

## Christianity in Canada

## The Story of Florence Gooderham Hamilton Huestis:

## The Care of Orphans in Three Generations

April 17, 2009

Hidden in the shadows of the drawing room, a seven year old girl watches anxiously as her uncle Henry Gooderham mounts the wooden stairs to her grandfather's bedroom. All week long family members have solemnly talked about William Hamilton's health and whether he will pull through this illness. With the rush of nurses and servants attending to the patient, no one has paid much attention to little Flora Hamilton or told her what will happen if her grandfather dies.

The date is November 26, 1880 and four days later undertaker John Young of Toronto will provide a plain rosewood coffin for William Hamilton's burial.<sup>1</sup> Henry Gooderham had been summoned to his dying father-in-law's bedside in order to sign a legal covenant in which he promises to become Flora's official guardian.

At age forty-two and married to William Hamilton's daughter, Mary Webster Hamilton, Henry Gooderham had no children. The idea of moving little Flora into his quiet house with his delicate wife Mary was not his foremost desire but duty dictated that this was the only course of action open to him. With his signature on the legal covenant, Henry Gooderham will become the protector and ultimately caring guardian to his wife's young niece Flora; a relationship reluctantly embarked upon but which will become central to his entire life.

At the outset however, it does not appear that Henry's guardianship will last for long. The deathbed covenant specifies that Henry will care for Flora until she reaches the

legal age of majority. The wording suggests that his duty as guardian is taken on somewhat grudgingly as he anticipates cutting his ties with Flora when she turns twenty-one. The document reads, “Henry Gooderham Distiller of the said City of Toronto agreeing to educate maintain and support one adopted child Flora Hamilton during the period of her childhood and until such time as she shall be able to maintain and support herself ... after the decease of the said William Hamilton until the said Flora Hamilton shall have attained the age of twenty-one years.”<sup>2</sup>

Henry Gooderham was born in Canada in 1834,<sup>3</sup> the fourth son of the “distiller, businessman and banker” William Gooderham. In 1832, two years before Henry was born, Henry’s father, William followed his brother-in-law James Worts from England to Upper Canada. Worts had settled in York the previous year and established a flour mill at the mouth of the Don River. Gooderham invested in the enterprise and over the following decades, Gooderham and Worts established a mercantile and financial empire in York (Toronto) which grew to include the largest distillery in Canada West, railways, mills and banks. The Dictionary of Canadian Biography (DCB) reports that William Gooderham immigrated to Canada with a total of 54 persons including members of the Worts and Gooderham family, servants and 11 orphans.<sup>4</sup>

William Gooderham was not only a successful business entrepreneur but also a deeply spiritual man. His financial and business successes did not interfere with his strong evangelical convictions and his ongoing involvement with Little Trinity Church in his adopted land. The DCB describes Gooderham as “a leading member of Little Trinity Church and a warden from 1853 to 1881” a period of nearly thirty years.<sup>5</sup> The presence of orphans, in the initial immigration party, was a consistent indicator of one of his

lifelong concerns. Outside of his business interests, Gooderham embarked on a number of personal and public endeavours. Although he avoided the public eye, he was elected to the school board in 1850, became city alderman for St. Lawrence Ward in 1853 and 1855, served as president of the York Pioneer Society from 1878 to 1880 and was a life-long free mason. Furthermore, he was the board of trade representative on the trust of the Toronto General Hospital and with Worts and William Cawthra donated \$113,500 to the new wing for infectious diseases.<sup>6</sup>

However, it is William Gooderham's impulse, to bring 11 orphans to Canada and later to place a number of orphans under his personal protection, which is of interest to the topic of this paper. I will consider how the values that directed Gooderham's actions were consistent with the values of the Protestant church in Canada in the context of the nineteenth century. Finally I will consider how his sense of duty in this area was modeled by members of his family over the next two generations.

