

“STEPPING STONES TO SOCIALISM”:
THE POLITICAL DISSIDENCE OF PHILLIPS THOMPSON

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No Canadian resembles an English Pre-Raphaelite more than Phillips Thompson resembles William Morris. Both men were prolific writers, indefatigable lecturers, and committed socialists. Though Thompson was primarily a journalist and satirist with none of Morris's talent for decorative design, his *Labor Reform Songster* is written in the same spirit as Morris's *Chants for Socialists*, and includes one of Morris's labour hymns along with twenty of Thompson's own. His major book, *The Politics of Labor*, not only anticipates the issues of Morris's and Belfort Bax's *Socialism: Its Growth & Outcome*,¹ but, moreover, exemplifies the evolving role of the dissident intellectual in colonial Canada.

Early in his career, Thompson was depicted in the Victorian satirical magazine *Grip* as the leader of the Toronto literary Bohemia:

At the head of the table sits a man with a high forehead, Roman nose, and straight, sandy whiskers, a tall, thin, ungainly individual. It is Phillips Thompson of the *Mail*, at one time on the *Telegraph*, afterwards of Boston employed in reporting; now the Pres. of the Free Thought Association; the 'Jimuel Briggs' of Coboconk University, the writer of satirical poems, the composer of National Currency, Rag Baby songs; a stalwart Beaver-backer, an uncompromising Atheist, a profound thinker, and a genial, jovial gentleman. (Timothy, 2)

Described as possessing “the pen of a revolutionist and the heart of a gentle, loving woman,” Thompson could exasperate the equally colourful but much less radical editor of *Saturday Night*, Edmund E. Sheppard, for fretting the whole day over how to walk to work without stepping on a potato bug.

Accustomed as he was to controversy, Thompson was often at the centre of turmoil. Yet he could not always foresee the repercussions that his name alone might stir. One such incident began at the University of Toronto on a November evening in 1894 when a progressive group of students and faculty who belonged to the Political Economy Club had invited Phillips Thompson and Alfred Jury to conduct a debate on labour issues. With Thompson being a socialist and theosophist