

SARAH CARTER

OURS  
BY EVERY LAW  
OF RIGHT AND  
JUSTICE

Women and the Vote in  
the Prairie Provinces



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## **WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY**

SERIES EDITOR: VERONICA STRONG-BOAG

The story of women's struggles and victories in the pursuit of political equality is not just a matter of the past: it has the value of informing current debate about the health of democracy in our country.

This series of short, insightful books presents a history of the vote, with vivid accounts of famous and unsung suffragists and overdue explanations of why some women were banned from the ballot box until the 1940s and 1960s. More than a celebration of women's achievements in the political realm, this series provides deeper understanding of Canadian society and politics, serving as a well-timed reminder never to take political rights for granted.

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## INTRODUCTION

**THE EDITOR OF THE** *Calgary Eye Opener*, Bob Edwards, wrote in 1909 that “women are simply crazy to holler for suffrage” and that only “a few old hens want it.” Edwards was wrong, as it turned out. In 1916, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta began to tumble like dominoes – or, as another analogy had it, “woman suffrage . . . swept the newest Canadian provinces like a prairie fire.”

These were the first provinces in Canada to pass provincial legislation enfranchising women on the same basis as men. The images of dominoes and a prairie fire, however, suggest inevitability, and this was far from the case. Activists waged long and arduous campaigns in each of these three provinces. Securing the vote for most – though not all – women was a significant accomplishment, a triumph over powerful opponents, and a cause for celebration. Activists understood the magnitude of their achievement. In Edmonton on 1 March 1916, at the second reading of the Equal Suffrage Bill, women thronged the legislature. Among them were representatives from more than fifteen organizations, including the Edmonton Equal Franchise League, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, the Rebekah Lodges, the Women’s Industrial Society, and the Jewish Women’s Society. An unusual sight in the chamber that day, too, for the first time ever, were babies in arms, so eager were their mothers to witness this moment in history. The bill passed its second reading with only one dissenting vote. Lucien Boudreau, the MLA for St. Albert, declared that women belonged in the home, and he advised them not to meddle in the public affairs of the province. This brought laughter from the women who crowded the legislature. Alberta’s Act to Provide for Equal Suffrage received the assent of the lieutenant governor on 19 April 1916.



The moment may have seemed flawless, but it was not. The vote had been secured for many women, but far from all. The history of the suffrage campaign on the Canadian Prairies is a complex and unsettling story. In the pages that follow, readers will undoubtedly find themselves championing the achievements of suffragist reformers while also being deeply troubled by their views and the narrowness of their vision. The early suffragists accepted, and sometimes promoted, racial differentiations and exclusions that privileged whiteness and Britishness. The title of my book, taken from an article written by the famous activist Nellie McClung, illustrates that universalist arguments for women's inclusion were used even when they were not truly meant.

Prairie suffragists did not seek or achieve universal enfranchisement. They sought equal voting rights with men, and not all men could cast an electoral ballot in 1916. In decrying the limited vision of this generation of activists, we need to similarly condemn the much more powerful male legislators, at both the



Women and their supporters, including mothers with babies, thronged the Alberta legislature on 1 March 1916 for the second reading of the Equal Suffrage Bill. “Equal” suffrage, declared as law following the assent of the lieutenant governor on 19 April 1916, meant that settler and Metis women could now vote, but First Nations women (and men) could not.

federal and the provincial level, who refused votes to most women and who refused in earlier and subsequent decades to grant citizenship rights to people who were defined as “Indian.” Men and women who were governed by the federal Indian Act of 1876 were denied electoral power in all three “Prairie” provinces (as in the rest of Canada).\*

Nor were they alone. In Saskatchewan, “persons of the Chinese race” could not vote. These enduring restrictions serve as stark reminders that the West was a settler colony, where questions about the franchise for women were caught up in the disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples and debates about the entitlements

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\* I have placed “Prairie” in quotation marks this one time to indicate that this common description does not do justice to the diverse topography of the region, where there is also parkland, forest, and tundra. The suffrage activity of this book was overwhelmingly concentrated in the Prairie south, where settlement was intense.

of racialized immigrants.\* Yet it is not correct to say that in 1916 only white women secured voting rights in these three provinces. Metis women (who were not legally defined as Indian) could vote from that time forward, as could African Canadian women and those of other ethnicities.