The Reverend Alexander Sanson of Trinity Church comments on William Gooderham's remarkable lifelong achievements in a sermon given on August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1881 after his funeral. Among his many accomplishments, Sanson mentions a dutiful son, industrious apprentice, a loyal soldier, cultivator of the paternal farm, overseer of the poor in his native parish, the leader of the large-scale family movement from England to Upper Canada and remarkable business man for half a century.<sup>7</sup>

Sanson remarks that while "recognizing the hand of God for good upon him preserving, guiding and prospering him, I cannot refrain from referring for a moment to the point from which I set out – dutiful son. This was like a thread of gold which ran through the weft of his life from beginning to end."<sup>8</sup> Emphasizing Gooderham's filial

affection, Sanson attributes Gooderham's attention to his parents as a major factor in the successes of his life. Sanson poses the question, "Was not his long life, so strongly marked by filial, parental and relative affection, in all their practical exemplifications, a fulfillment of 'the first commandment with promise; Honour thy father and mother, that it be well with thee, and that thou mayst live long on earth?'"<sup>9</sup>

Neil Semple highlights the importance of the family structure to moral order in his history of Canadian Methodism, *The Lord's Dominion*. "Blending sound business practices and devout personal habits, men such as John Macdonald, the "merchant prince" of Toronto, impressed upon all who would listen the need for discipline, hard work, integrity, frugality, benevolence, and patriotism. Canada needed individuals who showed patience, self-denial, self-control, good sense, and honesty."<sup>10</sup> Semple lists a number of ethical Methodist merchants in Upper Canada, including in his list William Gooderham, an Anglican, who followed strict and honest practices in both his business and personal life. Material success resulting from an energetic and hard-working lifestyle was seen to be sanctioned by God.

William Gooderham was not alone in his dedication to his family members as well as to the ideal of the family unit. In Victorian Canadian society, Methodism placed the integrity of the family at the heart of a new moral order. It was the family that was held up as being at the centre of civilization providing a "foundation for national life."<sup>11</sup> This ideal was very much rooted in middle class values. Conversely, those families or individuals who were poor, did not practice moderation in drinking or were sexually promiscuous were seen to lack the qualities necessary to establish this new moral order. Nevertheless, these people were to be pitied and helped. Methodism continually stressed

the Christian duty of reaching out to those who were less fortunate. There was a belief that through the continuing ministrations to the poor, social disorder would disappear with the arrival of “Christ’s earthly dominion.”<sup>12</sup> William Gooderham’s diligent example in caring for both his family and for needy members of the wider community, served as a model for members of the Gooderham family over the next two generations.

William Gooderham and Harriet Tovell Herring had eight sons and five daughters. At his death in 1881, William left a substantial estate of approximately \$1,550,000, after having provided for his children<sup>13</sup>. Several of William and Harriet’s sons had left the family distilling business to become Methodists. Concern over the danger of alcohol consumption at a time when many lives were ruined by liquor, caused a crisis of conscience for William Jr.,<sup>14</sup> James<sup>15</sup> and Henry<sup>16</sup>. William Jr., the eldest son and James, the second eldest, joined Berkeley Church where William soon became a trustee. James became a member of the teaching staff at Berkeley followed by a brief career as Methodist minister until a throat infection caused him to return to business pursuits.<sup>17</sup> The fourth son, Henry was employed in the family concerns<sup>18</sup> and ultimately worshipped at Sherbourne Street United.<sup>19</sup>

William Jr. was not a particularly successful business man but was a great supporter of Methodism, being converted twice. He was thought by some to be odd as he fervently practiced evangelism by approaching strangers in public urging them to proclaim the Word of God.<sup>20</sup> As a supporter of missions in Canada and abroad, he gave sermons in various churches, and supported many charities financially. In his will, he gave generously to many Christian organizations like the YMCA, the Upper Canada Bible Society, the Boy’s Home and Girl’s Home, homes for Infants and the Toronto

Home for Incurables. However, it was his gift of \$200,000 to Victoria University, the Methodist College in Cobourg, tied together with the stipulation that the gift would be given only if the university was relocated in Toronto, which caused an enormous stir in Toronto and Methodist circles.<sup>21</sup>

Coming from a family of such evangelical fervour and commitment to the welfare of the less fortunate, Henry Gooderham was placed in an uncomfortable position by his father-in-law William Hamilton's request to take on the care of young Flora Hamilton. Gooderham was fond of his father-in-law and had helped him financially after a fire in 1876 almost ruined his uninsured business<sup>22</sup>. William Hamilton, an iron founder, machinist and inventor was a man of note in Toronto. With his son William, he had established the successful businesses of the St. Lawrence Foundry, Engine Works and Machine Shop in 1851 or 1852. His firm built the fence around Osgoode Hall, produced railway cars and wheels, steam engines and dredges for clearing harbours.<sup>23</sup>

