 1843 onward reflect a personal independence and a willingness to take business risks in order to establish himself financially.<sup>30</sup> Leaving his family with his father-in-law in Goderich, Robson entered upon the next stage of his career and departed for the newly established crown colony of British Columbia in the first week of April 1859.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> George Robson, "History of the Robson Family".

<sup>30</sup> Robson's father and other Scottish immigrants serve as examples of individuals willing to leave established homes in order to pursue fortunes. In 1862, at the age of 65, John Robson, Senior contemplated migrating to British Columbia. Ebenezer Robson "Diary", Thursday, 3 September 1862. Ebenezer Robson Collection, BCA. He remained in Sarnia until his death on 4 April 1879. His wife Euphemia died in 1864. Ebenezer Robson "Diary", Saturday, 22 October 1864. For a study of the motivations behind the movements of Canada West settlers, see David Gagan, *Hopeful Travelers: Families, Land and Social Change in mid-Victorian Peel County, Canada West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

<sup>31</sup> George Robson, "History of the Robson Family".

## Chapter 2.

### Religion on the Pacific Coast

Travelling by way of New York and the Isthmus of Panama, Robson and his companions eventually reached Esquimalt in mid June 1859.<sup>1</sup> By July he was sluicing for gold at Hill's Bar on the Fraser River, but by the fall of that year, the disappointed gold seeker was in New Westminster, the newly established settlement and capital of the new colony of British Columbia. Originally finding employment splitting shingles and cutting cordwood, Robson eventually secured the position of editor of *The British Columbian* in February 1861. As there was no Presbyterian presence in New Westminster, Robson naturally gravitated to the Wesleyan Methodists. Assisted by funds from their parent Church in Britain, the Canadian Wesleyans had selected four missionaries to be sent to the Pacific colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia in the fall of 1858. One of those missionaries was Robson's younger brother, Ebenezer. Another was Edward White who was assigned the new settlement of New Westminster. On Sunday, 30 October 1859, the Reverend White noted in his diary that he preached a sermon based on Genesis 2:23 and Matthew 6:19-21, and was pleased to note that John Robson had joined his little congregation. Robson quickly became an active member, assisting White with his garden and cutting firewood. He partook of Christmas dinner with the Reverend White's family and on Sunday, New Year's Day 1860 was one of seven individuals who took communion. Later that week found Robson at work helping with the construction of the Methodist church, which was completed by March. In August he was appointed

<sup>1</sup> *The Gazette* (Victoria), 21 June 1859, 3.

Steward and thereafter continued to participate in the various church activities.<sup>2</sup> According to family legend, this included the duty of calling people to Sunday service, prior to the purchase of a church bell, by standing on a stump and blowing a tin horn, thus earning Robson the nickname of Gabriel.<sup>3</sup>

In comparison to other denominations, the Presbyterians were somewhat late in sending missionaries to British Columbia. The Reverend John Hall, the first Presbyterian minister in the colony of Vancouver Island, arrived from Ireland in April 1861. While Hall travelled to New Westminster and the interior of British Columbia during that summer,<sup>4</sup> it was not until March the following year that the Reverend Robert Jamieson of the Canada Presbyterian Church arrived in New Westminster. The Canada Presbyterian Church represented the recent union of the former Free Presbyterian Church and the United Presbyterian Church of Canada. On behalf of himself and a number of other Presbyterians, Robson presented Jamieson with an address of welcome.<sup>5</sup> While he maintained a friendship with the Methodist Reverend White, Robson transferred his allegiance to the new Presbyterian congregation. By April 1863 Robson noted in an editorial that he was acting as treasurer for the Presbyterians in their intention to construct a church on Carnarvon Street. The building was to be a tasteful structure, “one of the ornaments of our city, having a tower in front, from which will ascend a handsome

<sup>2</sup> Edward White “Diary”, 30 October 1859; 6 November 1859; 9 November 1859; 1 January 1860; 4 January 1860; 5 January 1860; 11 March 1860; 13 May 1860 and 30 August 1860. Edward White Collection, MS-2351, BCA. Compare Roy, “John Robson” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 914. Ebenezer was stationed in Hope and later in Nanaimo. He was not involved in the construction of the New Westminster church.

<sup>3</sup> Charles George Robson, “A Short Account of the Lives of John, Ebenezer and David Robson, Three British Columbian Pioneers”, (Unpublished term essay, University of British Columbia, 1938), BCA. Charles Robson obtained this information from his grandfather, who was a nephew of John Robson and the son of Robert Robson.

<sup>4</sup> *British Columbian*, (New Westminster), 13 June 1861, 2; 20 June 1861, 2; and 25 July 1861, 2.

<sup>5</sup> *British Columbian*, 20 March 1862, 2.

spire.”<sup>6</sup> Tenders were let out and the church was ready for services by the end of the year.<sup>7</sup>

The minister of Robson’s new church, the Reverend Jamieson, was replaced by the Reverend Daniel Duff in November 1865. Meanwhile across the Strait of Georgia in Victoria, in an argument over the ownership of the land on which the First Presbyterian Church was built, the majority of the church members there, led by the Reverend Thomas Sommerville, split and established a new St. Andrew’s congregation, affiliated with the Church of Scotland. In the fall of 1866, the New Westminster incumbent was therefore called upon to assist with services at the Victoria First Presbyterian church. Robson, in turn, took on a greater role in the New Westminster church. In a letter to his brother Ebenezer, he commented: “Mr. Duff [the New Westminster incumbent] is away every alternate Sabbath supplying the Victoria congregation, Mr. Sommerville having kicked up a shindy and started an old Kirk arrangement. So I have to do duty every other Sabbath. I read the 4<sup>th</sup> sermon yesterday to a not very large congregation.” Robson concluded, “it is my earnest prayer that I may have grace to use whatever influence I may possess for God and in his cause.”<sup>8</sup>

As demonstrated by his involvement with the Methodist and Presbyterian churches, and his editorship of *The British Columbian*, Robson had become an integral part of New Westminster society. He was treasurer and vice-president of the St. Andrew’s Society and the Master of the first Orange Lodge in British Columbia. The New

<sup>6</sup> *British Columbian*, 25 April 1863, 3.

<sup>7</sup> *British Columbian*, 23 December 1863, 3.

<sup>8</sup> John Robson to Ebenezer, 22 October 1866, Ebenezer Robson Collection BCA. The reason behind the Reverend Sommerville starting a “shindy” and the necessity for Robson to take the services in New Westminster originated with a controversy within Victoria’s Congregational church. That group split over the seating of Negroes within their church, with some members joining the Presbyterian body. When in 1866 it was discovered that the deed of land for the First Presbyterian church was in the name of three members of the former Congregationalist Church, the Reverend Sommerville resigned and established a new Church. Rev. F.E. Runnalls, *It’s God’s Country: A Review of the United Church and its founding partners, the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in British Columbia* (Ocean Park, B.C. n.p., 1974), 36.

Westminster Fire Department, the Hyacks, included Robson in their number as an honorary member. He also belonged to the New Westminster Debating Society and served on the Board of Management of the Royal Columbian Hospital. Entering the political life of the settlement, he was elected in October 1863 to the town council and then later in the fall of 1866 to the colonial Legislative Council.<sup>9</sup>

Demonstrating his adherence to the Westminster Confession and its assertion that the scriptures contained the truth of God's word, Robson readily participated in the establishment of the British Columbian Bible Society. The members of the New Westminster religious community came together to approve the following resolution:

That believing the Holy Scriptures to contain all things necessary to salvation, and to be the supreme and infallible rule of faith and practice, it is the duty therefore of every Christian and lover of his race to promote their circulation among all the families of the world.<sup>10</sup>

The Governor of the colony was named patron; the Anglican Bishop of Columbia was appointed President of the Society; and John Robson, together with Attorney General Crease and "all ministers of the Gospel resident in the Colony who are members of the Society," were designated as Vice Presidents.

In February 1864 Robson's personal life changed with the arrival of his wife and family whom he had left behind in Goderich five years previously.<sup>11</sup> The delay in his family's arrival reflected Robson's lack of financial security during this period in New Westminster. His attempts to expand his newspaper met with failure, and efforts to augment his income by involving himself in various business ventures did not prove profitable. The final economic blow came in April 1868 with the removal of the capital of

<sup>9</sup> *British Columbian*, 24 December 1862, 3; 28 November 1866, 3; 16 January 1864, 3. 14 January 1863, 2; 13 February 1862, 2; 13 March 1862, 2; 20 October 1866, 3 and John Robson to Ebenezer Robson, 25 April 1879.

<sup>10</sup> *British Columbian*, 7 November 1863, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Colonist*, 22 February 1864, 3. "Mrs. J. Robson and 2 children" are listed as arriving on the steamship *Sierra Nevada*, leaving San Francisco at 7 pm 17 February, and arriving at 4 am on 21 February at Esquimalt.

the united colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia from New Westminster to Victoria. Robson led the battle in the Legislative Council to retain the capital on the mainland, but, when he failed, he had little choice but to move his newspaper to Victoria. As he noted in a farewell editorial to the citizens of New Westminster, it was necessary to “seek the center of population and commerce, with the hope of attaining a wider range of usefulness.”<sup>12</sup>

Robson, through the *British Columbian*, had been the leading advocate for New Westminster and the mainland colony, trading bitter editorial insults with Victoria and Vancouver Island for almost a decade. It could be expected that his removal to Victoria would be difficult, particularly on his pride. However, his decision was ameliorated by his membership in the Presbyterian Church and Victoria’s St. Andrew’s congregation readily welcomed him. Robson’s adherence to his faith as well as his reputation as an eloquent speaker prompted the Reverend Sommerville to meet him as he disembarked from the New Westminster steamer in mid-January 1869. Sommerville invited Robson to speak during the church service in St. Andrew’s partially completed church. Poking fun at himself as “that strange animal from that little fishing village on the banks of the Fraser”, Robson complimented the new church and the local congregation before making a “short address to mothers and their duty towards their children.”<sup>13</sup> Later that year Robson and his family, which now included Frederick William, born in New Westminster in July 1867, joined the Church of Scotland-affiliated St. Andrew’s congregation.

It was partially through church-related activities that Robson began to enter Victoria’s community life. In the fall of 1873, representatives from all the Protestant denominations in Victoria organized together to form the British Columbia Protestant Orphans’ Home. While the need for such an institution was apparent, it was felt that no single denomination could undertake the initiative. A committee of twelve men and twelve women from the various denominations collaborated to determine direction and procure funding for the home. Robson assumed the role of secretary and by the

<sup>12</sup> *British Columbian*, 27 February 1869, 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Colonist*, 15 January 1869, 3.

beginning of December 1873 was able to report that \$1,050 had been obtained through canvassing and that he had no doubt that the total would soon exceed \$1,500. As the Orphans' Home would serve the entire province, it was hoped that additional contributions would be obtained from other communities and that a site in Victoria for the home might be donated by some generous landowner. Religious instruction was to be provided to the orphans by the various denominations on a rotating basis. Robson's support of the Orphans' Home continued as he served as secretary on the Board of Directors into the late 1880s.<sup>14</sup>

The several years following Robson's move to Victoria, as described in a letter to his brother Ebenezer in October 1872, were "a long up hill struggle ... always hard up, every now and then raised to the mountain top of expectation and then again cast down to the valley of despair."<sup>15</sup> *The British Columbian* was unable to compete with Victoria's other newspapers and ceased publication in July 1869. Robson did, however, manage to secure a position as editor for the *Victoria Daily British Colonist*. He remained as the New Westminster representative in the Legislative Assembly and participated in the Confederation debates, but was unable to have responsible government accepted as one of the terms. He was asked by Governor Musgrave to be a member of the Confederation delegation, but was then asked to step aside in favour of Dr. J.S. Helmcken. Assuming that he would have difficulty being re-elected in New Westminster, Robson put his name forward for the Nanaimo riding for the 1870 colonial assembly. Unfortunately his temperance leanings as well as his political ambitions took a blow when he lost the election to Arthur Bunster, a local brewer. On the other hand, he was successful in being elected as the member from Nanaimo in 1871 for the first provincial Legislative Assembly. In anticipation of being appointed to the Cabinet of the new government, he took a cut in his editor's salary. However, he was excluded from the government, first by Premier McCreight and then by De Cosmos and Walkem. Acting as

<sup>14</sup> *Colonist*, 8 November 1873, 2; 10 December 1873, 3; and 12 December 1873, 2. *The Seventeenth Annual Report of the British Columbia Orphans Home, Victoria for 1888*. CIHM 16513.

<sup>15</sup> John Robson to Ebenezer Robson, 28 October 1872, Ebenezer Robson Collection, BCA.

the leader of the opposition, he attacked the government over the Texada Island scandal, but failed to prove his case.<sup>16</sup>

Robson's prospects finally took a turn for the better in the spring of 1875 when he obtained the patronage appointment of paymaster and purveyor for the Canadian Pacific Railway surveys from the Mackenzie federal government. As reported to his brother Ebenezer, Robson was pleased with his salary of \$3000 per year as well as being "liberated from the slavery of politics and editorial duties, and I can assure you it came none too soon, for I was completely worn down both in body and mind."<sup>17</sup> But Robson's pleasure over his new position was soon offset by family tragedy. In late 1872, determining that his eldest son would not be able to obtain a proper education in British Columbia, Robson undertook to send him back to Ontario to attend Victoria College at Cobourg. It was not long after he assumed his duties as paymaster, that Robson was advised of the boy's illness and death on 15 August 1875.<sup>18</sup>

The one constant for Robson remained his religion. He was elected elder in St. Andrew's church in Victoria in 1874, and remained involved with the Bible Society.<sup>19</sup> The Reverend Thomas Sommerville, who had originally welcomed Robson to Victoria's St. Andrew's, departed for Scotland at the end of 1870. He was replaced by the Church of Scotland minister, Simon McGregor. At the end of 1874 one of Robson's first duties as an elder was to sanction the Reverend McGregor's return trip to Scotland to recruit additional ministers. During a meeting of the Scottish Presbyterian General Assembly in Edinburgh, McGregor successfully persuaded four young Presbyterian ministers to accompany him back to British Columbia. Arriving in Victoria at the end of August 1875,

<sup>16</sup> In February 1874 the *Colonist* reported "suspicious dealings" regarding government members and control of an iron mine on Texada Island. The result was the establishment of British Columbia's first Royal Commission to look into the matter. Robson acted as prosecutor for the Commission. See Antak, 102-109.

<sup>17</sup> John Robson to Ebenezer Robson, 31 May 1875, Ebenezer Robson Collection, BCA.

<sup>18</sup> *Colonist*, 19 August 1875, 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Colonist*, 7 November 1872, 3 and 31 August 1875, 3.

the group immediately organized the first Presbytery of British Columbia in connection with the Church of Scotland.<sup>20</sup>

One of the new ministers, Alexander Dunn, described Robson's St. Andrews congregation as "a truly Scotch one." His description continues:

It might have been transported, Minister and all, from a city in Scotland, were such a thing possible. Moreover, any Minister, facing the congregation could see at once the unmistakable indications of persons of high respectability. In appearance, in manners, in general intelligence and true piety they constituted a body of superior men and women. Not demonstrative or talkative, they were loyal and patriotic, courteous and kind. They were "doers of the Word and not hearers only." By different avenues, and in the pursuit of different avocations, at earlier and later dates, they had found their way to the Pacific Coast. They appeared, as one got acquainted with them, to have come pure and uncontaminated to their destination. Or, perhaps, it would be more correct to say that they remained pure and uncontaminated, amidst the temptations and dissipations of Victoria during the prevalence of the gold fever, when fortunes were made at Cariboo in a day, and squandered in Victoria in a winter.<sup>21</sup>

Robson remained an elder in the Victoria church until his employment with the Canadian Pacific Railway surveys necessitated his family's move from Victoria back to New Westminster in 1878, whereupon he assumed a similar position in the mainland city's congregation. By the fall of 1879 he was New Westminster's representative at the meeting of the Presbytery of British Columbia.<sup>22</sup>

The defeat of Alexander Mackenzie's government in the 1878 federal election placed Robson's employment as paymaster and purveyor in jeopardy. He campaigned to retain his position, but in February 1879, as he described it, "The thunderbolt has gone forth, and my official head is off! By last boat came the official notification of my

<sup>20</sup> *Colonist*, 1 September 1875, 3 and 2 September 1875, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Rev. A. Dunn, D.D., *Experiences in Langley and Memoirs of Prominent Pioneers* (New Westminster: Jackson Printing Company, 1913), 81.

<sup>22</sup> *Colonist*, 11 October 1879, 3.

dismissal.” Lamenting, “it is nothing ..., to a young man, but to one at my age and with a family to support it’s different,”<sup>23</sup> Robson endeavoured to gain other employment. The obvious solution was for him to re-enter journalism and politics. In October 1880, together with his younger brother David, Robson purchased the New Westminster *Dominion Pacific Herald*, which they renamed *The British Columbian* at the beginning of 1882. He also successfully contested one of the two New Westminster seats in the July 1882 provincial election.

The primary opposition to Robson in the election and afterwards came not from his fellow candidates, but rather from *The Mainland Guardian*, his newspaper rival in New Westminster. The *Guardian’s* editor, James K. Suter, soon embroiled Robson in religious controversy. The 8 November 1882 issue of the *Guardian* published two letters. The first, signed “A Steel Pen”, referred to a Methodist revival meeting on the previous Sunday where John Robson made the following “soul-stirring declaration,” proclaiming “I have been, for eighteen years, a wicked sinner, and during that time I never knew the Lord. Tonight I saw our Blessed Saviour, and I am a new man.”

The author continued:

This converted sinner was for eighteen years a member of the Presbyterian Church, and pretended all the time to be a pious worshipper. He is also a politician, and it is quite possible that he will one day acknowledge that he was for eighteen years on the wrong side and I believe he will be converted and become a member of the Government party in five minutes after he sees a change would be profitable.

