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Colportage in Canada



THE CALLING of the colporteur, though not under that name, was an early one in the Church, for in the beginning of the second century there was one, Quadratus, who "delivered the books of the Divine Gospel," and, later, Pamphilus (martyred in 309 A.D.) who distributed large supplies of the Scriptures. There is no doubt that in the early centuries manuscript copies of the Scriptures were scattered abroad, and in the fourth century Bibles were sold in Rome, Antioch, Milan and other important cities of the Empire. The invention of printing, and the subsequent publishing of the Bible or portions of it in more portable form, made it possible for the travelling merchants of Europe to carry the printed book amongst their wares, and the spread of the Word, even in the face of rigid prohibition by the ecclesiastical authorities of the time, brought life and light to many souls, and prepared the way for the fuller coming of the Reformation. There were such "packmen" amongst the Waldensians, and in France, Savoy, Piedmont, Hungary, Transylvania, England and in other parts of Europe, the precious wares were hawked by zealous salesmen: one of them in France, Philibert Hamblin, a friend of Palissy the Potter, deserves special mention. The idea of the setting apart of special agents as colporteurs was inspired by three banker brothers, the Messrs. Courtois, in Toulouse, who in their eagerness to spread the Word, employed such men to travel over Southern France, even to the Spanish frontier. These men had remarkable success, and the British and Foreign Bible

Society's agent in Paris, hearing of it, made a suggestion to the London Committee for the employment of such messengers in the service of the Society.

The first Bible Society colporteur was employed in 1827, to labour in the towns and villages along the Sea of Marmora. Since then, in addition to distribution through Churches, Missionary Societies and devoted friends, authorized and consecrated men have been sent out to spread the Word in accordance with the Society's fundamental principle "without note or comment", to avoid controversy or argument in the presentation of the book, and to commend it by a life of toil and sacrifice. It is to be noted that from the very beginning, the Society's policy has been to offer the Scriptures for sale—in the cheaper editions much below cost price—and only in exceptional circumstances to present them as free gifts.

British North America was indeed a field waiting for such labourers, and it requires no great degree of imagination to realize that in a country stretching almost four thousand miles from the Atlantic to the Pacific, slowly opening up to receive immigrants from many shores, the Society had indeed an ever-growing field of opportunity. In 1803, a man in Nova Scotia was forced to walk some sixty miles over the snow in order to obtain a Bible, and in the same Province the Society in Canada had its birth in 1807, though Ontario has the proud distinction of being the distributing centre for the first foreign translation sent out by the Society—the Gospel of St. John in the Mohawk tongue. As auxiliaries developed in Nova Scotia, Montreal, Kingston and Toronto, colporteurs and travelling agents were speedily employed.

In the paragraphs that follow, some attempt will be made to give an account of the growth and development of a work, now being carried on by some thirty-eight men and women colporteurs, which is so vital not only to Canada but to the world.

At the Ports of Entry

Halifax, Saint John and Quebec are the great ports for the reception of the stream of immigration as it flows from the British Isles and European lands. At the ports the

Society has specially selected agents, and is indeed indebted to the immigration, steamship and railway authorities for every facility to offer to each immigrant in his or her birth tongue a portion of the Word of God. The portions are offered to all alike, free of cost, generally Gospels or Epistles, and to the Jewish immigrants the Scriptures in Yiddish. Some of these agents are capable of addressing a word of welcome to the new-comers in their own speech, but even without that spoken word, each Scripture portion conveys in silence its own special welcome to men and women often lonely and bewildered as they go out not knowing whither they go.



Presenting Scriptures to New Canadians

In the Maritimes and Upper and Lower Canada

BEGINNING with Nova Scotia, colportage work is carried on energetically by colporteurs who penetrate its lonely places and pass over its hills and valleys and by its lakes and rivers sowing the Good Seed of the Word. In Cape Breton one who speaks the Gaelic tongue distributes the Word in that language to those who in the land of their adoption have not forgotten their birth speech, so typical of the mystery and romance of the far-famed Highlands. In other parts of the province, colporteurs travelling by motor, lose no opportunity of sowing the Good Seed. In New Brunswick, in its great port, Saint John, a Bible woman labours faithfully, and every part of the province is visited by colporteurs zealous in the service. As early as 1807 Bibles and Testaments were sent out to Prince Edward Island for distribution, and in that Auxiliary, in addition to a



A Motor Van in Ontario

depository where Scriptures can be obtained, its Board, alive to the requirements of the province, employs a colporteur agent from time to time. **Quebec**, the largest province in the Dominion, has been for over a century a field for labour, and the results of the distribution of the Scriptures in French have been evidenced in many a well authenticated case of sound conversion and of real appreciation of the truth of the Gospel. In this great province, as throughout the Dominion, the Indian



Amongst Lumbermen

tribes are not forgotten, and new editions of the Scriptures in Moose and Coastal Cree have recently been issued by the Society to meet their need for the Word of God. At one time an intrepid colporteur with a motor launch speeded along the St. Lawrence carrying the Gospel in written form. In the **Montreal** Auxiliary a faithful band of men and women work amongst English and French-speaking peoples, and many homes have been changed, and many hearts have proved the truth of the saying, "The entrance of Thy Word giveth light."