All through my school years, up to and including my studies as a PhD student, I was taught nothing about the campaigns for women's suffrage in the Prairie provinces (or anywhere else, for that matter). Yet, growing up in Saskatoon, I knew from an early age that there was a story to tell. My grandmother, Jean Munn, was a friend of Violet McNaughton, and I have a memory of meeting McNaughton (a very small person dressed tip to toe in black) and knowing that she had worked for votes for women.

At the University of Saskatchewan, where I was a history honours and then a master's student in the 1970s, there was no course content related to women's history. I knew that one of the few female professors at that time, Mary Hallett, was working on a biography of Nellie McClung, but I had gleaned that most of her colleagues disapproved of women's history, and Professor Hallett did not teach in this area. (Her biography of McClung, *Firing the Heather*, was published posthumously in 1993, with co-author Marilyn Davis.) I remember being riveted by the knowledge of a fellow student in my 1976 Prairie history class, Candace Savage, who took over our tutorial one day. I learned for the first time about Nellie McClung, the Mock Parliament, and other inspiring incidents from the suffrage campaign.

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\* Settler colonialism involves displacing Indigenous peoples from their land and replacing them with expatriate settlers. Its underlying impulse is to eliminate Indigenous peoples from ownership of valuable resources, particularly land, and to elevate settler families as legitimate and therefore entitled to land. Settler women's reproductive labour was central to the process of repopulating what were once Indigenous lands in Canada. Residential schools and other strategies, including restricting the franchise to settlers, also eliminated the power and cultures of Indigenous peoples.

Perhaps the professors of those years (1972–77 and 1980–81) ought to be excused. Even if they had wanted to teach about the struggle for suffrage on the Prairies, there was little to draw on. Published in 1950, Catherine Cleverdon's path-breaking *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* had a chapter on the Prairie provinces, but the predominantly male academics of the day regarded her book as dull reading. A political scientist from the University of Saskatchewan wrote that it was "rather tedious" and "not exciting or profound." In Canada, activists were peaceful but supposedly boring, as they did not chain themselves to railings, smash windows, or hide in Mr. Speaker's cupboard, unlike their British sisters.

There followed a long hiatus until the publication of Veronica Strong-Boag's work on McClung in the mid-1970s; Candace Savage's *Our Nell: A Scrapbook Biography of Nellie L. McClung* (1980); and the sod-breaking compilation of photographs and documents *A Harvest Yet to Reap: A History of Prairie Women*, by Linda Rasmussen et al. (1976). There have since been many outstanding dissertations on Prairie women's suffrage, generally with a focus on prominent individuals such as McNaughton and Henrietta Muir Edwards, and these were invaluable sources for this book. Early celebratory accounts gave way to more critical assessments and debates, with scholars such as Carol Lee Bacchi arguing that suffragists were conservative and racist defenders of the right of their class to rule others. Seizing on these criticisms and characterizations, anti-feminist organizations and individuals, including some journalists, condemned this generation of activists, particularly in the context of debates about who should appear on fifty-dollar bills or postage stamps.

In teaching classes on women's history in Canada at Prairie universities, I have long wished for a synthesis of the campaign in the three provinces of the West, a not-ponderous book that at the same time shows the complexity of these activists, their times, and their issues. So I accepted the invitation to contribute a volume to

this series. I have written Prairie history for decades, with a focus on Indigenous-settler contact zones, women, and gender. My other motivation for contributing this volume is to provide context, depth, and balance to the history of this generation of activists, who are too frequently tossed on the rubbish heap of history because people learn about them only from contemptuous anti-feminist press coverage. I seek to shed light on the contributions of these activists and the steps they took toward equality and justice while also recognizing the blind spots, shortcomings, and exclusions that resulted in equality and justice for only some.

This is the first study to combine the campaigns in the three Prairie provinces since Cleverdon's 1950 book. Although her book made a valuable contribution then and for decades after, it was a product of its time, just as the suffrage activists were products of theirs. I'm writing this book at a moment when reconciliation and acknowledgment of our settler colonial past and present are front and centre. Perspectives do not simply change; we recognize today that some perspectives were entirely left out of earlier histories.