Referring to “Honest John”, Steel Pen warned the members of the Methodist Church “who are truly zealous and devout worshippers” to “look sharp” for he may be converted yet again.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> John Robson to Ebenezer Robson, 18 February 1879. Ebenezer Robson Collection BCA.

<sup>24</sup> *Mainland Guardian* (New Westminster), 8 November 1882, 3.

The second letter was signed “Ilex” and related a similar account of the revival meeting:

I hear that the revival meetings at the Methodist Church in this city, have proved eminently successful; indeed, beyond the most sanguine expectations of its promoters: the visible emotions of the audience manifested themselves in various ways – in lamentations, groans, and pious ejaculations, whilst others were reduced to tears. Among this latter class I find our friend Honest John. I fervently hope that his penitence is sincere and will be lasting. I feel assured that such a consummation will be hailed by your readers as well as his own, and will deserve their hearty good wishes, “for there is more joy in heaven when one sinner repents than ninety-nine just.” That it may be lasting will confer a boon on this community they least expected. May he always be “under the weeping willow tree, down by the bubbling waters.”<sup>25</sup>

Whether Suter solicited these letters is uncertain, but their publication did launch a controversy involving Robson and his religious beliefs. The *Victoria Daily Colonist* immediately took exception to the letters’ publication and the “scurrilous attack on Mr. Robson who had been guilty of the awful offence ... of joining the Methodist Church.” When the *Victoria Standard* reprinted the letters and referred to “the hypocrisy of a hardened case” in reference to Robson, the *Colonist* accused that journal of a gross outrage, noting, “Whatever may be a man’s political sentiments, his religious views ought to be sacred.” Suter and the *Guardian* replied that, indeed, a man’s religious views ought to be sacred, but if that man says in public that he had been a sinner for eighteen years, such a conversion should be reported.<sup>26</sup>

Robson’s own editorial response was to note that statements were being employed that served to damage his character. He asserted that the statements made in the two anonymous letters were “not only contemptible” but “absolutely false.” Moreover, he had not joined the Methodist church and had expressed no intention of doing so.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Mainland Guardian*, 8 November 1882, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Colonist*, 9 November 1882, 2; 10 November 1882, 2; 12 November 1882, 2; *Mainland Guardian*, 11 November 1882, 3; *British Columbian*, 11 November 1882, 3.

<sup>27</sup> *British Columbian*, 18 November 1882, 3.

Suter, in turn, dismissed Robson's comments as a "miserable whining attempt to defend himself." As far as Suter was concerned, "When a man gets up in any particular place of worship and tells that particular congregation that while in another Church he was a sinner, his statement may be criticised without implying offence."<sup>28</sup> The *Guardian* and Suter continued to chide Robson over his "conversion", but the episode was effectively concluded with a letter signed by several members of the Methodist church who attended the revival meeting. They asserted that Robson had made no statement that he had been a wicked sinner for eighteen years, and implied that he had simply re-affirmed his faith in Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of Suter's evident exaggerations, this episode does furnish insight into Robson's religious life. Ebenezer Robson, who was responsible for organizing the week of revival meetings, recounted in his diary that his brother John led the meeting in prayer

<sup>28</sup> *Mainland Guardian*, 15 November 1882, 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Colonist*, 18 November 1882, 3; *British Columbian*, 18 November 1882, 3. The letter was brought to Suter for publication, but he refused unless he was paid, whereupon it was sent to the *Colonist* and *British Columbian* for publication. The animosity between Robson and Suter reached a climax with Robson suing Suter for libel. In May 1887 the *Victoria Daily Times* claimed that Robson endeavoured to influence a trial involving the brother of R.F. John, MLA for Victoria District. Robson threatened the *Times* with libel, whereupon that paper apologized. Suter, who had reprinted the accusations in his paper refused to apologize and Robson sued him for libel. In January 1888 Robson was awarded \$1,000 damages. Upon this decision Suter suddenly discovered that he had an agreement with his niece and owed her \$50 a month for the last eleven years for housework. Therefore he had no assets to pay Robson. At a new trial the jury decided that Suter's agreement with his niece was valid. This verdict was overturned by Judge Begbie on appeal and a new trial was granted. The decision of the new trial is unknown, but the *Mainland Guardian* ceased publication in August 1889. Its last editorial was an attack on the Robson government. *Colonist*, 20 May 1888, 4; 13 June 1888, 1; *Mainland Guardian*, 21 August 1889, 2. *British Columbia Law Reports*, Part II, vol, 1, 375-77. J.K.Suter was born in Scotland, probably in 1823. After ceasing publication of the *Guardian*, Suter was editor of the short lived *Daily Truth* which continued to attack Robson. He died in New Westminster in December 1899. *Times* (Victoria), 21 December 1899, 6. See also, Bessie Lamb, "From 'Tickler' to 'Telegram': Notes on Early Vancouver Newspapers," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 9, No. 3 (July 1945): 175-199; and W.K. Lamb, "John Robson versus J.K. Suter," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 6, No. 3 (July 1940): 203-215.

during the Thursday night session.<sup>30</sup> While John Robson may have not professed his faith in the precise language attributed to him in the letters, he did certainly attend the revival services as a participant and in doing so expressed his devotion to the Lord, possibly in the emotional manner as described by Ilex.

In addition, Robson seems to have experienced a redirection of his faith around the time of the New Westminster revival meetings. While such meetings often emphasized individual salvation, it appears that Robson used the experience to become more forthcoming in publicly expressing his faith, and to join the campaign against juvenile delinquency, temperance and gambling. He became particularly active after his move yet again to Victoria in early 1883 with his appointment as Provincial Secretary and Minister of Finance and Agriculture in the Smithe government. Robson rejoined the Presbyterian congregation at St. Andrew's and, as will be described later, became more overtly involved with temperance and other religious activities.<sup>31</sup>

The Reverend Alexander Dunn's 1875 description of Robson's Victoria congregation as "truly Scotch" may not have been quite the same by the mid 1880s. The Reverend McGregor returned to Scotland in 1881 to be replaced by another Church of Scotland appointed minister, Reverend Robert Stephen. His ministry soon created a division within the St. Andrew's congregation, in which Robson, as elder, would take a leading role. It would also see that congregation leave the Church of Scotland to join the Presbyterian Church of Canada.<sup>32</sup>

Placing the years from the mid-1850s to the mid-1880s in historical context, it can be noted that John S. Moir in his history of the Presbyterian Church in Canada

<sup>30</sup> Ebenezer Robson, "Diary", Thursday, 9 November 1882. Ebenezer Robson Collection, BCA. Ebenezer also comments on the effect of the prayer meetings on his ten year old son. As noted previously John Robson was no stranger to such revivals in his youth. By 1891, as part of his involvement with the Young Men's Christian Association, he was presiding over "Week of Prayer" meetings in Victoria. *Colonist*, 8 November 1891, 5.

<sup>31</sup> For example see *Colonist*, 1 July 1883, 3; 4 May 1884, 3; 4 January 1885, 3; and 27 September 1885, 3. Some of his comments on morality in Victoria roused the ire of the City Council. *Colonist*, 14 November 1884, 2; 16 December 1886, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Dunn, *Experiences*, 82.

labelled this period as “An Age of Unions.”<sup>33</sup> Robson reflected such a union philosophy as early as 1864, although it appears to have been based more on the sparse population of the Pacific coast colonies and financial considerations than any particular religious conviction. In the only newspaper editorial in which he specifically directed his attention toward the Church of Scotland, he noted that:

Union is the order of the day amongst Presbyterians in the North American colonies, Australia and New Zealand, and why could not we reap the innumerable advantages arising from beginning at the point to which they have almost compelled to betake themselves in the colonies named, after years of struggling and unseemly rivalry and unnecessary expenditure? Why could not the Presbyterians of Scotland, Ireland and Canada send, and support for a time, their missionaries here on the understanding that they unite at once and co-operate with each other in building up a British Columbian and Vancouver Island Church, which shall be neither Canadian, Scotch, Irish, English nor American exclusively, but include the whole in one large-hearted, loving embrace?<sup>34</sup>

Moir’s ‘age of unions’ climaxed in Montreal on 15 June 1875 with the official amalgamation of the various Maritime and eastern Canadian Presbyterian organizations into the new Presbyterian Church of Canada. In British Columbia, until direct communication with the east was provided by the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, unification of the predominately Church of Scotland congregations with the new Canadian body assumed a low priority. Indeed, in order to unify all Presbyterians in the province, the New Westminster congregation in October 1876 under the Reverend Robert Jamieson actually left the Canadian church, and joined the British Columbia Church of Scotland Presbytery.<sup>35</sup> In the spring of 1886 however, with the approaching completion of the trans-continental railway, the impetus was provided for the various Church of Scotland congregations in British Columbia to affiliate with the new Canadian

<sup>33</sup> John S. Moir, “An Age of Unions,” in *Enduring Witness: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: The Bryant Press Limited, 1974), 128–145.

<sup>34</sup> *British Columbian*, 4 June 1864, 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Colonist*, 28 October 1876, 2.

church, thus establishing the new Presbytery of Columbia.<sup>36</sup> The Reverend Stephen reported to a committee of the Canadian Presbyterian church that the St. Andrew's Victoria congregation was not favourable to union.<sup>37</sup> It is possible that this comment simply added to what had become an untenable relationship between him and his congregation. The Reverend Dunn notes that the "Canadian element," which presumably included Robson, "was becoming stronger, more aggressive and self-assertive," leaving the impression that the congregation desired union with the Canadian Church, while Stephen did not.<sup>38</sup>

The congregation previously registered its dissatisfaction with the Reverend Stephen by reducing his stipend from \$1,500 to \$1,000 per annum. By mid-1885 the Board of Managers had reached the conclusion that "while recognizing the worth of the Rev'd Mr. Stephen and his many points of Ministerial ability," they were of the "opinion that a dissolution of the Pastoral tie is desirable."<sup>39</sup> As elected Chair of the Board of Managers, Robson was responsible for composing a letter to the governing body in Edinburgh responsible for the appointment of ministers, requesting that Stephen be recalled. On behalf of the congregation he noted "how thoroughly in earnest we are in our determination to rid ourselves of a minister who has proven himself utterly incapable of filling the position with acceptability and success." The Colonial Committee was thereupon informed of the following resolution, "unanimously passed at a regular monthly meeting of the Managers, held in the Vestry of St. Andrew's Church and duly communicated to the minister:"

Whereas at a congregational meeting held on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of October last it was resolved, that it was desirable that the services of the Rev. Mr.

<sup>36</sup> *Colonist*, 10 April, 1886, 3; 16 April, 1886, 2; and 3 August, 1886, 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Colonist*, 10 April 1886, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Dunn, 82.

<sup>39</sup> Board of Managers' Minutes, 4 October 1885. St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church (Victoria, B.C.) 1866-1953. Microfilm, MS-1507 Reel A807, BCA. The Board of Managers was dismayed when their proceedings were leaked to the press. "At a meeting of the managers of this church on Monday evening a resolution was adopted requesting the resignation of the pastor, Rev Mr. Stephen." *Colonist*, 14 October 1885, 3.

Stephen as Minister of the Church should terminate not later than the 7<sup>th</sup> day of March next (1886) and whereas the Managers have reason to believe that the said Mr. Stephen intends to disregard the wishes of the congregation expressed in the said resolution:

Be it therefore resolved that he be notified that his stipend will be reduced to the sum of one dollar per quarter on and after the first day of March or as soon thereafter as it can be legally reduced.<sup>40</sup>

It took almost a year following the approval of the resolution before it was finally reported that “Rev. Robert Stephen has tendered to the Presbytery his resignation as pastor of the St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church of this city.”<sup>41</sup>

Robson’s congregation of St. Andrew’s during 1886 and 1887 underwent considerable turmoil, first with obtaining the resignation of the Reverend Stephen and later with their decision to separate from the Church of Scotland and unite with the Presbyterian Church of Canada. In normal circumstances, their minister would be appointed by the Church of Scotland Colonial Committee, but as they were in the process of altering their allegiance, the occupation of their pulpit remained vacant.<sup>42</sup> In November of 1887, once union with the Canadian Presbyterian church was recognized and St. Andrew’s became part of the Canadian Columbia Presbytery, the congregation, through Robson, telegraphed the Reverend Patrick McFarlane Macleod to offer him the position.<sup>43</sup>

Born in Scotland, the Reverend Macleod had emigrated with his wife and family to Ontario where he became pastor at the Central Presbyterian Church in Toronto. In the

<sup>40</sup> Draft Letter, John Robson to Colonial Committee, no date (March 1886?), John Robson Collection BCA.

<sup>41</sup> *Colonist*, 21 October 1886, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Robson had written the Home Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church of Canada in April 1887 in connection with procuring the services of a minister. They refused to offer any assistance, apparently believing that the Church of Scotland would be “sending you a supply.” Rev. W. Cochrane to John Robson, Brantford, 30 April 1887. John Robson Collection, BCA.

<sup>43</sup> P. McF. Macleod to John Robson, Toronto, 23 November 1887, John Robson Collection, BCA.

spring of 1887 he attended the Presbyterian General Assembly in Winnipeg and then accompanied a number of his colleagues west to Vancouver and Victoria. His reputation as an orator was confirmed for the St. Andrew's congregation as he delivered several guest sermons during July 1887.<sup>44</sup> Macleod arrived as the new St. Andrew's pastor in March 1888. Within four months it was reported that as the result of his efforts "a new life has been infused into the congregation". As attendance had increased and it was "impossible to meet the demand for pews," plans were drawn up for the construction of a new church and a building committee was established under the chairmanship of Robson.<sup>45</sup> A building site was selected, an architect employed and ground was broken in February 1889. "Having taken such a deep interest in the work of erecting a new church," Robson was given the honour of laying the corner stone the following month.<sup>46</sup> The structure was officially dedicated on 12 January 1890 and the following evening Robson was pleased to occupy the chair and address the congregation.<sup>47</sup>

However, Robson's desire to see the new church built as a tribute to his faith soon had an effect on his personal finances. It appears that Robson had always tithed, and in his will he admonished those to whom he left legacies to do what is right by giving "as I have been endeavouring to do, at least one-tenth (1/10) of their substance to the Lord, thereby securing the promised blessing."<sup>48</sup> By the mid 1880s, with the monetary returns from his speculative investments in Vancouver city land, Robson was able to contribute in a generous fashion to the various activities involving the Presbyterian church. As insufficient funds were set aside for construction of the Victoria church, and the original estimate of \$40,000 escalated, Robson's inclination was to make up the shortfall.

<sup>44</sup> *Colonist*, 12 January 1888, 4; 24 June 1887, 4; 5 July 1887, 4; and 9 December 1887.

<sup>45</sup> *Colonist*, 23 June 1888, 1; and 13 March 1888, 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Colonist*, 8 March 1889, 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Colonist*, 14 January 1890, 1.

<sup>48</sup> Copy of Will, Abbotsford Genealogical Society, Abbotsford, B.C.

On 8 April 1890, W.C. Ward, manager of the Bank of British Columbia, sent a letter to Robson as elder and building committee chair reminding him that \$8,500 resulting from the construction of the church was due to the bank that day and had not been paid. To satisfy the debt, Robson wrote a cheque from his personal funds, and continued to advance monies to the church. In a document labelled "Memo of Loan on St. Andrew's", Robson listed twelve separate cheques totalling just under \$45,000 from the period of June 1889 to April 1890, and a further three cheques totalling \$5,320 from July 1890 to March 1891.<sup>49</sup> By the end of 1891 the church board of managers reported that they owed Robson \$57,330.49, in return for which they gave him a mortgage on the property as security.<sup>50</sup>

As an elder and leader in his church, Robson's relationship with Macleod appears to have at times become strained, particularly as the construction budget for the new church began to escalate and Robson used his personal funds to cover the debt. In March 1888, possibly as encouragement for Macleod to accept the St. Andrew's charge, the congregation had purchased and renovated the residence of former Premier William Smithe for use as a manse. When in September 1891 Macleod approached Robson for financial assistance in order to purchase the house, Robson's answer to Macleod was quick and rather curt:

<sup>49</sup> W.C. Ward, Manager of Bank of British Columbia, to John Robson, 8 April 1890, and Memo of Loan to St. Andrews, John Robson Collection, BCA.

<sup>50</sup> Board of Managers' Annual Report, 1892. St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church (Victoria, B.C.) 1866-1953. Microfilm, MS-1507 Reel A805, BCA. Robson contributed to the construction of other churches as well. In a letter to the Reverend Thomas Rogers of the newly established Kootenay settlement of Nelson, Robson noted that although he had contributed \$1,000 to the general building fund for churches throughout the province, he would still be pleased to contribute towards the construction of Roger's church. (John Robson to Rev. Thomas H. Rogers, 5 April 1892; Rev. Thos. Rogers to John Robson, 14 April 1892. John Robson Collection, BCA) In his biography of Reverend James Robertson, Superintendent for Presbyterian Missions in the West, Charles W. Gordon relates a story regarding Robertson canvassing for the Church and Manse fund. He approached a British Columbia cabinet minister who wrote a cheque for \$100. When asked if that was satisfactory, Robertson replied "Hardly, from you, sir," and suggest that "another nothing" be added. Another zero was thereupon added to make \$1000. The cabinet minister would likely have been Robson. Charles W. Gordon, *The Life of James Robertson: Missionary Superintendent in Western Canada* (Toronto: The Westminster Company, 1908), 192.

Your's just handed to me and I regret very much my inability to help you in the matter therein referred to.

As you know, I am carrying a very heavy load in connection with St. Andrew's and having the Church owing back I neither feel able nor inclined to take a manse on top of it.