In **Upper Canada** the work is done most thoroughly by men who travel over a great part of Ontario even to the far north, whilst on a country road in the **Ottawa** auxiliary not so long ago a colporteur was pursued by wolves, showing that such perils still beset travellers, and that the work is not without its adventures. In **Western Ontario** colportage has been for years carried out by willing friends of the cause, and latterly a colporteur and van have been at work with excellent results.

But that does not exhaust the Society's efforts to reach men with the Word. A trusted agent who has the gift of tongues, visits lumber camps in Ontario and Quebec as each summer comes round, offering the Word in the vernacular to men who in their camps discuss thoroughly varied topics, including religion in its many forms. Surely such men need to have the Word that speaks of life in all its fulness.

Across the Prairies to the Pacific

EACH Auxiliary in Canada has control of its colportage and of the colporteurs within its territory. Without infringing this principle, the Western Auxiliaries rely for direction and selection of colporteurs on a committee, with a convener and secretary chosen by representatives of the Auxiliaries, to supervise the work. Bible distribution in the West dates from 1849, when Dr. David Anderson, the first Anglican Bishop of Rupert's Land, brought with him from England a supply of the Scriptures, which was quickly exhausted. So eager was he for the work that in the Red River Settlement at Fort Garry (now Winnipeg) a depot for the British and Foreign Bible Society was opened, and year by year supplies of Scriptures came over by the Hudson's Bay Company's boat for the Red River Settlement. That depot is now represented by a large well-equipped Bible House, the headquarters of the **Manitoba** Auxiliary, from which for many years colporteurs were sent out as the great West land developed, and before new lines of rail were laid, they speeded forward carrying the Gospel in written form, until it can be truthfully said that in twenty-five years as many copies of the

Scriptures have been distributed as there are inhabitants in the Prairie Provinces. At the outset, colportage work was most systematically undertaken. Wagons were sent out carrying equipment, including a tent with seating, which accommodated one hundred people; a folding organ; table; chairs; bed for the colporteur, and trunks containing Scriptures for sale. Notices were sent to every resident in the district, and night by night meetings were held commending the work of the Society and the Bible to those rugged pioneer souls who cleared and broke up lands which now produce a harvest which helps to feed the world.



A Colporteur on the Prairies

As new auxiliaries were formed in Saskatchewan and Alberta, the work was followed up with zeal. To-day, over the prairies, travelling mostly by horse and rig, colporteurs work in every province, many of them speaking the native tongues of the New Canadians, and bringing to many a home not only the precious Word, but the added joy of a visitor, capable of speaking to the new-comer in the speech of his native land, as one friend to another.

When new areas open up, colporteurs go in and possess the land. Already in the fertile Peace River territory a colporteur is at work, and developments in the Churchill area and in North Saskatchewan are eagerly watched.

The work of the Society began in **British Columbia** in 1863 when a trusted messenger of the Upper Canada Bible Society travelled by way of the Isthmus of Panama and commenced work in Vancouver Island, a Society being definitely formed in 1872. Work in this province, amidst the beauty of its eternal snows, its forests, lakes and rivers, thus proceeded from West to East. The Society has been greatly helped in the work of Bible distribution by the Churches and Missionary Societies, and for some time a Bible woman with considerable experience in Western cities has been working in Greater Vancouver, finding a varied field of service in a population which speaks some forty-two languages and in a city which bids fair to be one of the world's great ports. A colporteur with a motor van visits the scattered families of the province and invades lumber camps in the mighty forests.

Having reached the Pacific, the thought of the ever-increasing flow of life and trade from the West to the Far East, is brought forcibly to mind, and with it the spiritual and moral opportunities which present themselves to Canada as a nation through which one of the great trade routes of the world passes. The simple question arises, "Does colportage work in Canada fulfil a real purpose and meet a felt need?" Surely colportage is helping to make and to keep Canada Christian, and in a reading age, with illiteracy fast disappearing, this avenue of approach to the individual must ever be kept open and this means of grace offered to each and all in the Dominion. But this, for one supreme purpose, that Canada may not only trade with the Pacific Islands and China and Japan, but may also share the Gospel, in written as in every other form, with those of every nation and kindred and people and tongue, whose spiritual lives need to be nourished "by the sincere milk of the Word." Such is Canada's privilege and opportunity. Will you help by your gift?

Please send contributions and address all correspondence to
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In Canada and Newfoundland