The settler colonial context and the long shadows of racism are key themes of my book. The Prairie suffrage movement coincided with years of intense colonization. Indigenous peoples were dispossessed of their livelihood, their land, and their rights even as settler women were claiming these rights for themselves. Suffrage activists showed remarkably little interest in the rights of Indigenous peoples, but the desire of many to augment and "improve" the white population on the Prairies indicates that a consciousness of race pervaded the women's movement of the day. Their work helped to advance the cause of settler domination. This was an age of imperialist feminism, when many women of British ancestry asserted their superiority over racialized women and those from various ethnic minorities. But the Canadian West was also a colony where the categories of white and Indigenous were not rigid. People defied and criss-crossed these boundaries, and that too was unsettling to settlers.

Another key theme of this volume is the culture of patriarchy. The West was deliberately crafted and energetically guarded as white masculine space, with women, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, to be kept in their place. A gender order, regarded as a timeless bedrock of empire – of men for the field and women for the hearth – was to be pickled and preserved for eternity. British or British Ontarian men were seen as the ideal western settlers since they would be active agents of the empire, owning and farming the land that was the foundation of the region's economy. These men would benefit from their exclusive rights to property well into the twentieth century through the exclusion of women and Indigenous peoples. Female settlers were essential to this goal, however, with British women preferred. The tasks assigned to them were to make homes and tame the wild colonial males while vigorously propagating the white population. They were under pressure to be models of feminine deportment and conduct, perpetuating a male-cherished gender order that was undergoing turbulent challenge and change in Britain. "Foreign" and Indigenous women were also expected to conform to this idealized gender order, and their unwillingness or inability to do so was used to bolster claims of British superiority.

My book challenges the persistent myth of the West as free of the conventions and limitations of the "Old World," of the region as a land of opportunity, the "last best west." According to this myth, traditional gender roles eroded because women were full partners in the "pioneering enterprise" – a profoundly colonial narrative that assumes a blank slate before settlers arrived in the West and ignores the region's foundations of inequality. A related myth, built on this one, is that female enfranchisement encountered little resistance in the Prairie provinces because settler men recognized women as equal partners and thus rewarded them with the vote. This too is a colonial narrative; what was seen as the "frontier" by some was homeland to others, and the colonial process did not create equality but rather hierarchies of gender, race, ethnicity, and class.

Male legislators were quick to take credit for women's suffrage in 1916 and beyond, claiming that the campaigns to achieve it were effortless because they themselves held "pioneering" women in high regard. According to them, the franchise was gifted to women by male legislators who were grateful for their contributions. Pragmatic suffragists pressed this myth into service when calling on legislators to shed the shackles of tradition. Some settler women also bought into this mythic claim to their equal status, believing that in coming to the Canadian West they had left behind the conventions and restrictions of their homelands. Catherine Cleverdon argued that on the Prairies women had merely to generate enough interest in the issue to ask for and receive the vote. But such narratives understate the challenges that activists faced. The idea that Prairie women were handed the vote ignores the decades of activism that led to 1916. The opposition to expanding the franchise and other rights of women was fierce in the Prairie provinces, as elsewhere. As I will show in this book, the struggle for the vote was taxing, lengthy, and waged against steadfast and formidable resistance.

The volume begins with a chapter that sets out the unique characteristics of the suffrage campaign in the West, as well as those shared with the campaigns in the rest of Canada and beyond, followed by a chapter on each of the Prairie provinces. Activists in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta mounted separate and distinct campaigns, despite a significant overlap of objectives and strategies and some similar advocates and opponents. Why was the franchise a provincial concern? Although Prime Minister John A. Macdonald had succeeded in passing legislation in 1885 that gave the federal Parliament control over the right to vote and that extended the vote to First Nations males of Eastern Canada if they met the property qualification, this was changed in 1898 under the Liberal government of Wilfrid Laurier. Control of the franchise and electoral lists was returned to the provinces, and First Nations males of the East were once again disenfranchised. From

then on, voting rights depended on the whim of provincial governments, so suffrage campaigns were of necessity provincially focused. By the time of the 1898 legislation introduced by Laurier, most provincial franchise laws had already removed the property qualification for voting in favour of allowing all-male British subjects over the age of twenty-one to vote, reflecting the principle that the vote was a right accompanying citizenship. The province had also become the focus of activism by women's organizations because laws concerning dower, property, inheritance, the guardianship of children, the municipal franchise, education, prohibition, and many other matters were under provincial control.