However much I would like personally to oblige you I fear that I cannot under existing circumstances meet your wishes in this matter.<sup>51</sup>

According to Macleod, Robson was also not above criticising his sermons, particularly when he deemed them to lack in reverence "for those subordinate standards of the church."<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the Robson family, the congregation of St. Andrew's contained a number of the leading citizens of Victoria.<sup>53</sup> A challenge to Robson's role within his church was to come from one of these individuals, John Nicolson Muir. The son of a Presbyterian minister, Muir was named as the principal of Victoria High School in 1884. He was also known to Robson through his participation in the YMCA as well as his assistance in such temperance organizations as the Blue Ribbon Society. In addition, Muir appears to have been a respected member of the St. Andrew's congregation, being elected in the fall of 1886 to the church's board of managers.<sup>54</sup> In 1890, following his dismissal as principal and the cancellation of his teaching certificate for harsh disciplinary methods and improper reporting practices, Muir proceeded to criticise the provincial government and particularly John Robson as the Minister of Education. He went so far as to seek church discipline by approaching the St. Andrew's church Session to lay a charge of falsehood and conduct unbecoming a church member against

<sup>51</sup> P. McF. Macleod to John Robson, 17 September 1891 and John Robson to Mr. Macleod, 17 Thursday [September 1891], John Robson Collection, BCA.

<sup>52</sup> *Colonist*, 5 July 1892, 3.

<sup>53</sup> This included Alexander Munro, head of the Hudson's Bay Company on Vancouver Island and such industrialists and entrepreneurs as R. P. Rithet and Robert Dunsmuir.

<sup>54</sup> *Colonist*, 10 June 1884, 3; 3 August 1884, 3; 16 July 1885, 3; 15 July 1886, 3; 12 October 1886, 3; 21 October 1886, 3; 18 November 1886, 3; 8 September 1886, 3; and 13 March 1887, 4.

Robson.<sup>55</sup> Muir's accusation was also included in a letter written directly to Robson. In the letter, which was forwarded to the Session, Muir continued to both challenge and reprimand Robson:

I presume that you are aware by this time that it is impossible for you to be an elder in the Presbyterian church and at the same time continue your political knavery without keeping the congregation in trouble, as I hope by God's grace to have the courage to expose you, and by his blessing on my efforts either to succeed in causing you to stop your Political knavery or to step down and out of the eldership. The disgrace to the church has continued long enough and the Session in their vain and futile efforts to whitewash you have brought themselves into disgrace.<sup>56</sup>

Given Robson's role within the congregation, and particularly the fact that he was in the position of personally financing the construction of the new church, it was not surprising that Muir's charge of slander was dismissed. Instead, it was Muir's name that was erased from the membership roll.<sup>57</sup> His case then followed a somewhat complicated trajectory as it moved up and down the various levels of church government.<sup>58</sup>

There is no record of what Robson himself thought of Muir's accusations and his attempt to bring political criticism into the realm of church discipline. It is possible, as Robson stated to a Legislative Committee on Education, that he believed the reason

<sup>55</sup> *Colonist*, 13 September 1890, 5.

<sup>56</sup> J. N. Muir to John Robson, 16 August 1890, John Robson Collection. BCA.

<sup>57</sup> Given Muir's disciplinary techniques, there may be some relevance to the fact that the Reverend Macleod delivered a sermon on mitigating corporal punishment in schools. *Colonist*, 20 May 1890, 5 and 22 May 1890, 4.

<sup>58</sup> *Colonist*, 13 September 1890, 5; 12 December 1890, 2; 9 December 1891, 1; 7 March 1891, 5; and 10 September 1891, 1. See also Minutes of Presbytery, 10 September 1890 and 9 September 1891, Minutes of BC Synod and Presbytery of Columbia 1886-1974. Microfilm, MS-1508 Reel A869, British Columbia Archives, Victoria, B.C. By September 1891 Muir managed to further complicate matters by printing a broadsheet titled "Christianity Disgraced!!" in which he charged the Presbytery of Columbia with slander in not allowing him to speak in his defence. He was thereupon found guilty of "High Treason." His final appeal was to the 1892 Presbyterian General Assembly which allowed him to rejoin the church, instructing the St. Andrew's Session to give him a "letter of demission," thus allowing him "to seek admission to another congregation." *DailyTimes*, (Victoria) 10 March 1892, 1 and 4. *Colonist*, 13 August 1892, 5.

behind Muir's conduct was simply "on account of his mental equipment being out of order."<sup>59</sup> However, the incident did bring into focus the dichotomy of Robson's separate roles as a spiritual as opposed to political leader.

Assuming the position of Premier in August 1889, and then facing a bitterly contested election in June 1890, Robson nevertheless continued in his involvement with the numerous church activities, including his duties as chairman of the Board of Managers. He retained his position as head of the church building committee and commenced negotiations on a mortgage for the new church. He offered support to the British Columbia Sunday School Association in the spring of 1890, pointing out that as religious instruction was not given in schools that the duties of the Sunday school teacher had become more important in instructing youth.<sup>60</sup> In 1891 he served as a representative for his church at the General Assembly held in Kingston, Ontario. Within the St. Andrew's congregation, he arranged private and separate monetary arrangements between leading choir members and himself in order to secure their services. He also dealt with the daily concerns of the congregation, including responses to requests such as finding employment within the government for the husband of a valuable choir member, boarding visiting ministers while attending Presbytery, coping with the church treasurer's concern that the full amount of the congregation's donation to the Bible society had not been collected, tentatively establishing a church newspaper to be called *New Era*, and finding another minister to "supply the pulpit" when the Reverend Macleod was absent.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the congregation itself was divided into six geographical districts with an elder responsible for the administration of each district.

<sup>59</sup> *British Columbia Journals*, 1890, Report on the Select Committee on Education, cxi.

<sup>60</sup> *Colonist*, 1 May 1890, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Reverend P. McF. Macleod to John Robson, 31 October 1890; 16 January 1891; 28 February 1891; 13 April 1891 and 25 May 1892; W.W. Baer to John Robson, Victoria, 21 March 1890; E.D.M. McLaren, 8 April, 1890, Victoria; J. McConnon to John Robson, "Monday" 1891?, Victoria, John Robson Collection, BCA.

Robson's charge was First District, comprising "James Bay, bounded on the West by Menzies Street and the North by Michigan Street."<sup>62</sup>

By the end of 1891, likely because of the workload brought on by his political as well as church related activities, Robson found that his health was deteriorating. No doubt this was compounded by the death of his second son from consumption in April of that year. By April 1892 he was apologizing for having his secretary type his personal letters as his hand was too "shaky" to write.<sup>63</sup> Following the 1892 Legislative session, Robson travelled to England to secure Imperial legislation relative to the establishment of Scottish crofter fishing colonies in British Columbia.<sup>64</sup> Taking with him the Reverend Macleod's wishes for the restoration of his health, Robson hoped to resign his position as premier and receive an appointment as British Columbia's next Lieutenant-Governor

<sup>62</sup> St. Andrew's Church 1890 Annual Report. St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church (Victoria, B.C.) 1866-1953. Microfilm, MS-1507 Reel A808, British Columbia Archives, Victoria, B.C.

<sup>63</sup> John Robson to J. Mara, 12 April 1892, John Robson Collection, BCA.

<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of the proposal to establish Scottish Crofters fishing colonies in British Columbia, see Ivan Antak, "John Robson: *British Columbian*" (MA Thesis, University of Victoria, 1972), 196-201; and Jill Wade, "The 'Gigantic Scheme': Crofter Immigration and Deep-Sea Fisheries Development for British Columbia (1887-1893)," *BC Studies*, No. 53, (Spring 1982): 28-44. An examination of the role of the Scottish Church in connection with the land settlement difficulties experienced by the crofters is offered in Alan W. MacColl, *Land, Faith and the Crofter Community: Christianity and Social Criticism in the Highlands of Scotland, 1843-1893*. (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2006). While MacColl does not reference the particular colonization scheme that involved Robson, it is interesting to note that such a proposal was first suggested to provincial authorities in 1886 by the Church of Scotland's Reverend Thomas Sommerville, who had welcomed Robson to St. Andrew's in 1869. See Sommerville's letter in the *Colonist*, 19 July, 1892, 6.

upon his return. This was not to be the case. While in London, he met with an accident that resulted in blood poisoning and his untimely death on 29 June 1892.<sup>65</sup>

It is evident that the foundation of Robson's religious beliefs was laid by his parents, and most particularly by his father.<sup>66</sup> Demonstrating a somewhat independent nature in his youth, Robson gradually came to model what he believed society expected of him as Presbyterian elder and moral leader. One Presbyterian Church constitution describes an elder as an individual who is "grave, circumspect, and exemplary in his conduct, of acknowledged piety, 'apt to teach,' regularly maintaining the worship of God in his family, and held in estimation by the people."<sup>67</sup> It was a description that Robson would attempt to emulate throughout his life. While he sometimes revealed strong emotions during editorial or political debates, he would return, chagrined, to the orderly and stoic attitude that he thought his faith demanded. Presbyterians often refer to their faith as a balance between order and ardour. Order represents the mind and rationality, while ardour represents the heart and emotion. In his actions Robson would fall on the order and logical side of this scale. He attended church, tithed and followed the dictates

<sup>65</sup> As the St. Andrew's church was mortgaged to Robson, his demise created considerable consternation for the congregation as they were now indebted to the Robson estate. According to the Reverend Macleod, before Robson left for London, arrangements were made for a bond to be signed in order to secure a mortgage loan which in turn would be guaranteed by Robson. (Private Notice from P. McF. Macleod to the Members and Adherents of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. Nwp 284.711 C645M, BCA). Following Robson's death, no other member of the congregation would guarantee a loan and the church entered a period of financial and congregational turmoil. In the end, the Reverend Macleod split from the congregation, and the Robson estate took a loss by agreeing to accept the old church and manse as partial payment, and then forgiving much of the remainder of the debt. See Correspondence and legal papers regarding indebtedness of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church to the estate of John Robson, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church (Victoria, B.C.) 1866-1953. Microfilm, MS-1507 Reel A805, BCA; and Dr. Douglas Hunter. Interviewed by Orchard Imbert. March 29, 1962. T1298:0001. BCA.

<sup>66</sup> The influence of the father as opposed to the mother in the religious upbringing of the Robson children is at odds with the general consensus of historians. See J.I. Little, "The Fireside Kingdom: A Mid-Nineteenth-Century Anglican Perspective on Marriage and Parenthood", in *The Other Quebec: Microhistorical Essays on Nineteenth-Century Religion and Society*, ed. J.I. Little (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 56.

<sup>67</sup> *The Constitution and Government of the Presbyterian Church In Ireland, with a Directory for the Administration of Ordinances.* (Belfast: The University Book Printing House, 1887), 35.

of his faith, including being an advocate of moral causes, but he would keep his spiritual beliefs largely to himself.

On a personal level, as a father and head of his household, Robson continued his parents' practice of family worship in his own home. He demanded that his children learn and repeat the catechism and lessons as he had done in his youth.<sup>68</sup> He regarded such religious obligations as a duty not to be ignored or taken lightly. He regularly attended church and prayer services and, in the case of the early settlement at New Westminster, actively sought out a church affiliation. In the absence of a Presbyterian body, he readily joined the Methodist congregation of the Reverend Edward White. Later, with the arrival of the Reverend Robert Jamieson, he immersed himself in the management of the Presbyterian congregation. As has been seen, Robson served as an elder and Chairman of the Board of Managers for the St. Andrew's congregation in Victoria, and subsequently as a representative to the regional Presbytery and the national General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church.

His allegiance to his church and faith also afforded Robson a network of connections throughout British Columbia. His movements between the cities of New Westminster and Victoria were made somewhat easier by his membership in the church and his friendship with such Presbyterian and Methodist ministers as the Reverends White, Jamieson and Sommerville, and later McGregor, Dunn and Bryant. It is possible that part of the reason he decided to stand for the Nanaimo constituency in 1870 and 1871 was that he was known in that community through the ministerial work of his brother, Ebenezer. Certainly J.K.Suter, Robson's editorial opponent in New

<sup>68</sup> Robson's grandson remembers an incident when, as a youth, he uttered an oath, possibly taking the Lord's name in vain. His grandfather cut a switch from a bush in his garden and proceeded to discipline him. Robson would have been a stern patriarch to his own children as well. Dr. Douglas Hunter. Interviewed by Orchard Imbert. 29 March 1962. T1298:0001. BCA.

Westminster, attributed part of Robson's political strength in that community to his religious affiliations.<sup>69</sup>

Throughout his life, Robson faced numerous setbacks and failures. He struggled financially through most of his business career. Politically he was disappointed in not being named to the Confederation delegation or obtaining Cabinet office in the province's first administration. Family tragedy faced him with the loss of both of his sons. Nevertheless, in spite of these setbacks he remained ambitious and confident. It was his Presbyterian faith and his belief that God's grace was with him that supplied Robson with such self-confidence. It was a confidence that stiffened his resolve and remained with him throughout his life. His faith also gave him a sense of direction. The following chapters will offer a more detailed analysis of that faith.

<sup>69</sup> *Mainland Guardian*, 20 October 1886, 4. Suter refers to a clique, based on religious and temperance beliefs, that assisted Robson in his objectives. As previously noted, Robson had family as well as church and business connections in New Westminster.

## Chapter 3.

### Church and Politics

Whether it is defined as religion versus politics, sectarian versus secular, spiritual versus materialistic or sacred versus worldly, the question of the relationship between church and state has continually attracted historians' attention, and Canada is no exception. John S. Moir, in his studies on Canadian Presbyterianism, emphasises that the "problematic relationship of church and state" was one of the most important features of the Scottish Presbyterian identity transferred to the Canadian scene.<sup>1</sup> William Westfall argues that one factor in the creation of a Protestant culture in nineteenth century Ontario was the tension between the two worlds of the secular and the sacred.<sup>2</sup> The dichotomy between church and state as envisioned by Robson is fundamental in defining both his ideology and character.

As he disembarked from the steamship *Forwood* at Esquimalt on 18 June 1859, John Robson brought with him an awareness of the relationship between religion and politics that had been nurtured by his church. Within the definition of his Presbyterian faith lay Robson's approach to politics which helped place him within the basic liberal context of nineteenth century Canadian thought. Members of the Presbyterian congregation and the church Session elected their elders and, within limits, determined spiritual policy. For Robson and others of his faith, it was a contradiction to have the right to vote on divine matters within the church, but be denied those same rights in the

<sup>1</sup> John S. Moir, "Who Pays The Piper...": Canadian Presbyterianism and Church-State Relations", in *The Burning Bush and a Few Acres of Snow*, ed. William Klempa (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1994), 67-81.

<sup>2</sup> William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989.)

secular realm. This inconsistency contributed to the development of Canadian political thought and was partially responsible for the rationale behind representative and responsible government.<sup>3</sup> As will be seen, the denial of these rights by the form of government that Robson discovered in British Columbia was at odds with the mode of representation that he experienced within his church.

Moreover, in an 1863 editorial, Robson, in examining the practice of imprisonment for debt, directly linked his religious faith to a concept of liberalism and its accompanying bundle of rights as implied by McKay's Liberal Order Framework. In describing the purpose of the Creator in the development of mankind, he asserted:

God's most precious and sacred gift to man is MANHOOD, and His purpose is that this manhood *shall evermore become better and nobler*. The right of security to his person, the right of locomotion, and the right to enjoy the product of his labor or his property, are his inalienable possessions, they are *essential to his improvement*, and can never be justly separated from his manhood except by vice or crime committed by himself.

Continuing, he referred optimistically to the "progress and regeneration" which he believed the human race to be continually undergoing, and then proceeded to equate God's gift of manhood with a concept of liberty which could not be denied in the real world:

Liberty – the right to choose our own ways in this world of probation – is the indispensable condition of manhood; and, blindly often, but, as it would seem, providentially always, the Anglo-Saxon people have steadily and firmly contended for this principle as a *birthright*, to be struggled for and jealously watched and guarded.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A discussion of Presbyterian influence on the Canadian political reform movement and the establishment of responsible government may be found in Michael Gauvreau, "Covenanter Democracy: Scottish Popular Religion, Ethnicity, and the Varieties of Politico-religious Dissent in Upper Canada, 1815-1841", *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 36, no.71 (May 2003): 55-83.

<sup>4</sup> *British Columbian*, 14 February, 1863, 1.

Robson's concept of liberalism was therefore embedded within and derived from his faith. Encompassed within his notion of manhood was the belief that the individual rights of liberty, equality and property ownership were derived from the Creator. As these rights flowed from the Creator, it followed that they could only be restricted by Him and it was the responsibility of the individual, and by inference the state, to properly employ and maintain those rights in adherence with God's law. It was this rationale that Robson would employ when bringing forward legislation to enforce prohibition and Sunday closing. As a member of his church and an elder, Robson believed that it was also incumbent on him to relay the responsibilities of these rights to others, particularly members of his family. It would be no coincidence that he hoped that his eldest son would strive to become "a man and a Christian." His perception of individualism was therefore tempered by what he regarded as his obligation to both his religious community and to society as a whole to preserve and advance public morality.