It was in Henry Gooderham's nature to support his wife's father, but taking on little Flora was outside his experience to date. In addition to the difficulty of having a young child in the house, he would be adopting a little girl whose origins were the subject of much gossip among the Toronto elite. Attempts by descendants to discover the parentage of Flora have been, as of yet, unsuccessful.<sup>24</sup> We only know that Flora Hamilton was a granddaughter of William Hamilton but not whether she is the offspring of a son or a daughter of the house. She was not baptized until her adoption by Henry Gooderham at which time her legal name became Florence Gooderham Hamilton.<sup>25</sup>

After her grandfather's death in 1880, seven year old Flora moved catty-corner across the street at the corner of Mill and Sherbourne to her uncle's house.<sup>26</sup> Although

Florence, by virtue of her adoption by Henry Gooderham, was protected to some extent from the difficulties of being born out of wedlock, her school life is reported to have been miserable at Bishop Strachan School in Toronto. Her situation would have been highly unusual amongst the elite of Toronto. To be both a bastard and the heir to Henry Gooderham's fortune would have caused a complicated response in the people she met. When it came time to send her own four daughters, "the beautiful Huestis girls" to school, her unhappy memories of Bishop Strachan School caused her to send them all to Havergal, never considering her former school as an option.

Photographs, of Florence Gooderham Hamilton at age thirteen, fifteen and seventeen, show a pale and serious young woman, unsmiling but with a kind countenance.<sup>27</sup> After her schooling Florence met Archibald Morrison Huestis who had recently arrived from Halifax to work the Methodist Book Room in Toronto. Archie was the son of Dr. Stephen Fulton Huestis, a Methodist minister, and Louise Archibald Huestis. Archie's photograph, at age twenty-two, captures a very handsome young man with wavy dark hair, a luxurious moustache and large dark eyes. In 1892, Florence at age twenty and Archie several years older were married in Henry Gooderham's house at 160 Wellesley Crescent. The wedding was described as "quiet but very pretty."<sup>28</sup>

Four daughters were born in quick succession to Florence and Archie. Gladys arrived in March 1893, followed by Doris in October 1894. My grandmother, Florence, was the third daughter born in April 1896 and Marion, the fourth, was born in October 1897. My grandmother's photograph albums show many happy family gatherings with Florence, Archie and the four girls often accompanied by Uncle Henry Gooderham and members of the Huestis clan. Trips to Atlantic City, Prout's Neck in Maine, York Cliffs

and Elgin House in Muskoka included members of the extended family. My grandmother's photographs include family friends Madeleine and Denton Massey and trips to the Massey Farm, Dentonia, which was four or five miles up the Kingston Road.

Many women would have felt that they were living full and happy lives in these comfortable circumstances, but Florence Gooderham Huestis was driven by a strong desire to contribute her time and effort to improving the lot of those less fortunate than herself. Perhaps her own difficult origins and childhood drove her desire to make a difference in the lives of others. As a Methodist herself, with many examples of philanthropy in the Gooderham family, she immersed herself in social action. Her accomplishments were remarkable and wide-ranging. An entry in the volume entitled *Women of Canada*<sup>29</sup>, describes her as a vital figure in the social welfare work of Toronto. As President of the Council of Women in Toronto for eight years she increased the number of committees in this organization to seventy-two.

The Council of Women addressed and found solutions for social problems of the day. Many of the projects initiated by Florence Huestis would now be considered government responsibilities. Under her guidance, a depot securing a supply of pure milk was set up for infants. This work was later taken over by the city of Toronto and formed the basis of the Child Welfare Clinics. Seeing the need for physical education in public schools Florence collaborated in the initiation of the Toronto Playground Association. As convener of the Public Health Committee of the Local Council of Women, she was instrumental in causing the city to filtrate drinking water and improve the sewage disposal systems.<sup>30</sup>



The list of her initiatives as President of the Council of Women is abundant. She was responsible for the erection of twenty-four model apartments for women, which led to the passage of the Mother's Pension Act. She and others had contributed to a fund to test the practicality of caring for six mothers and twenty-two children for two years in order to demonstrate the feasibility of such a program. She devoted much time to the National Social Hygiene Council of Canada becoming the National Vice President.<sup>31</sup> She was the First Vice-President of Women's College Hospital.