The year 1916 was far from the end of the fight, and this book's final chapter covers the ongoing controversy over the federal franchise. The right to the dominion franchise continued to be disputed by legal and political authorities, including Prime Minister Robert Borden himself, and the divisions shattered the fragile unity of suffragists. This final chapter also charts some of the significant accomplishments of the post-suffrage era in relation to women's rights, as well as the limited advances made in achieving equality for all.

The activists profiled in this book would have been keenly disappointed at the snail's pace of change for women after their 1916 victory. Yet, we are all beneficiaries of their battles for women's rights and the extension of democracy. Their achievements were limited, but a great deal of hard work was required to advance the partial inclusion for women that they did gain. The Prairie suffragists deserve a respectful hearing from us, just as they demanded again and again a respectful hearing of their petitions. As historian Veronica Strong-Boag writes of Canadian suffragists, "their vision, like ours, was sometimes faulty and incomplete, but it also embodied an uncommon personal politics of courage and optimism."

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We have sorely begrudged the time we have had to spend coaxing, pleading, reasoning, petitioning, “seeing” people, agitating for something which was ours by every law of right and justice and which should never have been taken away from us.

– NELLIE McCLUNG, 1915

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Let us go to an all-white settlement. There are too many jet black eyes and high cheek-bones here. I like them very well when they belong to the neighbors’ children, but I would not like them in my grand-children. We came here, John, for the children’s sake, not ours, and we’ll do our best for them every way.

– NELLIE McCLUNG, 1935,  
QUOTING HER MOTHER’S WORDS WHEN THE  
FAMILY ARRIVED IN MANITOBA IN 1880

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# SETTLER SUFFRAGISTS: CONTEXTS, CAUSES, OBSTACLES



In this cartoon, which appeared in the *Grain Growers' Guide* on 1 July 1914, "Mother" is not able to vote, while males caricatured as undesirable can. The message was that respectable settler women were at least as deserving as these enfranchised men.

**ELIZABETH WASACASE WAS BORN** in Elphinstone, Manitoba, in 1907, the daughter of an Anishinaabe (Saulteaux) mother and a Metis father. From age twelve, after the death of her mother, she attended the St. Boniface Orphanage and at age eighteen married a man from the Kahkewistahaw First Nation, Saskatchewan. Of her six children, five died at an early age due to diphtheria and pneumonia. Wasacase, a respected herbalist and healer, raised more than twenty-five foster children, despite having no electricity or running water. She understood four languages: French, Cree, Saulteaux, and English. The 1963 federal election was the first one in which she was permitted to vote; she cast her ballot then and again in the 1965 federal and Saskatchewan elections. Wasacase did not think that the franchise threatened treaty rights. Interviewed in 1966, she was asked, “What do you fear most in life?” and she replied, “Nothing.”

This accomplished and fearless woman was unable, for most of her adult life, to exercise the franchise – a fundamental human right and the most critical means that individuals have of influencing the laws and policies that govern them. That she and other status First Nations people (with the exception of the provincial vote in Manitoba from 1952) were disenfranchised until 1960 is evidence of the long shadows of colonialism and racism, two themes of this book. The words in the second epigraph above, which were said by Letitia Mooney to John Mooney (Nellie McClung’s parents) when the family moved to Manitoba from Ontario in 1880, express the determination of settlers to create all-white spaces for themselves. The settler colonial enterprise

took work and time, and the process was aided by denying the franchise to First Nations.

### **DEMOGRAPHICS**

The founding Indigenous nations on the Prairies were the Plains Cree (Nehiyawak), Nakoda Oyadebi (Assiniboine), Saulteaux/Plains Ojibway (Anishinaabe), Dakota, Lakota, Stoney-Nakoda, Sarcee (Tsuut'ina), and Blackfoot (Niitsitapiisini), which are divided into the Blackfoot (Siksika), Blood (Kainai), and Peigan (Piikani). To the north, in the subarctic regions of what became the three Prairie provinces, were the Woodland Cree and the Dene. By the nineteenth century, the Metis people were also a powerful presence in the West.

Settlement of the Prairies proceeded following the suppression of the Metis resistance in Manitoba in 1869–70, the treaties with First Nations in the 1870s, and the survey of the land into sections, townships, and ranges. First Nations were obliged to make their permanent homes on small reserves, and they were henceforth subject to the administration of the federal Department of Indian Affairs and the 1876 Indian Act. By the time of the 1869 transfer of Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company to the government of Canada, their numbers had been considerably reduced by a recent smallpox epidemic.