Robson's view of the proper relationship between church and state owed much to his experiences in Canada West. Judging from the content of his editorials in the *British Columbian*, Robson had participated in the atmosphere of free-flowing debate on responsible government and other concerns that characterized the politics and religious life of that region during the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>5</sup> One particular principle that Robson would bring to British Columbia was that of religious voluntarism. On the part of Presbyterians such as Robson, voluntarism carried the conviction that in order for churches to preserve their religious independence, they should receive only voluntary support from their members. If that particular religious body was of God, it would succeed; if not, it would fail. Moreover, as part of the Presbyterian Calvinistic philosophy, it was believed that nothing, including civil authority, should stand between the individual and his or her God. Support from the state, financial or otherwise, should be denied. Historically, the voluntarist movement developed in Scotland largely in reaction to the recurring disputes over patronage and the power of lay patrons to appoint ministers or

<sup>5</sup> For an examination of the public debate that took place and its influence, see Jeffrey L. McNairn, *The Capacity to Judge: Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy in Upper Canada 1791-1854* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

elders to the local sessions. In addition such seceding groups as the Free Church enlisted the principle of voluntarism to deny the establishment of any state church. In Upper Canada, voluntarism played a role in the controversy over the clergy reserves that were originally set aside for the Anglican Church, and then extended to include the Church of Scotland. During the early 1850s, a proposal to establish tax-supported denominational schools in Canada West launched a firestorm of voluntarist protest, led by George Brown and the *Toronto Globe*.<sup>6</sup>

As a church member as well as a businessman interested in Canadian politics, Robson certainly would have been aware of such disputes and the concept of voluntarism with its separation of church from state would continue to influence his thinking throughout his career in British Columbia. However, if he originally believed that it was an easy matter to separate his personal religious beliefs from his politics, he would eventually discover a tension between his church-determined religious and moral goals and his state-based political and economic ambitions. On the one hand, Robson remained concerned about his spiritual well-being as a faithful adherent of his Christian denomination, maintaining his role as an elder charged with monitoring his congregation and acting as a moral guardian. On the other hand, he was a politician and businessman, required to act pragmatically in order to maintain his position of political and secular well-being. Robson would find it necessary to continually and realistically realign his policies when dealing with the relationship between his religion and politics.

On his arrival in the crown colony of mainland British Columbia in 1859, it was easy for Robson to discern parallels between the new colony and the Upper Canada of his youth. Politically, the colony was administered by Governor James Douglas, who not only ruled by decree but also resided in the neighbouring colony of Vancouver Island.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of voluntarism and the role of George Brown and his newspaper, the *Globe*, in this controversy see J.M.S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe: The Voice of Upper Canada 1818-1859* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1959), 122-128. For a more recent discussion note Michael Gauvreau, "Reluctant Voluntaries: Peter and George Brown; The Scottish Disruption and the Politics of Church and State in Canada," *Journal of Religious History*, 25, no. 2 (June 2001): 134-157.

Robson quickly equated Douglas with the reactionary governors of Upper Canada, and he commenced, both editorially and politically, to support the struggle for representative and responsible government that he had earlier witnessed. In terms of the relationship between the colony's churches and the state, Robson hoped that the new colony would avoid the sectarian disputes that had plagued Upper Canada. In order to help accomplish this, Robson espoused a course of action which leaned towards the Free Church policy of voluntarism.

In the first edition of the *British Columbian* the issue of separation of church and state was broached by Robson in connection with the establishment of schools in the colony. As part of "Our Platform," the paper noted that it would "advocate an inter-denominational system of education upon a broad and liberal basis".<sup>7</sup> Education was important for Presbyterians such as Robson in that it assisted the faithful to read the Lord's word as represented by scripture. In an editorial in early April 1864, following the arrival of his family in New Westminster and acknowledging the necessity of finding a school for his own children, Robson stressed education's importance, noting: "Next to religion, education is the most important subject that can engross the attention of the statesman, philanthropist or patriot. And even religion is of sickly hue and full of vagaries where the culture of the intellect is neglected. Intelligence and virtue or ignorance and vice generally go hand in hand."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *British Columbian*, 13 February 1861, 2. In New Westminster, as elsewhere in the colony, schools were often originally established in affiliation with the various religious denominations. For example, in early 1861, the Reverend White's sister-in-law, Emily Woodman, opened a day school in the Methodist church, and in 1862 the Reverend Jamieson established a school which he later turned over to a parent's committee which appointed a school master. F. Henry Johnson, *A History of Public Education in British Columbia* (Victoria, B.C.; Morriss Printing Company Ltd., 1964), 23; Rev. F.E. Runnalls, *It's God's Country: A Review of the United Church and its founding partners, the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in British Columbia*. (Ocean Park, B.C. n.p., 1974), 16. *British Columbian*, 13 February 1864, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *British Columbian*, 6 April, 1864, 2.

To foster “the culture of the intellect,” Robson reiterated, the colony’s educational system must be established on a “non-sectarian basis.”<sup>9</sup> Because the colony’s adult male-dominated demography meant that there were few non-Native children, Robson argued that it was not physically or economically feasible to establish a myriad of schools representing each religious creed. Therefore one common school system should be created which would be the only system to receive funding from the government. Such financial support would be derived largely through the endowment of a portion of Crown lands. As in Upper Canada, the monies resulting from the sale of such lands would be invested and profits used by the schools. In Robson’s mind such common schools would result in an efficient system whereby all the ordinary subjects would be taught and religious controversies would be avoided. While Robson did not want to be understood as opposed to the use of the Bible in schools, he was opposed to the “introduction of sectarian creeds, formularies or tests.”<sup>10</sup> Religious doctrine should be kept separate from state control, with any specific religious training the responsibility of the Sabbath school teacher, the pastor and the parents.

The separation of church and state as it related to government grants to churches also attracted Robson’s editorial attention. In 1862 Governor Douglas brought forward a proposal to grant sizable land grants to each of the “four principal denominations of Christians in British Columbia, *i.e.*, of the English, Roman, Presbyterian and Methodist Churches.”<sup>11</sup> This proposal was rejected by the British Colonial Secretary, the Duke of Newcastle. Robson agreed with Newcastle’s opinion that only grants of land of about one acre for a church, school and a minister’s dwelling

<sup>9</sup> *British Columbian*, 27 February, 1862, 2.

<sup>10</sup> *British Columbian*, 13 April 1864, 2; and 23 April 1864, 1. The question of establishing non-sectarian schools resulted in considerable debate throughout the colony. There were various public meetings called to discuss the issue. (*British Columbian*, 18 June 1864, 2; 9 July 1864, 2; 16 July 1864, 2; and 20 July 1864, 2.) As in Canada West, the greatest opposition to non-sectarian schools came from the Roman Catholics. A pamphlet was printed by Rev. L. Fouquet, O.M.I. whose opinion is suggested by the pamphlet’s title: *Non-sectarian system of Education versus the so-called Non-Sectarian Schools*. This resulted in an exchange of letters between Fouquet and the Reverend Jamieson. *British Columbian*, 22 April 1865, 3; 27 April 1865, 3 and 29 April 1865, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *British Columbian*, 23 August 1862, 2.

house were appropriate. Again drawing upon his experience in Upper Canada, Robson maintained that any additional grants would only create discontent and controversy within the religious community and in the end damage the organizations they were designed to help:

If we may judge from history, both sacred and profane, we shall arrive at the conclusion that an efficient and faithful ministry will find hearers and obtain adequate pecuniary support without legal enactments of state aid, while those Christian communities which depend for material support upon their own energies and voluntary contributions, are more pure and prosperous than those who depend in whole or in part upon the State.<sup>12</sup>

Robson returned to the question of government aid to churches in a subsequent editorial, noting: "In a Colony composed of various religious sects, it would obviously be unjust to support one or more out of the public revenue, without giving equally to all, which we have shown would be impossible, from the fact that there are those who could not accept of [*sic*] public support."<sup>13</sup>

Two years later, Governor Douglas in his opening address to the 1864 Legislative Council recognized that, allowing for the different religious persuasions in the colony, it was not possible "to establish a dominant or endowed Church." However, he suggested that the various denominations be granted "pecuniary assistance, proportioned to, and in aid of private contributions ... or else the grant of an equivalent in land."<sup>14</sup> The Governor's proposal caused Robson to revisit the concept of state support for churches. He again referred to the experience of Canada West where arguments over state endowments had reached a climax in the years 1852 and 1853 when

<sup>12</sup> *British Columbian*, 20 August 1862, 1. Robson was not alone in his opinion regarding government assistance to churches or the establishment of a state church. In Victoria the Congregationalist minister, W.F. Clark made his viewpoint known in a letter to the *Colonist* in 1859. *Colonist*, 7 October 1859, 3. The Anglican Bishop George Hills also preached against such aid. *Colonist*, 5 October 1860, 1 and 13 October 1860, 1.

<sup>13</sup> *British Columbian*, 23 August 1862, 2.

<sup>14</sup> James E. Hendrickson, ed., *Journals of the Colonial Legislatures of the Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia 1851-1871*. Vol. IV, (Victoria: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1980), 179-182; and *British Columbian*, 23 January 1864, 3.

legislation was enacted secularizing the land reserves held by the Church of England and Church of Scotland. As the result of this legislation, he claimed, all denominations were treated equally. With no aid from the state, strife between churches ceased and they demonstrated more vitality and zeal in their work. Robson criticized Douglas's proposal and asserted that churches in British Columbia were committed to "the voluntary principle" and that the Governor should not attempt "to *force* patronage upon them." He concluded: "Let them alone. Let them rest entirely upon their own merits for pecuniary support, and if they are of God they will flourish, but if they are of man they will crumble and decay."<sup>15</sup>

Robson's philosophy advocating the separation of the two realms of church and state was tested soon after he entered politics as a New Westminster City councillor. In the fall of 1864 a motion was brought forward in Council that "all property used or set apart for churches be exempted from taxation." Robson, in accordance with his belief that religious bodies should refuse any government aid, was in complete disagreement. He moved an amendment denying any assistance, adding that no church property should be exempted from municipal taxes. Debate ensued during which Robson emphasized the voluntarist principles previously expressed in his editorials. He was eventually convinced by the remainder of the Council to accept a compromise in which only the one acre that the government had granted each church would be exempted from taxation.<sup>16</sup> This would be the first, but not the last, instance in which Robson would find it necessary to contend with the sometimes conflicting views of his religious goals and the pragmatic compromises required of a politician.

As Robson became more involved with the temperance and morality movements of the 1880s, his position on the separation of church and state began to evolve. During his earlier career in British Columbia, and particularly as a journalist, he adhered to a strict demarcation. This gradually changed, particularly following his apparent

<sup>15</sup> *British Columbian*, 30 January 1864, 3.

<sup>16</sup> *New Westminster Council Minutes*. 17 October 1864. New Westminster City Archives; and *Columbian*, 22 October 1864, 3.

“conversion” in late 1882. While remaining Presbyterian, Robson was also influenced by the Methodist experiential doctrines as he became more vocal in publicly advancing temperance and community morality. He would also become aware of the importance of women’s sphere of influence through his advocacy of these reforms, even to the extent of reversing his stance on female suffrage. As will be seen, adherence to his faith would lead Robson to assume a prominent public role within his community as temperance lecturer and arbiter of community morality on such issues as Sunday observance and the evils of gambling. Yet, as a government member and Premier, Robson pragmatically refrained from bringing forward any government bills on social issues that might jeopardize his control of the government. It was Robson’s dilemma of reconciling the ideals of his faith with the realities of the secular world that his fellow congregation member, J.N. Muir, was able to identify when he admonished Robson to either “stop [his] Political knavery or to step down and out of the eldership.”<sup>17</sup>

In discussing the rise of the social gospel movement in Canada, Richard Allen notes that the “first signpost” along the trail of the movement was the “conviction that Christianity required a passionate commitment to social involvement.”<sup>18</sup> Brian J. Fraser, in examining the background of the social gospel movement among Presbyterian progressives following the 1875 union of Canadian Presbyterian churches, refers to the fight “to preserve the purity and righteousness of a Protestant Canada by means of an aggressive assault on what they considered to be the un-Christian elements of Canadian society.”<sup>19</sup> In the following chapters, specifically examining temperance, Sabbath observance and community morality, it will be demonstrated that Robson publicly committed himself to this struggle for the betterment of his society. In doing so he would find it necessary to balance his spiritual and secular objectives, and he would gravitate away from the philosophy represented by voluntarism with its concept of religious goals

<sup>17</sup> J.N. Muir to John Robson, 16 August 1890. John Robson Collection.BCA.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914-28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 16.

<sup>19</sup> Brian J. Fraser, *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterian Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada, 1875-1915* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988), 173.

being separate from political actions. History is a continuum. It would be individuals such as Robson moving away from the voluntarism of the mid-1800s and gradually accepting the necessity of state intervention to accomplish goals of a moral nature that would foreshadow the tenets of the social gospel movement leading into the twentieth century.

## Chapter 4.

### Temperance

Writing as Premier on 16 May 1892, just prior to leaving for his fateful trip to London, Robson tersely and bluntly replied to a request from W.E. Morse for a liquor license for a saloon in Nelson:

I have to say in reply that I have nothing to do with the granting of liquor licences, and had I the control of the matter I daresay that I should decide that none should be granted, - believing the liquor trade to be a curse to humanity. As I do not possess that power, I have to refer you to the Licensing Commissioners of the district.<sup>1</sup>

Robson's advocacy of temperance originated in his childhood and remained as a guiding principle throughout his life. As has been seen, one of the major reasons for the Robson family moving from Perth to the new settlement at Sarnia in 1840 was their friendship with the temperance advocate Malcolm Cameron. In her study of temperance in Canada prior to Confederation, Jan Noel attributes the origin of the temperance movement to the parallel growth of evangelicalism and the development of a new business and professional class that found itself threatened by widespread drunkenness. However, she also notes that the basic and immediate motivation for temperance advocates was

<sup>1</sup> John Robson to W.E. Morse, 16 May, 1892. John Robson Collection, BCA.

their desire to cure the social problems created by alcoholic drink.<sup>2</sup> This appears to have been the case in the area around Perth during Robson's youth, when alcohol was used as an anaesthetic against cold winters, bothersome insects and the harsh working conditions of clearing the land and planting crops. The Reverend Bell's diary cites several examples of accidents or death in Perth and the surrounding area while individuals were under the influence of drink. In one instance, an abusive drunkard fell into the river and drowned while on his way home from an evening of carousing at a local tavern. It took a few days for the body to be found, whereupon the withered corpse was dragged out and placed on the wharf where it lay as individuals came by to view the body.<sup>3</sup> Such a display served as an unpleasant object lesson for inhabitants such as the young John Robson in respect to the evils of drink. The Reverend Bell, who originally enjoyed making his own wine, gradually moved into the temperance camp upon witnessing liquor's destructive effect on the Perth settlers.<sup>4</sup>

The Reverend Thomas Wilson, whose congregation the Robson family joined in 1829, was one of the leaders for temperance in the community of Perth. In a sermon delivered in the fall of 1836, likely listened to by a teen-aged John Robson, the minister maintained the validity of temperance societies as determined by scripture and he stoutly defended them as being the work of God.<sup>5</sup> The Reverend Wilson had earlier, in 1832, invited his congregation to sign a total abstinence pledge. John Robson, Senior was among the first to do so.<sup>6</sup> Following the Robson family's move to Sarnia, as has

<sup>2</sup> Jan Noel, *Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades before Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 7-13. See also Reginald G. Smart and Alan C. Ogborne, *Northern Spirits: A Social History of Alcohol in Canada*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto: Addiction Research Foundation, 1996). A more recent summary of the history of alcohol and drinking in Canada may be found in Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003). See also Albert John Hiebert, "Prohibition in British Columbia" (MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1969). While concerned primarily with prohibition in British Columbia, this work offers a background to the province's temperance movement.

<sup>3</sup> Skelton, *A Man Austere*, 236.

<sup>4</sup> Skelton, *A Man Austere*, 237.

<sup>5</sup> Sermon Preached by the Rev. T.C. Wilson, Perth. U.C. on Behalf of the Perth Temperance Society, October 2, 1836. CIHM 63248.

<sup>6</sup> Ebenezer Robson, "My Story."

been previously noted, both John Robson, senior and John Robson, junior, spoke at Total Abstinence Society meetings. On his arrival in the colony of British Columbia Robson continued to support temperance. He would almost certainly have attended Malcolm Cameron's temperance rally when that individual visited New Westminster in September 1862. Cameron's address appears to have provided the impetus for the creation of the New Westminster Temperance Society, whose monthly meetings Robson also attended.<sup>7</sup>

As the *British Columbian* had originally been purchased for him by the political Reform group in New Westminster, it is to be expected that Robson's editorials would concentrate on political and economic concerns, particularly in advocating the interests of mainland British Columbia, and more specifically those of New Westminster. Moreover, his temperance advocacy was constrained by the need to sell subscriptions and attract advertisers. For example, an examination of the 21 March 1861 edition of the paper includes advertisements for the "Sky Rocket Saloon," "International Saloon," "The Eldorado Saloon," "Blizzard Saloon" and "Pioneer Saloon," in addition to various merchants who supplied "all kinds of Liquors, Wines, Brandies, Cordials, Bitters, &c., &c., in bulk and cases." Out of a total of sixty-nine advertisements, twenty deal with saloon or liquor sales. It would not be financially prudent for Robson to alienate almost 30 percent of his advertising base.<sup>8</sup> However, this did not prevent him from inserting articles clipped from other journals that related to the temperance movement. For example, in the period between 1863 and 1865 the *British Columbian* described temperance among ministers in the Church of England, and noted that the movement

<sup>7</sup> *British Columbian*, 10 September 1862, 3; 1 November 1862, 3; 29 November 1862, 2; 31 January 1863, 3. Cameron probably used similar arguments when he addressed the Citizens of Ottawa in February 1864. See CIHM 50456.