In reviewing Florence Huestis' report as president in the 1913 annual report<sup>32</sup> of the Local Council of Women, the work of her organization with its many sub-committees is remarkable. The Council of Women had political clout. She reports that the combined deputation from Ontario Local Councils to Sir James Whitney and other cabinet ministers to discuss their opinions of current political platforms was "fairly satisfactory."<sup>33</sup> In the same report, Florence Huestis, listed as convener of the tuberculin committee reports that she has given four briefs on the need for the establishment of meat and milk inspectors to monitor cows with tuberculosis. Further, she points to the need for schools to have plentiful fresh air and public baths. There is also an urgent need to provide medical facilities to treat infectious diseases for the poor.

A more spirited description of Florence Huestis' influence occurs in Helen Caister Robinson's account of the Big Sister Movement in Toronto.<sup>34</sup> Big Sisters began as a "small sub-committee of the Local Council of Women, initiated by the President in answer to a request for assistance from the judge of Toronto's newly established juvenile court."<sup>35</sup> John Edward Starr, ordained as a Methodist minister but also a student of law, had formerly worked as deputy sheriff of Peel and as the director of the Children's Aid

society. As the first judge of the juvenile court, Starr had the powers of a police magistrate.

When the court opened in Toronto in April 1912, the population of the city had doubled since 1907 with Canada's open door policy on immigration.<sup>36</sup> Overwhelmed by the number of children below the age of 16 appearing before him and concerned about the living conditions to which many of these children would be returned, Judge Starr was looking for alternative measures. Having read about the success of the Big Sister and Big Brother Movements in New York started by socially prominent women, he decided to approach the Local Council of Women. He walked over to 10 Homewood Place to talk with Mrs. A.M. Huestis, president of the Local Council.

Bright, attractive, self-assured, Florence Huestis anticipated no difficulty in interesting several philanthropic friends in the project. Because of the kind of work that would be expected of them she thought the Council's Committee on Traffic in Women and Equal Moral Standards would be the appropriate group to be involved. She would speak to the chairman about the matter. With the warning that it was summer holiday time and she and many of her friend were about to depart for their respective cottages at The Island, Lake Simcoe or Muskoka, she assured him that a sub-committee would be set up in the autumn<sup>37</sup>

Four years later at the annual meeting of The Local Council in 1916, president Florence Huestis reported that the Big Sister committee had become a federated society, "supporting itself and caring for some hundred of younger sisters needing the kindly hand and warm heart of an older sister."<sup>38</sup> Apparently Florence Huestis broke her own rule not to belong to any of the member organizations of the Local Council of Women while she was president. She had consented in this case to become a member of the board to share her knowledge and experience with the members of the Big Sister Association.<sup>39</sup> In

Robinson's account of the 1916 annual meeting of the Local Council of Women, my great-grandmother is described as "poised, capable and enthusiastic, a gay hat lending charm to her animated face."<sup>40</sup>

I will attest that this story has a happy ending. Florence Huestis, through her daughters became the matriarch of four branches of strong female descendents. In my branch of the family, the first name Florence has been handed down matrilineally in each generation from my great-grandmother to my daughter who is in the fifth generation.

The first Florence incorporated strong Methodist values regarding the centrality of the family and the duty towards the care of those in less fortunate circumstances. The report from the 1916 Local Council of Women describes a confident and energetic woman who has turned her own early difficult circumstances into a powerful tool of transformative action to help others. It is a remarkable legacy left behind by a little girl who began life as Flora Hamilton shamed about the circumstances of her parentage; a legacy of care begun by William Gooderham's concern of orphans, continued by Henry Gooderham's sense of duty to his father-in-law's orphaned granddaughter and which culminated in the untiring work of Florence Gooderham Huestis for the benefit of the weakest and most easily overlooked portion of the population in Toronto in the early twentieth century.