Demographic information for Indigenous peoples of the West in the 1870s is fraught with problems. The 1870 Red River census did not include First Nations people, and the 1871 Canadian census did not encompass Manitoba or the North-West Territories. The federal Department of the Interior – and after 1880, the Department of Indian Affairs – accumulated statistics, but these too were limited and problematic. In 1871, in the province of Manitoba and the North-West Territories, there were estimated to be 20,866 First Nations people, with an additional 4,820 in the northerly posts such as Albany and Moose Factory, for a total of 25,686. At Red River, in 1870, 10,000 of the 12,000 residents were

reported to be Metis, with the French Metis in the majority by approximately 1,600. When the Metis of Red River are added to the estimate of First Nations, the total number of Indigenous people in 1871 is 35,686.

Land outside of First Nations reserves was surveyed into sections, townships, and ranges, after which it was made available virtually for free to male settlers (and a very few women). Settlement began most intensively in Manitoba and oozed west, with a British Ontarian foundation established in each province. Menonites from Russia and Icelanders arrived in the 1870s, followed by Scandinavians, Germans, Ukrainians, Belgians, Finns, Hungarians, Poles, Americans, and a host of others. The period of the most dramatic expansion in the West was from 1901 to 1911, when the population of Manitoba grew by 170 percent, Saskatchewan by 530 percent, and Alberta by 500 percent.

#### **EXCLUDING FIRST NATIONS VOTERS**

Anyone who has lived in the Prairie provinces knows that racism is deeply embedded in their political culture. As the Canadian nation was born, inequality lay in its very bones. A fundamental belief was that white men were entitled to more and different rights than others. Those at the margins, deemed incapable of exercising the franchise and excluded through property qualifications and notions of personhood, helped to define the status of those at the centre of power: white male settler citizens.

Men and women whom the Indian Act defined as Indian were denied electoral power, as were “persons of the Chinese race” in Saskatchewan. As in other settler colonies, Indigenous peoples were dispossessed when settlers arrived to stay and established a permanent homeland by engineering the marginalization of the original inhabitants. The original peoples had to be denied political power to safeguard settler dominance. The Indian Act was crafted to ensure that no Indian could vote, an exclusion that was never explained during the treaty negotiations of the 1870s. First

Nations men and women could not individually own any reserve land and did not pay taxes. Taking away their land, providing them with no opportunities to own land, and assigning communally shared reserves guaranteed that they could not meet the franchise property qualifications. A clause in the Indian Act declared that no Indian could acquire the federal government's homestead grant of 160 acres, a privilege reserved to settler males and a narrow category of settler females – widows with children.

Various rationales were used to deny Indian suffrage. In an 1885 House of Commons debate about the federal franchise, one MP declared, "Indian suffrage is an encroachment on the privileges of free men, and of white men ... It is an encroachment upon the rights and privileges of the civilized electors of the Dominion at large." According to an 1886 editorial titled "The Indian Vote," the "theory that they are citizens, though benevolent, is absurd." To give Indigenous peoples the vote would be "thrusting political power on people absolutely incapable of using it for their own good ... The next thing will be to confer the suffrage on their ponies."

The Indian Act did offer a complicated and prolonged route to enfranchisement, but it required the surrender of Indian and treaty status. This section of the act was curiously inclusive in terms of gender, allowing any man or unmarried woman over the age of twenty-one to whom the Indian Act applied to apply for enfranchisement. Once all the necessary requirements had been met, over many years, the applicant ceased to be "Indian" under the law. Few First Nations people took advantage of this tortuous route to enfranchisement.

Voting restrictions were added as settlement proceeded while giving "new settlers all the privileges of the franchise at as early a date as possible." Under the 1870 Manitoba Act, First Nations and Metis men voted. The Metis had negotiated the terms of the Manitoba Act with Canada and, of course, ensured their own voting rights. First Nations men, however, were excluded in Manitoba in 1875, when legislation declared that "persons who can neither

be electors or voters” in elections of members to the Legislative Assembly included all “Indians or persons of Indian blood receiving an annuity from the crown.” If such a person voted, he could be fined five hundred dollars or sentenced to a prison term of twelve months. Before that date, treaty men, including the males of St. Peter’s Indian Settlement north of Winnipeg, had voted. Their right to the franchise had been defended in the legislature and by a Manitoba judge who commented in 1875 that he did not see why treaty males “who live in houses and cultivate lands ... should be cut off [voters’ lists] because they get \$3 per year.” Such exceptions to prejudice soon disappeared. Once the Department of Indian Affairs got into gear on implementing the 1876 Indian Act, reserve residents were excluded from voting (unless they took the torturous route to enfranchisement), and people who were defined as Indian had no representation in any legislative assembly.