<sup>8</sup> In the same manner, Robson would later appear to advocate the sale of liquor in an editorial condemning the federal government for legislation restricting the brewing of beer to Victoria and New Westminster. Pragmatically, his rationale in this instance may have been the fact that he was the representative in the provincial legislature for Nanaimo, a city that would be excluded from the brewing industry. *Colonist*, 10 July 1874, 2 and Roy, "John Robson" in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 918.

was progressing rapidly in the British army. The newspaper also reported that President Lincoln had met with the Sons of Temperance to congratulate them on their program, and quoted New Brunswick politician Leonard Tilley's address on temperance.<sup>9</sup>

Later, as editor of the *Victoria Daily Colonist*, Robson was able to use an 1872 editorial on the illegal sale of alcohol to Indians to criticize the manner in which liquor licences were granted. Noting that "firewater" brought forth "the devil in the savage breast," Robson warned of the "danger of permitting an indiscriminate and unrestricted traffic in intoxicating liquors" and cited the law that demanded "due regard" in the granting of liquor licenses by magistrates according "to the requirements and convenience of the public." He then commented on the situation in the city of Victoria where there were at least sixty licensed liquor outlets:

Reckoning the population at four thousand, and giving each of these establishments an equal share, there would be sixty-six and a half customers to each establishment, or, leaving out the women and children, there would probably be half that number. Will anyone say that, in issuing these sixty licences 'due regard' has been had 'to the requirements and convenience of the public?'

Robson concluded by asserting that in the desire to increase revenues by the sale of licences, the magistrates were "swelling the criminal calendar and filling our jails and chain-gangs."<sup>10</sup> As Robson noted, the control of the liquor trade in British Columbia rested with the granting of licenses, originally by magistrates and then later in each municipality by a committee comprised of the mayor and justices of the peace. It was to

<sup>9</sup> *British Columbian*, 1 August 1863, 3; 5 December 1863, 2; 19 December 1863, 4; and 4 January 1865, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Colonist*, 23 July 1872, 2. See also *British Columbian*, 10 September 1864, 3; 1 October 1864, 1; and 8 October 1864, 3; where Robson refers to an incident at Metlakahtla resulting from the illegal liquor trade. He also refers to the illegal smuggling of 200 gallons of whisky and 60 cases of Old Tom (a brand of gin) in two Indian canoes. *British Columbian*, 20 October 1866, 2. See Douglas L. Hamilton, *Sobering Dilemma: A History of Prohibition in British Columbia* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press Ltd., 2004) for a discussion of Natives and alcohol.

be expected that temperance advocates such as Robson would direct their attention to licensing hearings in order to curtail the sale of alcohol.

By the early 1880s Robson had become more vocal and active in his temperance advocacy. As noted previously, he appeared to undergo a renewal of his faith in late 1882, perhaps due to the influence of his Methodist missionary brother. Ebenezer had left British Columbia in 1866, but returned in 1880 and was now offering temperance lectures in New Westminster as well as working to organize an alliance dedicated to the “restriction and final suppression of liquor traffic”.<sup>11</sup> Other members of the Robson extended family were also deeply involved in the temperance movement. Robson’s sister-in-law, Emma Ida Robson, the wife of his youngest brother David, was Treasurer of the New Westminster Blue Ribbon Temperance Society and intimately involved with the Woman’s Christian Temperance Movement. Mrs. Frederick Horace Robson, wife of one of Robson’s nephews, was president of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Movement (WCTU) in Kamloops.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Colonist*, 24 April 1881, 3. Ebenezer had toured Ontario delivering temperance lectures. See *The Perth Courier* for 6 September 1863, 3. “The Rev. E. Robson (Late of British Columbia) will deliver a Lecture on Tuesday Evening 10<sup>th</sup> Inst. in the Town Hall, Perth.” In December 1880 he spoke on the question “Can we have a Revival of Religion in New Westminster?” and in January 1881 led “Week of Prayer” meetings as well as taking part in a mass temperance meeting at the New Westminster Skating Rink. *Mainland Guardian*, 4 December 1880, 3 and 1 January 1881, 3. The *Colonist* in 1862 noted that Reverend E. Robson had encouraged the temperance movement in Nanaimo where he “delivered a lecture on the subject, the other evening, when quite a number of persons came forward and signed the pledge.” *Colonist*, 15 February 1862, 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Colonist*, 21 January 1883, 3, and Minutes of the British Columbia Women’s Christian Temperance Union Victoria 1888. CIHM 02589-1888-00. See also Mrs. Letitia Youmans, *Campaign Echoes. The Autobiography of Mrs. Letitia Youmans, The Pioneer of the White Ribbon Movement in Canada* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1893), 287. Emma Ida Robson was a social activist on behalf of the WCTU. In June of 1892 she smuggled a Chinese woman, Boo Kim, who had been supposedly drugged and abused by her husband, from a New Westminster court room to a WCTU refuge home in Victoria. *Colonist*, 25 June 1892, 2; 30 June 1892, 5 and 1 July 1892, 4. Both John Robson and his wife Susan had assisted in the establishment of this home in 1889. *Colonist*, 7 December 1889, 4. By 1891 the annual report of the WCTU refuge home noted that “twenty-two friendless ones have been sheltered from the temptations which surround such women, and have been placed under Christian influence. *Colonist*, 24 February 1891, 5.

Temperance advocates made reference to newspaper reports that ascribed most accidents or social ills to the indiscriminate use of alcohol, and gave further impetus to the cause.<sup>13</sup> Temperance organizations such as the Dashaway Association, the Church of England Temperance Guild and the Independent Order of Good Templars had earlier made appearances in British Columbia<sup>14</sup> and were now augmented by organizations led by such evangelistic lecturers as Francis Murphy of the Blue Ribbon Society, and Frances Willard and Letitia Youmans of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> A review of the newspaper summaries of the Victoria Municipal Police Court reveals a recurrent number of arrests for drunkenness. The *Colonist*, 7 July 1885, 3, for example, notes that three men and three women were arraigned for being drunk and were fined. An Indian was also fined for illegally supplying liquor to "an Indian girl named Annie." In addition, it was reported that an individual "became gloriously drunk over celebrating the glorious 4<sup>th</sup>." He obtained a keg of gunpowder and laid a line of it down Store Street. He then ignited it, and promptly blew himself "several feet into the air, tearing his clothes from his body and burning him in the most horrible manner, disfiguring him for life." Temperance advocates would point out that his drunken act also injured and seriously burned two innocent girls as well as other citizens. British Columbians' concerns would be later validated by the 1896 Federal Royal Commission on Liquor Traffic, which noted that the west coast province led Canada in the per capita consumption of alcohol from 1880 through to 1893. Smart, *Northern Spirits*, Table 3.3, 44. It is possible that the consumption rate might be the result of the province's male dominated society.

<sup>14</sup> A mass meeting of the Dashaway Association of Vancouver Island is described in the *Colonist* 10 June 1860, 3. Given the close relationship between churches and temperance organizations as well as their subsequent political involvement, it is interesting to note that the Constitution for the Dashaway Association provided that "Any member introducing the subjects of Sectarian Religion or Party Politics, shall for the first offense be reprimanded by the Chair; and for a repetition fined \$5, for a third offense, he shall be expelled." CIHM No. 16662. Dashaway Association, No. 15 (Victoria, B.C.). A branch of The Church of England Temperance Guild was proposed at the Anglican Synod held in Victoria in 1877, where it was noted that the question of temperance "was being debated all over England and the East in general." *Colonist*, 14 July 1877, 3. A "Temperance Celebration" by the Independent Order of Good Templars is advertised for Victoria consisting of a lecture by Levi Leland, with "songs, readings, glees, &c." *Colonist*, 24 November 1875, 3.

<sup>15</sup> The Blue Ribbon Society originated with Francis Murphy, an Irish born American Temperance evangelist. It took its name from a verse in the Bible (Numbers 15:38-39) which charged the "children of Israel" to wear a "ribband of blue" to signify their adherence to the "commandments of the Lord." For a discussion of temperance societies in Ontario see Darren Ferry, "'To the Interests and Conscience of the Great Mass of the Community:' The Evolution of Temperance Societies in Nineteenth-Century Central Canada", *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 14, no.2 (2003): 137-163.

As part of his involvement, Robson welcomed the opportunity to chair meetings of some of these temperance organizations. For example, at the start of 1887 he chaired a joint meeting of the Victoria Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Blue Ribbon Club. He congratulated both organizations, and during the recess "urged the young men to come and sign the pledge, to which quite a number responded."<sup>16</sup> The religious tone of such meetings can be gauged by a description of a Victoria Blue Ribbon meeting held in March 1884. Commencing with an opening song from a choir, the gathering heard the Methodist Reverend Cloverdale Watson address the audience with some "earnest sentiments in the temperance cause." He was followed by Robson:

... who, setting aside for the time being the moral aspect of the question, depicted the fearful ravages effected upon the physical system by the use of intoxicants as a beverage; and presented to his hearers – especially the younger ones- some sterling advice with regard to excesses of every description but more particularly to those relating to the use of tobacco and intoxicants which formed two of the besetting vices of the age.<sup>17</sup>

Robson continued to lecture on the benefits of temperance throughout the 1880s. Perhaps as the result of heavy drinking during New Year's celebrations, many temperance groups held pledge meetings at the beginning of the year. In a January 1885 article headed "New Year's Day at Temperance Hall" the *Victoria Daily Colonist* described the speakers and concluded:

But the address of the Hon. Mr. Robson was, beyond all question, the gem of the occasion. His remarks, forcible and interesting *per se*, were rendered additionally so by the use of several admirably prepared diagrams, most strikingly illustrating the magnitude of the "drink bill" of the United States and Canada, as compared with the food, clothing, educational and other bills of those countries. The whole thing was so fresh, so much out of the beaten track that Mr. Robson is certainly to be

<sup>16</sup> *Colonist*, 4 January 1887, 1. A brief examination of the *Colonist*, reveals numerous reports of Robson either chairing, addressing or attending meetings of the various temperance organizations. For examples see *Colonist*, 30 September 1883, 3; 16 December, 1883, 3; 21 August 1884, 3; 26 September 1884, 2 and 5 April 1885, 3; 4 January 1887, 1; 13 July 1887, 4; 10 May 1888, 4; 19 February 1891, 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Colonist*, 2 March 1884, 2.

complimented upon his success in lifting temperance advocacy out of the stale groove into which it has to such an extent fallen, and the hearty and repeated applause with which he was greeted showed how well his effort to make a temperance speech interesting and edifying was appreciated. We hope to have the pleasure of witnessing more such efforts.<sup>18</sup>

This favourable review, from a journal that had formerly employed Robson and that supported his government, contrasted with the description offered by the *Mainland Guardian* of Robson's lecture a month earlier to the New Westminster Methodist congregation. According to Suter, Robson's editorial opponent, he dismissed the Bible and proceeded to examine temperance from a "business stand-point". Suter wrote that Robson maintained that, taking into consideration the sickness and waste of time as well as the necessity to monitor the twenty saloons in New Westminster, the city spent a quarter of a million dollars a year. Such monies would be better employed constructing a railroad to connect the city with the C.P.R. mainline or to simply pay the whiskey-sellers off. Instead of selling the "distilled devil," saloon-keepers should earn an honest living "grading the streets or chopping wood" as Robson did when he first arrived in New Westminster. It was through these activities that Robson claimed he had earned the label "Honest John". Suter felt that the speech was confusing and disconnected, and could best be described as a "rant" by, "wonder of wonders," a "Minister of State".<sup>19</sup>

Robson embraced all the various temperance organizations in their work, but seems to have been most closely allied with the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, probably as the result of the involvement of both family relations and church

<sup>18</sup> *Colonist*, 4 January 1885, 3. See further examples of Robson delivering lectures to the Church of England Temperance Society (*Colonist*, 13 July 1887), to the members of the Epworth League (*Colonist*, 19 February 1891, 5), and to members of the Temperance Alliance (*Colonist*, 10 May 1888, 4).

<sup>19</sup> *Mainland Guardian*, 6 December 1884, 3.

acquaintances.<sup>20</sup> Organized at the end of 1874 in Cleveland, Ohio, the WCTU grew rapidly following the election of Frances E. Willard as its president in 1879. In February 1883, it was suggested at a meeting of the Victoria Blue Ribbon society that Miss Willard be invited to Victoria during her lecture tour of the American Pacific coast.<sup>21</sup> Arriving in Victoria, Willard, accompanied by her organist and fellow lecturer Anna Gordon, delivered her first address in the Methodist Church. Under banners declaring “Soldiers of a noble cause bearing Freedom’s flag unfurled” and “O, Haste, we pray, the Glorious Day, when temperance rules the World,” Robson offered an address of welcome. Labelling it as “one of the most pleasing events of his life,” he welcomed “the gifted lady who came as a champion of the noble work that had for its object the advancement of the cause of temperance,” wishing her “heaven speed ... in your God like mission.” Following several mass meetings, including one with the children’s Band of Hope temperance group, Willard and Gordon assisted in organizing a British Columbia Temperance Convention.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> As noted above, Robson’s sister-in-law, Emma Ida, David’s wife, was a leader in the movement that included the wife of Robson’s nephew, Frederick Horace. In the mid 1880s, Robson’s younger sister, Isabella, had moved to New Westminster with her husband, a retired Methodist pastor. Their son, Thomas D. Pearson, was a business partner of Robson’s. Pearson’s wife, Eleanor, was the daughter of Charles George Major, a leading member of the Methodist church, who had arrived in the colony in 1859 with John Robson. Charles John Robson, son of Robert Robson and nephew of John Robson also lived in New Westminster. A quick glance at the Minutes of the British Columbia Woman’s Christian Temperance Union reveals that all these individuals were involved in the movement. *Minutes of the British Columbia Woman’s Christian Temperance Union* (New Westminster: 1887), CIHM A02588; and *Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of British Columbia* (Victoria: 1890), CIHM A02589.

<sup>21</sup> *Colonist*, 13 February 1883, 3. For a history of the WCTU and its role in the woman’s movement see Ruth Bordin, *Women and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981). The WCTU in Ontario is examined in Sharon Anne Cook, *“Through Sunshine and Shadow” The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, Evangelicalism, and Reform in Ontario, 1874-1930* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995). For a further description of the role of Canadian women in the WCTU see the chapter titled “The Canadian Leaders” in Frances W. Willard, *Women and Temperance: or, The Work and Workers of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union* (Hartford, Connecticut: Park Publishing Co., 1883), 598-603.

<sup>22</sup> *Colonist*, 1 July 1883, 3 and 4 July 1883, 3.

Robson's welcome to WCTU dignitaries was repeated three years later in 1886 when Letitia Youmans, the president of the Canadian WCTU arrived to participate in the annual British Columbia Temperance Convention. In her autobiography published in 1893, Youmans related her arrival in Victoria from San Francisco:

According to previous instructions, we remained quietly on board until the arrival of a deputation from the W.C.T.U. We were taken to the pleasant home of the Hon. John Robson, who, with his excellent wife, had volunteered to entertain us. The Union Jack was floating over his house, and on my remarking that it did me good to see the old flag again, our host replied, "That flag goes up only on state occasions, such as the arrival of the President of the W.C.T.U." His never-failing fund of wit and good humor made our visit a very pleasant one.

The importance that Mrs. Youmans assigned Robson in the temperance movement in British Columbia is evident in her description of Frances Willard's previous visit:

Miss Willard had preceded me ... and had taken the capital by storm, and planted the white ribbon standard. A reception had been tendered her, in which all the members of the Legislature were personally invited; quite a number signed the pledge, among the rest, our host, Hon. John Robson. He put on the white ribbon, and was accustomed to say he was one of Miss Willard's converts. The stand that he then took for temperance was of the greatest importance in the Province, as he held the twofold office of Minister of Education and Provincial Secretary.<sup>23</sup>

Frances Willard's biographer maintains that the success of the WCTU was the result of her ability to define temperance as being within women's sphere of influence. Using the slogan of "Home Protection" she was able to promote such diverse and greater causes as female suffrage and women's rights by attaching them to the temperance movement.<sup>24</sup> When asked what she would prefer first, suffrage or prohibition, Willard replied: "I will take suffrage for women first, for if we once get woman

<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Letitia Youmans, *Campaign Echoes. The Autobiography of Mrs. Letitia Youmans, The Pioneer of the White Ribbon Movement in Canada* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1893), 284-285.