## Footnotes:

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- <sup>1</sup> Bill of Sale from “J. Young, Importer and Dealer in Fine Funeral Goods” paid by Henry Gooderham 8/2/80 –Family Papers
- <sup>2</sup> Official covenant of adoption November 26, 1880, signed by William Hamilton and his second wife Anne and by Henry Gooderham –Family Papers
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.paulturner.ca/Phillips/Gooderham/gooderham-dossiers.htm> April 7, 2009
- <sup>4</sup> [http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id\\_nbr=5546&interval=25&&PHPSESSID=5us1bih6pb0demhj0623cgi5u3](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=5546&interval=25&&PHPSESSID=5us1bih6pb0demhj0623cgi5u3) April 6, 2009
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, April 7, 2009
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, April 7, 2009
- <sup>7</sup> Rev. Alexander Sanson. “Sermon after the funeral of W. William Gooderham, Esq.” preached in Trinity Church Toronto, Toronto, 1881. WD Jordan Special Collection, Queen’s University (microfiche CIHM 89773), p5
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, p6
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, p7
- <sup>10</sup> Neil Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), p335
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid, p340-341
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, p340
- <sup>13</sup> [http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id\\_nbr=5546&interval=25&&PHPSESSID=5qsa2dvk491fdg324g4n506r4](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=5546&interval=25&&PHPSESSID=5qsa2dvk491fdg324g4n506r4) April 14, 2009
- <sup>14</sup> Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathaneal Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada*, (Kingston, Montreal McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989), p69
- <sup>15</sup> Thomas Edward Champion, *Methodist Churches of Toronto*, (Toronto: The GM Rose & Sons Company, limited, 1899) p169-170
- <sup>16</sup> Joyce Simpson Weekes, granddaughter of Florence Gooderham Huestis. In a conversation that I had with my mother Joyce Weekes on January 15, 2000, Joyce reported that “Henry sold his shares in the distillery as his wife Mary Webster Hamilton was opposed to alcohol. Henry and Mary joined the Methodist Church on Sherbourne Street.”
- <sup>17</sup> Champion, p169-170
- <sup>18</sup> [http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id\\_nbr=5546&interval=25&&PHPSESSID=5us1bih6pb0demhj0623cgi5u3](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=5546&interval=25&&PHPSESSID=5us1bih6pb0demhj0623cgi5u3) April 7, 2009
- <sup>19</sup> Joyce Simpson Weekes. Henry Gooderham attended Sherbourne Methodist Church with his adopted daughter Florence Hamilton and later when she married with her husband Archie and their four daughters
- <sup>20</sup> [http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id\\_nbr=5547&&PHPSESSID=5us1bih6pb0demhj0623cgi5u3](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=5547&&PHPSESSID=5us1bih6pb0demhj0623cgi5u3) April 14, 2009
- <sup>21</sup> [http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id\\_nbr=5547&interval=25&&PHPSESSID=vt255g8vm5s174u44h3p3a4mh1](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=5547&interval=25&&PHPSESSID=vt255g8vm5s174u44h3p3a4mh1) April 7, 2009
- <sup>22</sup> Joyce Simpson Weekes
- <sup>23</sup> [http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id\\_nbr=5021&interval=20&&PHPSESSID=a6bs2th4c352lju3foncjsa496](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=5021&interval=20&&PHPSESSID=a6bs2th4c352lju3foncjsa496) April 7, 2009
- <sup>24</sup> Doris Huestis Speirs, daughter of Florence Gooderham Huestis and Joyce Simpson Weekes have attempted to find birth certificates for Flora Hamilton.
- <sup>25</sup> Joyce Simpson Weekes found a record of her baptism at Trinity Church dated after her adoption by Henry Gooderham in the Anglican archives in Toronto.
- <sup>26</sup> Joyce Simpson Weekes,
- <sup>27</sup> Huestis family photograph book from 10 Homewood Place
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, newspaper clipping (no source recorded)
- <sup>29</sup> *Women of Canada*. (Montreal: Women of Canada Publishing Company, 1930) p127
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, p127
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, p127
- <sup>32</sup> <http://www.archive.org/details/localcouncilwome20lctwuoft>, April 8, 2009
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, p13
- <sup>34</sup> Helen Caister Robinson, *Decades of Caring: The Big Sister Story*. (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1979)

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p16

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p 18

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p 19-20

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p 27 (source *Local Council Annual Report, 1916*)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p 27

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p 27

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