The 1885 debate over the federal franchise demonstrated that legislators, including Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, intended to exclude all First Nations people of the West from the proposed franchise. There was concern that their votes should not swamp those of the settlers. That exclusion complemented the assertion of imperial control being applied in the West through the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and the suppression of the Metis resistance, both in 1885. Equally far from incidental was the new federal legislation’s deliberate omission of people of Chinese origin, many of whom were laying tracks for the CPR. Macdonald told Parliament that this too was necessary, or “the Aryan character of the future of British America should be destroyed.”

Under clauses in and amendments to the Indian Act, voting rights within reserve communities stayed exclusively male until 1951. The majority of male members who were twenty-one and older could elect the reserve’s chief and council. Similarly, only they could vote on vital issues such as permanently surrendering

reserve land, which reserve residents were frequently pressured to do. Alongside the Indian Act, various policies and initiatives curbed the freedom and independence of Indigenous women in an effort to refashion them as dutiful wives and mothers. Their misrepresentation as the slaves and chattels of men rationalized such efforts. These depictions, and others that cast Indigenous women as unfit mothers lacking in morals, permeated settler society.

First Nations women did not negotiate or sign treaties (although, on the other side, settler women were sometimes signatories as witnesses). Yet, they had a deep influence on the proceedings, one not seen or understood by settlers. Indigenous women, considered to be the custodians of the land, placed limits on the authority of Indigenous men at treaty negotiations, permitting them to offer to share the land but not to sell it. Though chiefs or councillors in Plains societies were seldom female, women had significant power, authority, and independence: they were used to speaking up. This was illustrated in an 1885 meeting between British general Frederick Middleton and the Cree leader Pîhtokahanapiwiyin and his people. An elderly Cree woman asked for mercy for her people, to which Middleton replied, "We don't listen to women." When another elder asked, "Then how is it that orders for the government of the country come from a Queen?," the military occupier sidestepped the contradiction by observing that the queen's councillors were men.

The history of treaty women's legal status with respect to the franchise after 1916 is not yet entirely clear. We do not know if treaty women who married non-First Nations men and thus lost their Indian status under the Indian Act had the right to vote once female suffrage was achieved on the Prairies. Until the Indian Act was amended in 1951, a treaty woman who "married out" was still entitled to annuities, interest monies, and rents paid to other treaty holders. It is unlikely that women who received treaty payments would have been placed on the voters' list. However, they

could commute their treaty money at any time and accept a payment of ten years' annuities instead. Those who did would have had a strong case to be added to the voters' list. Whether this occurred remains part of the Canadian suffrage story still to be recovered.

Restricting and refashioning Indigenous women was central to the settler colonial scheme. Efforts to do so over many decades were deliberate and relentless. Within their nations, they did not hold the inferior status assigned to non-Indigenous women. Under their laws, women could leave unhappy marriages and find new spouses, without censure or recrimination. Divorce was easily obtained, and remarriage was accepted and expected. Unhappiness, incompatibility, abuse, or failure by the man to work hard and provide were sufficient causes for separation. Early-nineteenth-century observers stressed that the ease with which an Indigenous wife could leave her husband greatly abridged his power over her. Divorced Indigenous women kept their property and retained or shared custody of the children. Such options encouraged good conduct on the part of men. All of these rights, however, were denied the Indigenous women who came under British common law and Indian Affairs scrutiny.

Settler women had freedoms, opportunities, and privileges that were denied to Indigenous women living under the reserve and Indian Act regime. But they were simultaneously subject to strict patriarchal controls and discipline, offering them little power in public domains. Female settlers would wait for many decades to acquire access to divorce and custody, to have remarriage seen as acceptable and respectable, and to have laws introduced that ensured a share of matrimonial property. Such gains were central goals of many of the activists featured in this book.