<sup>24</sup> Ruth Bordin, *Frances Willard: A Biography* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 11.

suffrage the liquor traffic will soon look as if all the dynamite of Hell's Gate shaft had exploded under it."<sup>25</sup> Robson expressed a similar sentiment in 1883 when he introduced the American temperance lecturer Mrs. Judith Foster by proclaiming "Woman's ballot will be the death-knell of our [liquor] traffic."<sup>26</sup>

However, in contrast to Willard's move towards an emphasis on women's rights, Robson's primary concern remained on the moral reclamation of the individual and curing the ills of society that were created by intemperance. During an 1873 legislative debate Robson had expressed opposition to female suffrage, asserting that "respectable women didn't want the right" and that a proposed Woman's Rights Bill was of a "dangerous and revolutionary character" designed to "disturb the matrimonial fabric and make fraud easy."<sup>27</sup> But a decade later, Robson became an advocate of female suffrage and women's rights as he realized the benefit of employing women's sphere of influence in the cause of temperance.<sup>28</sup> Alcohol was a hindrance to that control over self that was necessary both for economic success as well as for spiritual salvation. Robson's scriptural justification came from Romans 14:21 wherein it is asserted, "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is

<sup>25</sup> *Colonist*, 5 September 1886, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Colonist*, 27 June 1884, 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Colonist*, 12 February 1873, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Robson did not, as has been suggested, bring forward a private member's bill advocating female suffrage almost every year from 1885 onward. It was only in the 1887 and 1888 sessions that he actually presented such a bill. He did however vote in favour of private member's bills as presented by Simeon Duck and J.C. Brown, as well as amendments to the Public School Act allowing women the right to vote for school trustees. See Roy, "John Robson" in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 917. *Colonist*, 17 February 1887, 1; 12 March 1887, 1; 25 April 1888, 1 and 26 March 1892, 8.

offended, or is made weak.” For temperance advocates such as Robson, both drunkards and those engaged in the trafficking of liquor were denied the Kingdom of God.<sup>29</sup>

Robson’s intimate involvement with the temperance movement resulted in oratorical sarcasm in the provincial legislature, not only by opposition members, but even occasionally by his own government colleagues. When, during the 1888 legislative session the leader of the opposition, Robert Beaven, taunted him as putting himself forward as a “champion of morality,” Robson unapologetically admitted to throwing “any influence he might possess in the scale of moral reform.”<sup>30</sup> In responding to the throne speech in 1889, Beaven referred to trips made by government ministers to Ottawa costing taxpayers from \$1000 to \$1700, “but the provincial secretary [Robson] had reduced it to \$500, no doubt on account of his strict temperance principles.”<sup>31</sup> Another opposition member, Charles Semlin, during legislative debate in 1888 chided Robson for bringing forward a bill restricting liquor sales as a private member as opposed to introducing it as a government measure. He argued that if Robson’s government colleagues disagreed with the measure, then Robson should resign. Moreover, referring to a private dinner held at the Driard Hotel the previous evening, Semlin implied that Robson may have abandoned his temperance principles. A member of the government, James Baker, teased Robson and generated considerable laughter when he facetiously

<sup>29</sup> A recent examination of domestic reforms sees three waves of reform taking place in British Columbia. The first wave, led by Amor de Cosmos and John Robson, took place during the 1860’s and early 1870’s and was defined by new property rights being conferred on women and a reorganization of inheritance rights for children. According to the author, the second wave during the 1880’s and 1890’s was led by the attorney general and later Premier, Theodore Davie, resulting in an expansion on married women’s rights. A final wave placing additional maintenance obligations on married men and extending inheritance rights for women and children occurred from 1900 to 1922. Based on the fact that Robson altered his opinion in regard to female suffrage, further study is needed to determine if he may be regarded as instrumental in the second reform wave as well. Chris Clarkson, *Domestic Reforms: Political Visions and Family Regulation in British Columbia, 1862-1940* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> *Colonist*, 15 February 1888, 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Colonist*, 6 February 1889, 3. It is interesting to note that at one point, possibly during the 1870’s, a cask of beer was placed in the lobby of the legislative buildings known as the “Birdcages”. Members so inclined would leave the hall for a drink and chalk it up against their name on a board. *Colonist*, 7 February 1897, 6.

rose to defend him. In a comment that could be taken in two different ways, he asserted that he had been a member of the dinner party in question and could assure the House that Robson “had his private bottle”. What Baker failed to mention was that in accordance with Robson’s temperance beliefs, that “private bottle” likely contained ginger ale.<sup>32</sup>

The fact that Robson felt it necessary to bring forward temperance legislation as a private bill as opposed to a government measure reflects not only the strength of the anti-temperance forces but also the composition of the provincial legislature. Rather than being organized along party alignments, the legislature was composed of independent members, loosely coalesced into government and opposition groupings. The votes of individual members could be swayed, particularly on matters of a social nature. It was necessary for the government, of which Robson was a dominant member, to exercise caution in order to avoid the defeat of any measure, which in turn could result in a want of confidence. To prevent such an occurrence, temperance or suffrage measures were brought forward either as private bills or took the form of amendments to related legislation debated in the Committee of the Whole.

In the case of his 1888 private bill, Robson noted the number of petitions that had been presented to the Legislature in favour of temperance and argued that the use of liquor was “the cause of nine-tenths of the crime and misery in the world.” Although he personally favoured prohibition, his proposed legislation advocated what he described as a more “moderate” approach of offering local communities the right to approve any licensed facility. Regulations would be put in place to deny the sale of liquor to “minors or habitual drunkards”. Licensing fees would be increased and the hours of sale, particularly on Sunday, would be limited. The opposition argued that by raising the licensing fees the bill was in reality a money bill which could only be brought forward as

<sup>32</sup> Colonist, 11 April, 1888, 1. In a letter to the editor of the *Vancouver World*, Robson complained of inaccuracies in the reports of a banquet he attended. “If it were not for the fact that I drank all the toasts in ginger ale, one might suspect that it was not all the reporter’s fault.” John Robson to John Campbell McLagan, 20 January 1892, John Robson Collection BCA.

a government measure. In spite of Attorney-General Theodore Davie's argument to the contrary, the Speaker ruled that as one of the bill's clauses provided for an appropriation of public revenue, it was not properly introduced and was therefore out of order.<sup>33</sup>

While Robson, in this instance, failed to pass temperance legislation, he was still able to employ his position in the government as Provincial Secretary to subtly advance the cause.<sup>34</sup> This sometimes involved acting as a moral guardian, monitoring employees of the provincial government, and thus mirroring his position of elder in his church. For example, in March 1888 he asked his brother Ebenezer to "find out quietly for me how Kaye, teacher of South Cedar school is behaving; I mean morally. I have heard rumours about his gambling, drinking and cohabiting with women."<sup>35</sup> Earlier in April 1885 Robson as Provincial Secretary wrote to J. Bowron, government agent:

Sir; It has been represented in a confidential communication to the Government that the ferryman at Soda Creek is habitually intoxicated – thereby endangering the lives of passengers – and spends much of his time in selling liquor to Indians.

I have to request you will enquire into the matter (probably by confidential correspondence with some reliable person in that vicinity), and withhold payment of the Government bonus towards said ferry until satisfied that it is properly managed.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *Colonist*, 8 March 1888, 4; 14 March 1888,1; 27 March 1888,1; and 5 April 1888,1.

<sup>34</sup> In this respect Robson can be compared to other British Columbia temperance advocates who had mixed success as they became adept at employing various methods to achieve their goals. A court held in New Westminster to grant liquor licenses was packed by members of the WCTU and passionately addressed by members of the clergy, resulting in the denial of licenses to two businessmen. *Mainland Guardian*, 18 September 1886, 3. When the directors of the B.C. Agriculture Society in Victoria met to open bids for the bar and food concessions at their next show they discovered a bid from the WCTU to donate \$100 if no liquor was sold on their grounds. The offer was rejected by a vote of 3 to 2. *Colonist*, 26 September 1886, 3.

<sup>35</sup> John Robson to Ebenezer Robson, 3 March 1888, Ebenezer Robson Collection BCA. Robson appears to have used family members and friends to gather information for him on different issues, likely believing the information would be more accurate than that obtained elsewhere. He asked David Robson, his brother and former partner in the *British Columbian* to look into the conditions of the jail at New Westminster and report back. John Robson to David Robson, 23 January 1892, John Robson Collection, BCA.

<sup>36</sup> John Robson to J. Bowron, 20 April 1885, Provincial Secretary Papers, BCA.

In the case of the revenue collector in New Westminster during the summer of 1888, Robson took a more forward approach, writing him directly:

It is with regret I have to inform you, that your conduct of late has not been at all satisfactory. The habit of tippling, against which I personally warned you some months ago, would seem to be growing upon you, and altogether too much of your time is taken up with matters inconsistent with, and to the neglect of your duty as a paid officer of the Government.

The situation with this particular gentleman did not end happily, as it was soon thereafter that Robson sent a letter to the New Westminster government agent directing that the collector be fired.<sup>37</sup>

Robson also worked towards the appointment of morally appropriate individuals, seeking assistance from local temperance advocates and religious leaders. In reply to correspondence from the Reverend A. Dunn he noted:

Yours of 5<sup>th</sup> instant received, and I note what you say re the fitness of Wren and the desire in certain quarters to head off rum.

The position is this:- Three names were presented some time ago for J.P. – viz Bulwer, Sim and Captain Thompson. Meanwhile Rev. Mr. Bryant wrote me confidentially, petitioning against Bulwer & Thompson on the rum line, and suggesting delay as long as I could, so as to afford an opportunity for the people to take action, and I now await the result.

Of course you will understand that in making such appointments we must either consult the Members for the District or alienate them altogether; and hence the difficulty of appointing Mr. Wren without any recommendation from the Members. If they could be got to recommend him I would only be too glad to submit his name, and, similarly, if the people most directly interested protest against Rummy J.P.'s I should be delighted.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> John Robson to T.R. Figg, 18 July 1888 and John Robson to Charles Warwick, 28 July 1888, Provincial Secretary Papers, BCA.

<sup>38</sup> John Robson to Rev. A. Dunn, Private and Confidential, 9 December 1891, John Robson Collection, BCA.

His well-known advocacy of temperance resulted in Robson receiving various requests for assistance. In November 1890, the Methodist minister in Port Essington in northern British Columbia asked Robson to send a constable to that community to put a stop to the sale of liquor:

There are persons living here [Port Essington] who almost constantly violate the law of the land by selling intoxicating liquor without licenses, not only to white men but to Indians. To-day I was called upon by one who intreated [*sic*] me to do what I could to put a stop to this illegal whiskey traffic, saying that property is in danger and perhaps life by the midnight orgies of so many foolish Indians &c. In no less than three different places were found broken whiskey bottles, broken by the revellers when pursued by the disturbed. The labels can be produced.<sup>39</sup>

As administrator of the Department of Education, Robson also utilized the school system to educate students on the evil of drink. In November 1883 he wrote to Adam Crooks, the Ontario Minister of Education:

The importance of introducing into the text-books in use in our common schools some sort of temperance physiology, some literature calculated to make the youthful mind acquainted with the chemical composition, character, and genesis of alcohol and its effects on the human system, is beginning to be felt here.

Indeed I am persuaded that the most effective way of reaching the great drink evil of our day is through the young, and I know of no better mode of doing this than by the judicious introduction of scientific temperance literature into the text-books.

Robson continued in his letter to note that his province often looked to Ontario and its more advanced education system for ideas, and wondered if temperance reform could

<sup>39</sup> Rev. D. Jennings to John Robson, 26 November 1890, John Robson Collection, BCA.

be promoted in British Columbia by the use of Ontario text-books.<sup>40</sup> By mid 1884 Robson was employing the services of his brother Ebenezer and the Methodist Reverend Cloverdale Watson to edit textbooks for use in British Columbia schools. Two temperance text books were sent to Ebenezer with the request that some chapters be incorporated into the Third and Fourth readers to be used in the school system. Robson explained to his brother that time was pressing as these new texts should be introduced following summer holidays and that he felt “the work to be one of such vital importance.”<sup>41</sup>

Robson did receive some support for his stance on temperance such as that from the “Alberni Band of Hope Workers and Members” in 1890, praising him “for his support and fearless statement on behalf of Temperance.”<sup>42</sup> But, in spite of such accolades, it was not until the 1891 session that Robson, as Premier of a newly elected government, felt confident enough to bring forward temperance legislation as a government bill. The result was the passage of “An Act respecting the Sale of Fermented and Spirituous Liquors” which was similar to the private bill that Robson had brought forward three years previously. Magistrates were given the power to declare any individual a “drunkard” if that person “by excessive drinking of liquor, misspends, wastes,

<sup>40</sup> John Robson to Hon. Adam Crooks. 30 November 1883, Provincial Secretary Papers, BCA. Crooks was the first Minister of Education in Ontario and had been instrumental in the passage of the Crooks Act in 1876 which regulated liquor licensing in that province. It is doubtful that Crooks read or responded to Robson’s letter. He suffered a mental collapse and by the end of 1883 was committed to an asylum. Robert M. Stamp, “Adam Crooks” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), Volume XI 1881-1890, 220-223.

<sup>41</sup> John Robson to Ebenezer Robson, 5 June 1884 and 9 June 1884, Ebenezer Robson Collection BCA. An example of the type of text book created to advocate temperance in the school system is William Nattress, *Public School Physiology and Temperance*. (Toronto: William Briggs, 1893). This work was authorized for use by the Ontario Education Department and went through numerous editions. The volume is broken down into various chapters describing the functions of the different parts of the human body – The Bones, The Muscles, The Skin, Circulation, etc. Each chapter concludes with a description of the effect of alcohol on that part of the body. In the case of the skeleton for example the student is warned that it will stunt his growth. “Neither the drinking of alcohol in any of its many forms, nor the using of tobacco in any way, is a manly act, nor does either help in any sense to promote the growth and development of our bodies.” Nattress, 38.

<sup>42</sup> Wm. Smith to John Robson, 3 March 1890, John Robson Collection, BCA.

or lessens his estate, or greatly injures his health, or endangers or interrupts the peace and happiness of his family.” Once declared a “drunkard” that individual would be prohibited from purchasing liquor. Anyone selling liquor to such an individual was subject to a fine. The drunkard could apply to have his designation rescinded, but his or her spouse would have to be made aware of the petition and give their consent. In addition, the Act made it unlawful for any individual to furnish liquor to any intoxicated person, providing a fine of “not less than twenty dollars nor more than fifty dollars.” With the exception of providing liquor to bona fide travellers or hotel and restaurant guests with their meals, the sale of liquor was also prohibited from eleven o’clock Saturday night to one o’clock Monday morning.<sup>43</sup>

The Liquor License Regulation Act, as it came to be known, faced legal challenges from the liquor retailers, particularly over the jurisdiction of the provincial government to regulate their trade. This was resolved in the government’s favour by a decision of the British Columbia Supreme Court in early 1892.<sup>44</sup> But Robson was also forced to defend his Act in the 1892 Legislative session when an attempt was made to amend the business hours for the sale of spirits. It was proposed that saloons would be required to close Saturday night at twelve o’clock, but could re-open at seven o’clock Sunday morning. However, during Sunday they would be closed during the usual hours that Church services were held, which was from ten o’clock in the morning to one o’clock in the afternoon and from six o’clock to nine o’clock in the evening. When Robson rose in the Legislature to enter into the debate, it was reported that “he received undivided attention, as it was well understood that he felt a deep interest in the question.” Robson noted that the Act had only been in effect for a short period, and deserved a fair trial before it was altered. Moreover, he felt that it was a slur upon the community of church

<sup>43</sup> *Colonist*, April 15, 1891, 2; 17 April 17, 1891, 2 and 6.

<sup>44</sup> See *Colonist*, 10 January 1892, 6; 19 February 1892, 3; and 21 February 1892, 6. It is interesting to note how the “Licensed Vintner’s Association” attempted to evade the legislation. *Colonist*, 26 February 1892, 3. Saloon owners employed varying arguments against the closure of bars on Sunday. One argument was that the “closure would be productive of much evil” as individuals would simply buy an excessive amount of “intoxicating drink” on Saturday, take it home and “thus bring evil into the family.” *Colonist*, 10 February 1885, 3.

attendees to stop the sale of liquor during church hours. The implication was that those who went to church would spend the remainder of the day in saloons. He also pointed out that the number of drunks appearing in Monday morning Court following implementation of the Act had dropped significantly. The amendment over the hours of liquor sales was defeated, but credence is given to Robson's cautious approach to temperance legislation when it is realized that the majority of those voting in favour of the amendment were government supporters, including all four members of Robson's cabinet.<sup>45</sup>

Robson's personal commitment to temperance was unwavering. His religious background coupled with his support given to the various temperance societies indicates his desire for total prohibition. However, as much as Robson was motivated as a private individual to achieve such a goal, as a businessman and politician it was necessary for him to be pragmatic. He would accept advertisements in his newspaper for liquor and avoid blatant condemnation of the liquor traffic in his editorials, while at the same time copying news items from other journals in support of temperance. He would support temperance societies, deliver lectures on the evils of "the distilled devil", monitor government employees and revise textbooks in accordance with temperance principles, but he would not jeopardize his governmental position by advocating complete prohibition. The fact that he was frozen out of the cabinet in the first provincial Assembly by Amor De Cosmos and George A. Walkem likely played a role in Robson's thinking. So did the realization that he would probably have a better opportunity of advancing temperance ideals from within the government than from without. For Robson the question of temperance came to exemplify the tension between his religious beliefs and political reality. As we shall see, this dichotomy between Robson the Presbyterian

<sup>45</sup> *Colonist*, 8 April 1892, 8 and 9 April 1892, 2. The Executive consisted of Robson as Premier and Provincial Secretary, Forbes George Vernon as Commissioner of Lands and Works, John Herbert Turner as Minister of Finance and Agriculture, Theodore Davie as Attorney General and Charles E. Pooley as President of the Council. In contrast to the debate on liquor control legislation, it is interesting to note the ease by which an act prohibiting the sale of tobacco to minors passed through the legislature. *Colonist*, 18 February, 1891, 2.

Church elder and Christian idealist and Robson the ambitious businessman and politician was apparent in other aspects of his life as well.

## Chapter 5.

### Sabbath Observance and Community Morality

Whether it was the Shorter or Larger version of the Westminster Catechism that their Presbyterian father required them to recite before they received their porridge, the young John Robson and his siblings would be well aware of the answer to the question “What is the Fourth Commandment?” It was to “Remember the Sabbath-Day, to keep it holy.” In addition, they knew that the Sabbath was to be “sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days; and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God’s worship, except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy.”<sup>1</sup> Robson appears to have obeyed the Fourth Commandment throughout his life. Even when travelling, he took the time to respect the Lord’s Day, noting in his diary the churches that he attended.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, <http://www.presbyterian.ca>. For a description of the Sabbath question see Paul Laverdure, “Canada’s Sunday: The Presbyterian Contribution, 1875-1950” in *The Burning Bush and a Few Acres of Snow: The Presbyterian Contribution to Canadian Life and Culture*, ed. William Klempa (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1994), 83-99. Also note Paul Laverdure, *Sunday in Canada: The rise and fall of the Lord’s Day*. (Yorkton, Saskatchewan: Gravelbooks, 2004) for the period after 1900. Christopher Armstrong and H.V.Nelles, *The Revenge of the Methodist Bicycle Company: Sunday Streetcars and Municipal Reform in Toronto, 1888-1897* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Limited, 1977) describes the numerous issues surrounding the running of Sunday streetcars.