#### **THE METIS AND THE FRANCHISE**

Although colonialism tried to create sharp distinctions between Indigenous and settler peoples, Western Canada, particularly

Manitoba, defied such neat categorizations. Two centuries of intermarriage before Canada acquired Rupert's Land resulted in a large and powerful Metis population, who protested this transfer in the 1869–70 resistance; the Metis, who had not been consulted, feared for their land and their religious and language rights. Led by Louis Riel, they established a provisional government in 1870 – the Legislative Assembly of Assiniboia – and drew up a list of rights. Riel and his supporters knew the power of the franchise. During the provisional government's debate on voting rights, he stated, "We must seek to preserve the existence of our own people. We must not by our own act allow ourselves to be swamped." In 1870, their government negotiated with Ottawa regarding the terms of Manitoba's entry into Confederation. In February 1870, the provisional government agreed, after much debate, "that every man in the country (except uncivilized and unsettled Indians) who has attained the age of 21 years, and every British subject, a stranger to this country, who has resided three years in this country, and is a householder, shall have a right to vote." The sole member who asked about women voters was met with laughter and ignored. Section 17 of the Manitoba Act, assented to on 12 May 1870, entitled "every male person . . . 1) Of the full age of twenty-one years, and not subject to any legal incapacity: 2) A subject of Her Majesty by birth or naturalization: 3) And a *bona fide* householder . . . for one year next before the said date" to vote for a member to serve in the Legislative Assembly.

The Metis remained a powerful political force in the late nineteenth century in Manitoba and the West. John Norquay, Manitoba premier from 1878 to 1887, was Metis, and he sometimes spoke Cree and wore moccasins in the legislature. His Metis wife, Elizabeth (née Setter), proudly wore beautiful beadwork. Other Metis men were also elected to the Manitoba legislature. Louis Riel was elected to the House of Commons from Manitoba in 1873 and 1874. Concern about the power of the "half-breed vote" in the West continued well into the first decade of the twentieth century.

Metis and First Nations women attended openings of the early Manitoba legislature “in all their Indian finery – Hudson’s Bay blankets, feathers, beads.” So too did the Indigenous wives of politicians. Donald A. Smith (Lord Strathcona), one of the wealthiest men in Canada, was a Manitoba MLA from 1870 to 1874 (and an MP from Manitoba from 1870 to 1880). His wife, Bella (née Hardisty), Lady Strathcona, was a “daughter of the fur trade” with Indigenous ancestry. For many years, Bella Norquay, daughter of the premier, served as Manitoba’s assistant legislative librarian and thus played a key role in maintaining historical records of the young province. The first meetings of Manitoba’s government were held at the home of wealthy merchant A.G.B. Bannatyne and his Metis wife, Annie (née McDermot); she was famous for having horsewhipped Ontario writer Charles Mair in 1869 for slurs he published about the Metis women of Red River. Sometimes, speeches in Cree or Saulteaux were given in the legislature, such as by MLA Glenlyon Campbell, who was married to Harriet Burns, from a prominent Saulteaux family, and by MLA Horace Chevrier, who was married to Maggie Gingras, from a prosperous Metis merchant family.

West of Manitoba, the North-West Territories were administered by a federally appointed lieutenant governor and councillors. There was one Metis on the council, Pascal Breland, but he was not from the western Metis settlements of the South Saskatchewan River, who made up the majority of the Metis population. In 1878, the Metis of the South Saskatchewan petitioned the federal government for their own representative. Under the North-West Territories Acts of 1875 and 1877, Metis males could vote and be elected, but the first election was not held until 1881. The vote was granted to “*bonâ fide* male residents and householders of adult age, not being aliens, or unenfranchised Indians.” The first elected member of council for the district that included the Metis settlements of the South Saskatchewan, however, was an Englishman and employee of the HBC.



The daughter of a Metis mother and a Scottish father, Annie McDermot Bannatyne (1832–1908) married a prosperous businessman. The first legislatures of the province of Manitoba were held at her house. She was active in charitable causes but is most famous for having horsewhipped Ontario surveyor Charles Mair in 1869 for his derogatory comments about Metis women.

Metis women could vote under the suffrage legislation of 1916. Before that date, Metis widows and unmarried women had the municipal franchise in jurisdictions that permitted female voters so long as they met the property qualifications.