<sup>2</sup> For example, on his trip back to Ontario in 1878 in connection with his position of Paymaster and Purveyor with the Canadian Pacific surveys, he noted on Sunday, 17 March 1878, while in Perth that he attended “St. Andrew’s Church in morning & Free Church in evening.” Later in Sarnia he notes “Went to Presbyterian Church in the morning & Methodist Church in evening.” In the fall of 1878 on a trip to Kamloops, he spent the Sabbath in Yale, writing “Arrived at Yale – went to English church to hear Rev. Mr. Murray.” John Robson Diary. 1878. Formerly in possession of Mrs. J. D. Hunter. Copy in possession of author.

For Robson, observance of the Sabbath represented civilization in a frontier environment. Moreover, Robson linked Sabbath observance to the maintenance of moral standards within the community as well as to what he regarded as a demonstration of the supremacy and dominance of the British race. Unlike the cause of temperance, which he tended to avoid editorially, he felt compelled to rationalize and offer a defence of Sabbath observance in his newspaper. Reflecting his position as church elder, Robson would assume the role of providing direction for community morality in his support of such organizations as the Young Men's Christian Association.

In early 1862, Robson levelled criticism at Governor James Douglas for treating "the whole Sabbath question with the utmost supreme indifference". In fact, as far as the editor of the *British Columbian* could discern, with the partial exception of the city of New Westminster, there was an "almost universal disregard of the Sabbath throughout the Colony". Business transactions, gaming and all sorts of other activities were engaged in by citizens, much to the disgrace of the colony and more particularly to a British governor such as Douglas who professed Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Robson pointed out that when the establishment of the mainland colony of British Columbia was proclaimed in November 1858, English law was applicable, in the absence of any local legislation. He then cited at length from the appropriate English statutes:

For as it [Profanation of the Lord's Day] is deemed by the best authorities on religious subjects to be a violation of the Divine law, under the new as well as the old dispensation, so there is a notorious indecency and scandal in permitting any secular business to be publicly transacted on that day in a country professing Christianity: and it is found in fact that a corruption of morals usually follows its profanation. ... It humanizes by the help of conversation and society the manners of the lower classes, which would otherwise degenerate into a sordid ferocity and savage selfishness of spirit. It enables the illustrious workman to pursue his occupation in the ensuing week with health and cheerfulness; it imprints on the minds of the

<sup>3</sup> Ebenezer Robson in his diary complained of the failure of government officials to enforce the Sunday closure in Yale in April 1859. When he met with a refusal to close the post office on Sunday, he lamented: "How can we get the people to observe the Sabbath when magistrates and public offices make it a common day of secular business?" Ebenezer Robson, "Diary", Tuesday, 5 April 1859. Ebenezer Robson Collection, BCA.

people that sense of their duty to God, so necessary to make them good citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Robson noted that the law reflected the importance of the Sabbath as a religious institution. However, it was also important as a secular institution, offering rest and restoration for the 'lower classes' in order for them to become better citizens. Avoiding the religious aspect, he argued that the question fell within the purview of a public journalist such as himself. He concluded by challenging Governor Douglas either to require the magistrates to enforce the English law or to proclaim a good local Sabbath law.<sup>5</sup> The Governor's answer came six months later with a government proclamation asserting that as a result of doubts being raised, the English Sunday laws were in force in the colony. Robson expressed satisfaction, but noted that the law must now be enforced. He concluded, "Taking a deep interest in this subject, we shall closely and anxiously watch the action under this law of those who should be 'a terror to evil-doers, and a praise and protection to those that do well'."<sup>6</sup>

The editor returned to a discussion of the Sabbath less than a year later, in July 1863, with an editorial titled "Gambling and Sabbath Desecration in Cariboo". Robson claimed that it was largely on the "Holy Sabbath" that these gambling "blacklegs" were "plying their illegal art", usually under the direct observation of such government officials as Judge Matthew Begbie and Commissioner Peter O'Reilly. Maintaining that while individuals are prone to point to California as an example of "immorality and outlawry", Robson had "no hesitation in asserting that in respect to general morality, to Sabbath observance, and to the evil of which we write, California will put us to the blush." Lamenting the "moral tone of that important portion of our community", he asserted, "The

<sup>4</sup> *British Columbian*, 16 January 1862, 2.

<sup>5</sup> *British Columbian*, 16 January 1862, 2.

<sup>6</sup> *British Columbian*, 6 September 1862, 1 and 2.

fact is, under the present semi-civilized, inoperative Government, the people are rapidly degenerating in moral sentiment, becoming less British in every respect.”<sup>7</sup>

Four years later, in 1867, Robson again served as moral guardian when his attention was drawn to an article in a Monday edition of the *Cariboo Sentinel* wherein a programme of sparring, singing and dancing was described as having taken place “last night”. To Robson’s editorial dismay, “The ‘last night’ alluded to was *Sunday night!*”

What a commentary upon the moral sentiment of the Cariboo! Is it surprising that, when the laws of God are thus openly trampled upon, the laws of man fare no better? Where were the representatives of our boasted British law when that entertainment, of doubtful propriety on any day, was being given in the most public way, and within a stone’s-throw of the halls of justice, on the Sabbath-evening? Would such things have been permitted even in the early days? Whither are we drifting?

Depend upon it, we have no solid grounds for expecting prosperity as a people while both rulers and ruled manifest such gross looseness in respect of fundamental moral principles. Holding, as we do, as a nation, that “Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people,” what can we expect that but lawlessness and crime, commercial depression, political licentiousness and national misfortune shall blight this magnificent young colony, as the legitimate fruit of unblushing disregard of the laws of Him by whom “Kings rule and Princes decree Justice”?<sup>8</sup>

Further evidence of Robson’s personal commitment to the Sabbath was provided in 1869 when he assumed the position of editor of the *Daily British Colonist*. Part of his conditions of employment by D.W. Higgins, the owner of the paper, was that he would be able to observe the Sabbath. The days of publication were altered accordingly. As was explained to the paper’s readers:

We are impelled to this by a desire to avoid the performance of work on the Sabbath day, which is involved by the publication of a paper on Monday morning. In the Sunday morning issue all the mechanical labor is performed on Saturday, and we are convinced that upon the lower

<sup>7</sup> *British Columbian*, 25 July 1863, 2.

<sup>8</sup> *British Columbian*, 25 September 1867, 2.

consideration of convenience, a Sunday morning issue will prove more acceptable to the bulk of our readers than the late arrangement.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to the opening of the first Legislative Assembly of the new province of British Columbia, Robson called for a local Sabbath law, believing that it would be good “morally, religiously, mentally, physically, economically, [and] politically.”<sup>10</sup> When such a Sabbath Observance bill was brought before the 1873 Legislature there appeared to be agreement on the part of the members to respect the Sabbath, but disagreement as to which activities should be prohibited. It appeared more convenient for members to leave matters as they stood, and, as the English Sabbath laws were presumed to remain in force, the bill was quietly forgotten.<sup>11</sup> This attitude on the part of the legislative members appears to have continued into the 1880’s, particularly as no clear consensus could be reached as to what activities should be sanctioned or denied. In the 1888 legislative session a private bill for the “Better Observance of the Lord’s Day” resulted in considerable debate. In answering a member who claimed that such a law was outmoded, Robson proclaimed:

The All-wise Creator had so constituted man and beast that they required one day in seven as a day of rest, and had instituted and enforced the Sabbath in their interest, for their good. In our own motherland the subject had been one that had given rise to extensive investigation by parliamentary and other commissions, and the uniform verdict was that Sabbath was good for man and beast, and it ill became us, with our limited experience, to set ourselves up as wise above all others, and, with rash and sacrilegious hand, brush aside as bigoted rubbish those

<sup>9</sup> *Colonist*, 31 July 1869, 2. Robson’s sabbatarian legacy remained with Victoria for over a century as the *Colonist* maintained this publication schedule until 1980, when it was amalgamated with the *Victoria Times*. In 1890, John Charlton, a Presbyterian elder, federal member of Parliament and champion of the Lord’s Day on the national level, criticized the publication of newspapers on Sunday, singling out the *Victoria Colonist* and the *Vancouver News-Advertiser*. *Colonist*, 6 March 1890, 1. The *Colonist* responded in an editorial pointing out that more work was done on Sunday producing a Monday morning’s paper than a Sunday morning’s paper, and that to be consistent Mr. Charlton should “not touch Monday morning’s paper with a pair of tongs”.

<sup>10</sup> *Colonist*, 14 January 1872, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Colonist*, 29 January 1873, 3 and 6 February 1873, 3.

institutions which really lay at the foundation of Britain's greatness and influence among the nations.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of Robson's oratory, the bill was defeated, but the issue was revisited in the 1891 Legislative session with two separate bills being advanced. The first bill brought forward was defeated at second reading by a vote of sixteen to fourteen.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps encouraged by the closeness of the vote, Robson himself introduced a second bill later in the session. This bill provided that all businesses would be closed on Sunday, excepting apothecaries, chemists, hotels and restaurants. No person should do any worldly labour on the Lord's Day or sell any wares, except for milk. No one should engage in shooting or carry firearms on a Sunday except for the military, the police or Indians. Sunday excursions by steamboats or railway for amusement or pleasure, or to go and return on the same day by the same steamboat or railway, would be unlawful.<sup>14</sup> The two bills generated considerable public discussion as well as letters to the editor and a "Monster Petition" in opposition to Sunday closures. The general theme of both the petition and the letters concerned religious freedom. The preamble to the petition noted the 1858 declaration of Queen Victoria which declared that no religious faith should be favoured, molested or disquieted and "that all shall alike enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the law." It then continued:

We, the undersigned, citizens of British Columbia, twenty one years of age or more, believing that religious liberty is the natural right of all men, and in regard to religious faith and observances they should be allowed to follow the dictates of conscience, do earnestly pray your honorable body not to pass any Bill concerning Sunday, or the Lord's Day, or any other

<sup>12</sup> *Colonist*, 18 April 1888, 1 and 4. For an examination of Sabbatarianism in Britain see John Wigley, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Sunday* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980)

<sup>13</sup> *Colonist*, 12 February 1891, 2 and 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Colonist*, 4 March 1891, 5.

religious rite, ceremony or observance, which would interfere with the rights or religious freedom of ANY of Her Majesty's subjects.<sup>15</sup>

It is not certain if the expression of such public opinion or the fact that Robson's Sunday Bill was brought in late in the session influenced the legislators. However, after some debate regarding the exemptions, the bill was effectively killed in the Committee of the Whole.<sup>16</sup> Robson himself may have felt partially vindicated by the fact that he had secured passage of his Liquor Licence Regulation Act during this session, which did provide for the closure of liquor establishments on the Sabbath.

In his advocacy of the fourth commandment, Robson was quite aware that the goal of community morality could not be achieved by simply observing the Lord's day or attending church. Lynne Marks, in her review of Canadian church periodicals, notes that one of Christianity's biggest concerns during this period was to engage young men in the activities of the church and to assist them in avoiding inappropriate choices.<sup>17</sup> Robson mirrored his church's concern for young men being led astray. As a father, his concern included the future of his seventeen-year-old eldest son, lamenting, "This is a wretched place for a boy of his age. It seems difficult to keep him out of company one would rather not see him in."<sup>18</sup> In an 1874 editorial titled "Juvenile Depravity," Robson vividly described what he labelled the "social monster growing up in our midst."

Boys not out of their teens, nay, boys not into their teens, indulge in all the vices of ripe rascality. The bleared eye, the hard, prematurely old expression of countenance, the listless shuffling gait, the cigar in the mouth, the oath on the lips, the fumes of alcohol on the breath, are the too frequent evidences that the boy in years and all the better attainments has become a man in all that is bad. Youth has withered ere it bloomed. The physical system is sapped, dried, poisoned. The moral system, nipped by the early frosts of crime, is blistered and withered, and the

<sup>15</sup> *Colonist*, 4 March 1891, 5. For a selection of letters to editor, see *Colonist*, 17 March 1891, 6; and 22 March 1891, 3;

<sup>16</sup> *Colonist*, 16 April, 1891, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Lynne Marks, "A Fragment of Heaven on Earth'? Religion, Gender, and Family in Turn-of-the-Century Canadian Church Periodicals" *Journal of Family History*, 26, no. 2 (April 2001); 258.

<sup>18</sup> John Robson to Ebenezer Robson, 28 October 1872, Ebenezer Robson Collection, BCA.

seeds of death, moral and physical, promise an abundant harvest. On our streets, night and day, is this caricature of manhood to be met with. Enter the drinking saloon and you will find it there. Look into the gambling rooms and you will find it there.

The editor continued with an appeal to parents and the police to prevent youth from falling into “the ways of Death and Hell”, rooting out the juvenile depravity which “will inevitably so taint the moral atmosphere as to render Victoria unfit to raise families in.” He concluded by challenging the churches to lead a concerted effort “to improve the moral tone and save the youth of Victoria.”<sup>19</sup>

On re-entering the field of journalism in New Westminster in the fall of 1880, Robson continued to express his editorial concern over masculine immorality. In examining the situation regarding one convicted juvenile he suggested that the boy be administered “the cat” rather than spend time in jail among hardened criminals.<sup>20</sup> He also suggested that Mechanics’ Institutes and reading rooms be made more available as places where men could profitably spend their leisure time.<sup>21</sup>

The question of youthful male immorality reached a minor climax in the city of Victoria in the spring of 1884. Following the dismissal of charges by the police magistrate against a gambler and the discovery that city councillors had given instructions that such “sports” should not be prosecuted, local citizens expressed their displeasure. Robson took the occasion of attendance at a Blue Ribbon temperance meeting to allude “to the action of the city council and the schoolboy decision of the magistrate, and asked every man and woman in this city to stand by the gentlemen who are carrying on the warfare against gamblers.”<sup>22</sup> By the end of May, an enthusiastic mass anti-gambling meeting was organized to condemn “the Knights of the Green Cloth.” Robson expressed surprise that it was necessary to call such a meeting to

<sup>19</sup> *Colonist*, 18 October 1874, 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Dominion Pacific Herald*, 13 November 1880, 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Dominion Pacific Herald*, 15 December 1880, 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Colonist*, 4 May 1884, 3. For description of the case see *Colonist*, 3 May 1884, 3.

condemn the evil of gambling. "It would appear that we had been asleep, and were not aware that gambling was going on among us. It was therefore a good thing that people had been wakened up." He asserted that "gambling was a pernicious vice, and therefore they should all unite in putting it down." Expressing "alarm and amazement" that "gambling has been carried on in this city for many years" and applauding "the steps that have been taken to suppress this evil," Robson moved that the meeting offer its "hearty support" to any further action in the elimination of such activities.<sup>23</sup>

The concern over gambling and the fact that there existed little in the way of innocent amusement for young men gave Robson and others the impetus to organize a branch of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA).<sup>24</sup> At a large civic meeting, the honour of presenting the first resolution establishing the branch in Victoria fell to Robson:

*Resolved*, That the best interest of the community would be promoted by the formation of a Young Men's Christian Association, having for its object the spiritual, moral, mental, social and physical improvement of the young men of this city and those temporarily sojourning amongst us, and of all who, in seeking a new sphere of employment, are without home influence and care.

In support of the motion Robson noted that he thought that no one could argue against the necessity of such an organization, particularly as there was "melancholy evidence" that "Victoria was not as moral or as good as she ought to be." Warming to his topic, and taking on the mantle of church elder, Robson "spoke at length" on the topic of evil. He

<sup>23</sup> *Colonist*, 23 May 1884, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Originating in England in the mid-1840's the YMCA movement had spread to North America by the 1850's. For a background to the YMCA in Canada see Murray G. Ross. *The Y.M.C.A. in Canada: The Chronicle of a Century* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1951.) Attempts to organize a YMCA branch in Victoria in the early 1860's had failed. Robson first noted the YMCA as an organization in 1864 when the attempt was made to organize a chapter in New Westminster. Lauding its object of "moral and intellectual improvement" and noting its "broad non-sectarian principles," he gave the group his support. *British Columbian*, 16 October, 1864, 3 and 26 October 1864, 3. For the role played by libraries within the YMCA and Mechanics' Institutes in the moral development of British Columbia, see Heather Dean, "The Persuasion of Books': The Significance of Libraries in Colonial British Columbia," *Libraries and the Cultural Record* 46, No. 1 (2011): 50-72.

cited incidents of drunken boys yelling on the streets on Sunday evenings, and referred to whiskey selling and questionable games being conducted on the Sabbath. "Some of the flower of youth were ruined by the influences for evil that were among them." He went on to note "the number of hoodlum boys and prostitutes that there were in this city," and added:

Ladies cannot go to the post office, or to any public gathering at Beacon Hill, without being offended by the presence of brazen-faced lewd women, who parade themselves with more boldness, and in greater numbers, in proportion to the population, than in any community I know of.

Finally, he concluded by asserting that the YMCA would furnish a place where young men could spend their time among good influences, and that all Christians should assist in the endeavour. Robson's speech generated some interest, particularly among Victoria city councillors who took issue with his description of the immorality in their city. Councillor Wriglesworth went so far as to make "reference to tar and feathers and a rail with a man at each end."<sup>25</sup>

Robson continued to give his support to the YMCA, eventually being elected President and presiding over the opening of a newly furnished building in March 1890.<sup>26</sup> A "Week of Prayer" began in Victoria on Sunday, 8 November 1891, commencing with a special union service presided over by Robson as YMCA president. Through the auspices of the YMCA, clergy of the various denominations preached special sermons throughout the week for the benefit of young men. These included such topics as "The Choice of Companions"; "King Saul; a study for young men;" "Need of work among young men;" "The young man coming to himself;" and "Red Lights." Beginning with their common goal of assisting young males to benefit community morality, the YMCA also

<sup>25</sup> *Colonist*, 11 November, 1884, 3 and 14 November 1884, 2. *Colonist*, 14 November, 1884, 3. Robson later sued the *Victoria Standard* for its reporting of this particular Council meeting. *Colonist*, 28 November 1884, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Colonist*, 21 October 1886, 3; 16 October 1887, 4; 17 September 1889, 4; 20 September 1889, 4; 3 April 1890, 4; 9 October 1890, 5; and 10 September 1891, 5.

had the effect of bringing church leaders together in an ecumenical movement. By 1891 the clergy of the major denominations in Victoria, together with such interested individuals as Robson, were meeting in the rooms of the YMCA at an “all day convention” to discuss “a series of topics of vital influence upon the inner life of Christianity”.<sup>27</sup>

In the fall of 1891, the focal point and symbol for Robson and other citizens of Victoria regarding the city’s immorality came to be represented by the Standard Theatre. This business was purchased that spring by a Seattle businessman who proceeded to renovate the building by altering the stage and constructing sixteen private boxes and two proscenium boxes. Acts were brought in from San Francisco and while it was originally claimed that “The entertainment as a whole was clean variety, [*sic*] and well attended,”<sup>28</sup> this soon changed with the sale of liquor on the premises. A coroner’s jury in October attributed the death of one individual to “the pernicious custom of the Standard Theatre and other places supplying liquor to persons in a semi-intoxicated condition.”<sup>29</sup> Representatives of the WCTU were soon drawing up a petition describing various scenes of debauchery and demanding that the Standard’s liquor license be revoked. According to the petition “intoxicating liquors are sold to minors on the said premises” and:

common prostitutes are employed, whose business is to visit the boxes and, by taking indecent liberties with the men, and by lewdness, induce and coax the men to treat them to liquor, at 25 cents per drink. The said common prostitutes receive a percentage of the monies paid for the drinks which are sold in the above manner.

This was elaborated upon by another witness appearing before the Board of Licensing Commissioners who referred to the women that sometimes “appeared in tights,” and

<sup>27</sup> *Colonist*, 25 March 1891, 5. A listing of the clergy promoting and participating in the convention includes members of the Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist and Episcopal denominations.

<sup>28</sup> *Colonist*, 7 April, 1891, 5, and 14 April, 1891, 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Colonist*, 14 October 1891, 1.

acted as “box hustlers” who sat “on men’s knees, with their arms around them, and asking them to “gin up’.”<sup>30</sup>

The fight to close down the Standard Theatre, described by the *Colonist* as “the drams and the drama,” reached a climax at the end of January 1892. The WCTU’s representative, H. G. Hall, was able to utilize the services of a lawyer to prove that improper procedures had been followed in the transfer of the Standard’s liquor license from the previous owner. With the cancellation of their liquor license, the establishment was forced to close.<sup>31</sup> In a letter to Robson, the Methodist pastor Reverend James H. White noted that the cost incurred by Hall to close down the Theatre amounted to \$47.75, which divided among seven individuals amounted to \$6.85 each. If Robson could write a check for that amount, White would see that Hall received it. Robson’s response to White offers a partial summary of his feelings not only toward the evil of intemperance, but also toward his strong desire, through his church and organizations such as the YMCA, to achieve Sabbath observance and a responsible community morality:

It is with no small pleasure that I enclose you a cheque for my contribution towards shutting up the Standard Theatre. I would be very glad to contribute many times that amount towards closing all the whiskey mills in the country. I sincerely hope a good, solid organization may be formed for the purpose of handling such matters, including Sabbath observance, and providing ample funds for such purposes. I would most gladly be a contributor to such funds.<sup>32</sup>

Robson’s desire for Sabbath observance and his remarks such as those regarding the immorality that he witnessed in Victoria, as well as elsewhere, did earn him occasional opposition. This was certainly the case surrounding his comments regarding the need for the establishment of the YMCA and the response of Victoria city

<sup>30</sup> *Colonist*, 11 December, 1891, 5 and 29 December 1891, 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Colonist*, 23 January 1892, 3 and 26 January 1892, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Rev. Jas. H. White to John Robson, 27 January 1892, and John Robson to Rev. Jas. H. White, 28 January 1892, John Robson Collection, BCA.

councillors. However, as expressed in his above response to the Reverend White, Robson would continue to maintain that such actions were his moral responsibility.

## Conclusion

All individuals are bundles of complexity, and John Robson was no exception. He remained committed to his Presbyterian faith, but his beliefs appear to have been based more on the expected standards of his church than any individually held spiritual commitment on his part. Rather than the Methodist evangelicalism of his missionary brother, Robson adhered to the Scottish Presbyterian beliefs of his father, though the Calvinistic belief in predestination and the elect was tempered by the influence of the Free Church on Canadian Presbyterianism and the necessity for interdenominational co-operation on the settlement frontier. Arriving on the west coast as he approached middle age, Robson had already absorbed most of these concepts in Upper Canada. He retained political and family connections in Ontario and over the course of his career would remain receptive to ideas originating in the east.<sup>1</sup> However, Robson would also transplant and adapt these concepts to the unique geographical and social environment of British Columbia.

Along with other authors, Adele Perry, in her study of gender and race in colonial British Columbia, stresses the distinctiveness of settlement on British Columbia's gold rush frontier.<sup>2</sup> Most of the settlers arriving on the west coast in the period from 1858 to the mid-1860s were single white urban males looking to realize their fortune in the gold fields and then return home. The majority of these individuals, including Robson,

<sup>1</sup> Robson maintained a correspondence with family members in the east. He also appears to have been one of Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie few correspondents in British Columbia. Ormsby, *British Columbia*, 262.

<sup>2</sup> Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). See also: S.D.Clark, "Mining Society in British Columbia and the Yukon", in *British Columbia: Historical Readings*, W. Peter Ward and Robert A.J. Macdonald, eds. (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre Ltd, 1981), 215 – 231; Rodman Wilson Paul, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West 1848-1880* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963).

eventually admitted failure as gold seekers and then either left the region or sought other employment opportunities within the colonies. Perry notes that the result was the emergence of a predominantly white male society. There was, however, an inherent desire on the part of these men to replicate the society and civilization that they had left behind. This manifested itself in various ways, from assisted female immigration schemes to ensuring that one dressed properly for dinner.<sup>3</sup> For Robson, as a member of this masculine society, it was his religion and his faith that represented civilization and the society that he had left behind. It was his contention that man's belief in, and the worship of, a Christian God was the main force behind the transformation of wilderness into settlement. This belief was nurtured in Robson's youth when he assisted his father in establishing Presbyterianism in the developing settlement at Sarnia by aiding in conducting religious services and constructing a church. He continued with similar activities when he migrated to the colonies of British Columbia and Vancouver Island. It was obvious to Robson that it was necessary to spread God's word through the medium of missionaries, and he would support the call for the immigration of clergy to the west coast. However, he also held to his conviction that the actual physical manifestation and symbol of civilization on the frontier was the construction of a house of worship itself – the church.

In 1881, a correspondent of Robson's, the Reverend James Robertson, who was the Presbyterian Missionary Superintendent for Western Canada, stressed the necessity of a church building as affording "visibility and permanence" for the Christian faith. It was Robertson's contention that the visible presence of a church building and the sound of a church bell automatically augmented the moral life of a community, reminding the

<sup>3</sup> See Perry, *Edge of Empire*, 139-166, for an examination of female immigration schemes. Robson was appointed by Governor Seymour to the 1869 Legislative Committee for Assisted Female Immigration. Arthur Birch, the Colonial Secretary in New Westminster wrote to his brother in England that he and his companions wore "white ties every day at dinner, Holmes appearing in Uniform. This is one of the only ways of keeping up civilization in a place like this." Letter Arthur Birch to John Birch, New Westminster, 7 May 1864, cited in Charlotte Gray, *Canada: A Portrait in Letters 1800-2000* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2003), 159-161.

populace of their origins.<sup>4</sup> John Robson had already recognized this need on the west coast two decades earlier. In 1863, as treasurer for his congregation during the construction of the first Presbyterian church in New Westminster, Robson noted “the liberality and unanimity with which all, of every creed, have assisted each other in the important work of church building.” As Presbyterians had contributed towards the construction of churches of other denominations, Robson hoped that they in turn would support the building of this new church.<sup>5</sup> It was Robson’s desire to establish a civilizing presence in British Columbia that prompted him to assist in the construction of the first Methodist and then the first Presbyterian church in New Westminster in the 1860s, as well as to guarantee work on the new St. Andrew’s Church in Victoria in 1890. Indeed, as his financial resources improved during the later part of his career through land speculation, Robson readily contributed to the construction of churches throughout British Columbia. Evidence of the importance that Robson and others placed on the construction of such places of worship, as well as the necessity for the members of the sparse settler population to assist each other, is the fact that such contributions often crossed denominational boundaries.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Charles W. Gordon, *The Life of James Robertson: Missionary Superintendent in Western Canada* (Toronto: The Westminster Company, 1908), 181. In this biography of James Robertson, Charles W. Gordon (the novelist Ralph Connor) cites a letter from a missionary in which the change in attitude brought about by the construction of a church is described: “Before the church was built in this village only the decidedly religious people could be got to attend service. The store was open, the bar was full, the ordinary business of the week went on as usual. But the very day the church was opened all this was changed. The store closed up, the bar was empty of all except a few recognized and well-seasoned ‘toughs,’ the ordinary work of the week stopped, and many come to *church* who would not think of coming to the *service* in the shack. The silent appeal of that building with the Gothic windows was a more powerful sermon than any I had ever preached.” 181.

<sup>5</sup> *British Columbian*, 25 April 1863, 3.

<sup>6</sup> As the representative of the Anglican Cobble Hill congregation, John Nightingale wrote Robson requesting a donation towards the construction of their church. John Nightingale to John Robson, 28 November 1890, John Robson Collection, BCA. The Anglican Bishop George Hills noted that members of his denomination had subscribed monies to assist construction of the Methodist Church in Victoria. Cited in H.P.K. Skipton, *A Life of George Hills, First Bishop of British Columbia: 1909 manuscript*. Edited and annotated by the Reverend Sel Caradus, (Victoria, B.C.; Printorium Bookworks, 2009).

For Robson, as has been seen, it was adherence to the tenets of his religion that largely determined his concept of the relationship between church and state. It was also his religious beliefs that formed the foundation for his concept of the liberal order framework as defined by the historian Ian McKay. Robson regarded liberalism's bundle of rights including liberty, equality and property ownership as flowing from the Creator. This implied that these rights were immutable and could only be denied by God. It was Robson's interpretation of God's law that permitted him to violate certain individuals' liberties by bringing forward restrictive legislation regarding temperance and Sabbath observance.

A further outgrowth of the religious beliefs that Robson brought with him from Upper Canada was reflected in his advocacy of a non-sectarian school system, his opposition to grants to religious bodies, and his campaign to prevent the institution of an established church. These objectives were directed towards his desire to avoid religious controversy by preventing the importation of sectarian strife into British Columbia such as that created by clergy reserves or separate schools. Throughout his career, Robson would maintain that if any assistance or concession was given to one religious body, then in order to avoid controversy all should be treated in the same manner. His opinions were made clear in May 1892 when he received a request from his brother Ebenezer to assist in procuring a site for a Methodist college in New Westminster. Robson replied that any special treatment towards the Methodists would not be possible:

I duly received your letter of the 21<sup>st</sup> inst., and note its contents. It will be a difficult thing to do anything in the way of a college site. You see, the college will be denominational, and whatever we do for one denomination we must be prepared to do for all. However, I will see what can be done in the matter, but I fear it will have to wait until my return [from England].<sup>7</sup>

Robson was well aware that the geographical and financial difficulties faced by British Columbia's gold frontier made it difficult for the various religious organizations to prosper. Such obstacles faced by the west coast congregations were elaborated upon in

<sup>7</sup> John Robson to Ebenezer Robson, 23 May 1892. Ebenezer Robson Collection, BCA.

a letter written by the New Westminster Presbyterian minister Robert Jamieson to the *Canadian Presbyterian* in 1883. He drew attention to British Columbia's "very small settled population" and noted that "We have had occasionally a comparatively large population, but it has been very scattered, very heterogeneous, and very migratory." Pointing out that the entire "white population" of the province "would not make a 3<sup>rd</sup> or fourth rate town in Ontario – and that scattered over hundreds of miles," he asserted that "You cannot have churches without people." Jamieson's comments on the province's sparse population were well founded, particularly as his primary ministerial concern was directed towards the non-native population.<sup>8</sup>

This relatively small, scattered, heterogeneous and migratory population also affected the progress of religious denominations other than Jamieson's. There was no established church and no dominant denomination in British Columbia. Contradictory to what historian Edith Dobie referred to as an "aristocratic conservative tendency" existing in the province's religious life,<sup>9</sup> the response of the religious groups that were present was to act in concert to solve common societal problems. Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau in examining religious activities of colonial societies in eastern Canada note that "the greatest impact that the combination of religious pluralism and the inadequate funding of church institutions had was that it forged greater religious cooperation and unity than otherwise would have prevailed." They also note that "At the local denominational level, ... religious cooperation was a necessity for community endeavours, such as Sunday schools, temperance societies, charitable work and tract

<sup>8</sup> Jamieson's letter was in response to what he regarded as a misleading report by a deputy sent out to the west coast by the Canadian Presbyterian General Assembly. The letter is reprinted in the *Colonist*, 29 April 1883, 3. For the actual report see *Presbyterian Church of Canada Report of the Rev. Dr. Cochrane, Home Mission Committee.*, October 10, 1882, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church (Victoria, B.C.) 1866-1953. Microfilm, MS-1507 Reel A808, British Columbia Archives, Victoria, B.C. In 1881 British Columbia's entire population was 49,459, of which 25,661 was labeled Indian and half blood. By contrast the total population of Ontario in 1881 was 1,926,922. Toronto's population was 86,415. F.H.Leacy, ed., *Historical Statistics of Canada*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1883) A2-14; Riley Moffat, *Population History of Cities and Towns in Canada, Australia and New Zealand: 1861-1996* (Lanham, Maryland, and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2001), and *Canada Year Book 1905*, [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca).

<sup>9</sup> Dobie, "Some Aspects of Party History," 236.

societies.”<sup>10</sup> This appears to have also been the situation in British Columbia where religious organizations were forced to contend with a sparse male-dominated population located in a region characterized by difficult terrain and experiencing the “boom and bust” activities of the gold rush.<sup>11</sup> In November 1882, when David Higgins, owner and editor of the *Victoria Colonist*, made the observation that “a man’s religious opinions ought to be regarded as his own personal concern inasmuch as they have generally more to do with the next world than this,” he was confirming the degree of religious tolerance that came to be adhered to by west coast settlers such as Robson.<sup>12</sup>

Robson was well aware that the geographical and financial difficulties resulting from British Columbia’s gold frontier made it difficult for the various religious groups to prosper. In his editorials, he would therefore direct public opinion to act in the direction of a common interest untainted by any “national or religious bigotry.” In this connection, Robson, in an 1867 *British Columbian* editorial, drew attention to the equality, including ecclesiastical equality, that he believed existed within the British Columbia settler population. In referring to a dispute in Victoria’s newspapers over whether Governor Frederick Seymour in writing a letter of explanation to a Presbyterian minister was corresponding to someone “so far below him socially,” Robson commented:

This [situation] has led to a wordy war of angry personalities in both papers, in which some queer antiquated doctrines are propounded, and amusing codes of etiquette prescribed. Some of the disputants seem to think that they are living in Scotland, while others again imagine they are still vegetating under the very shadow of some venerable cathedral tower, where ecclesiastical red-tape has been in the ascendant for centuries. Poor fellows! Will no one rouse them up and inform them they are in the

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *Christian Churches and Their Peoples, 1840-1965: A Social History of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 17.

<sup>11</sup> It has been noted that not only did the population fluctuate in relation to the discovery of gold in different areas of British Columbia, but it also varied by seasons, as miners traded the colder climate of the interior for the milder winter weather in Victoria and New Westminster. See Megan Katherine Prins, “Seasons of Gold: An Environmental History of the Cariboo Gold Rush.” (MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> *Colonist*, 12 November 1882, 2. Higgins purchased the *Colonist* in 1866 and employed Robson as editor from 1869 to 1875. His comment was made during an editorial discussion of Robson’s alleged conversion from the Presbyterian to Methodist church.

Colony of British Columbia, far, far away in the northern regions of the Pacific Ocean? Wake up gentlemen and open your eyes to the fact that there is no State Church here – no dissenters – no aristocracy – no privileged classes – everyone’s “social status” regulated by his own talents or habits, or his or his neighbours’ likes and dislikes; and do try and realize the fact that the people of this Colony are not and will not be bound by the peculiar institutions or customs, politically, or socially or ecclesiastically of any one country on the face of the earth, to the exclusion of what may be deemed good in others.<sup>13</sup>

Robson himself demonstrated this equality as he united with the different denominations in order to seek solutions to discerned social evils. The “Week of Prayer” revival meetings, the Bible Society, the British Columbia Orphans’ Home, the YMCA and the numerous temperance organizations with which Robson was involved were largely ecumenical. Generated by the necessity to present a common front on moral issues, it was this mutual acceptance by the Protestant denominations, dictated by geography and a sparse transient population, that created the appearance of what has been labelled the province’s “unchurched” and “secular” attitude.

While John Robson was a Victorian patriarch, a journalist, a businessman and a politician, underlying his philosophy in each of these roles lay a strong under-current derived from his religion. He was an important participant in the political and economic history of British Columbia, and he did not, as suggested by the late nineteenth-century saying, “leave his religion behind him when he crossed the Rocky Mountains.” The story of his life and career is incomplete without an appreciation of the role played by his religious beliefs and behaviour. Furthermore, while John Robson was only one individual, our analysis of this aspect of his life suggests that a fuller understanding of British Columbia’s history could be attained by the examination of the religious beliefs and activities of his contemporaries.

<sup>13</sup> *British Columbian*, 20 April 1867, 3. *Colonist*, 10 April 1867, 3 and 12 April 1867, 2.

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