#### **SUFFRAGIST BLINKERS**

The sizable presence of Indigenous peoples, along with settlers of various ethnicities, made the Prairies distinct from other regions. Suffragists endorsed the settler colonial goal of erasing and replacing Indigenous peoples. None of the leading activists raised

the issue of votes for Indigenous women or men. In 1915, Winnipeg Labour politician and suffragist Fred Dixon held that treaty men should be excluded from the franchise. His “Let the Women Vote” article in the *Grain Growers’ Guide*, a farm journal, offered examples of what “brilliant and clever” women were “doing for the race” but asserted that “certain members of society . . . are very properly barred from voting, namely: idiots, criminals, insane persons, and treaty Indians.”

Most Prairie suffragists were keenly aware of the marginalization of Indigenous peoples and that they were colonizers who had replaced them and profited from their land and resources. Major players such as sisters Francis Marion Beynon and Lillian Beynon Thomas, Henrietta Muir Edwards, and Emily Murphy personally knew Indigenous people and sometimes wrote about them. Edwards lived on the Kainai (Blood) Reserve in southern Alberta for eleven years, from 1904, and before that had travelled extensively among the Cree, Saulteaux, and Assiniboine of Saskatchewan. She would have been familiar with the Indian Act, residential schools, and policies such as the pass system that diminished the freedoms and rights of First Nations people. Edwards hired Kainai women to work in her home. Emily Murphy and her husband, the Reverend Arthur Murphy, made huge profits in Western Canada as land speculators and through their ownership and sale of timber and coal. Her books boosted settlement, extolled the resources of the West, and encouraged women of British stock to colonize while casting Indigenous peoples as sad and sorry disappearing remnants.

Expressions of sympathy or concern for the marginalization and impoverishment of Indigenous peoples were rare. Journalist Francis Beynon’s remarks in a February 1914 column pertained to “foreign” immigrants rather than Indigenous peoples: “Because we of the Anglo-Saxon race have been able to bully less militant and aggressive peoples into handing over their territory to us is a

poor basis for the assumption that we as a race are the anointed of God and the one and only righteous and virtuous people." But even these strong words did not single out the West's most marginalized people.

When suffragists discussed Indigenous women, it was typically to insist upon invidious contrasts. In her 1913 book, *An English-woman in the Canadian West*, Elizabeth Keith Morris evoked the period's pervasive imagery of the "degraded drudge" who supposedly did not want, need, or understand women's rights, unlike settler women. Morris wrote that in the West, "squaws and half breeds," who were "naturally devoid of culture and education," dedicated all their "strength, their brains and their beauty to their lords." Their "abject subjection brought them a certain contented happiness, but women's rights were unheard and undreamt of . . . where a woman was born to serve and not to demand." For Morris, the sight of such a woman in Edmonton, "with her dirty blanket and moccasins," perched on a pony with a clay pipe in her mouth, "humbly and patiently at the back of her lord and master," threw "into marked relief the lot of the [settler] woman in Canada today." Denying modern settler women the right to vote was presented as a remnant of primitive times, when a woman was an "inmate of the harem, a slave, bought and sold like other goods and chattels." Activist Emily Murphy drew similarly invidious contrasts in her writing. Both Murphy and Keith Morris were promoters of the valuable resources of the West and of settlers, not Indigenous peoples, as being entitled to these resources.

From the beginning of the suffrage campaign in the West, the presence of racialized and ethnically diverse male voters performed a similarly useful function. Some suffragists saw "suspect" male voters from places such as Germany, Ukraine, Italy, Asia, and Syria as unworthy of the franchise denied to them. E.A. Partridge, suffragist founder of the *Grain Growers' Guide*, argued in a 1909 editorial that it was an "outrage to deny to the highest minded,

most cultured native-born lady what is cheerfully granted to the lowest browed, most imbruted foreign hobo that chooses to visit our shores." Similar arguments were applied to Metis voters. Opponents of the suffrage cause also drew on unflattering images, questioning if the vote ought to be given to "foreign" women.

Not all activists were prejudiced in equal measure. Nellie McClung and the Beynon sisters defended the rights of the "foreigner," believing that everyone, with the conspicuous exception of First Nations, should be enfranchised. In rural Manitoba, British-born suffragist and pacifist Gertrude Richardson (founder of the Roaring River Suffrage Association) welcomed settlers of diverse ethnicities and thought that Canada was an important and inspiring experiment in international co-operation and peace. In 1915, McClung spoke passionately in defence of immigrant women's enfranchisement; she faltered briefly in 1917, eventually to recant, when she endorsed the Wartime Elections Act – which extended the vote to close female relatives of Canadian soldiers but took it away from Canadian men who had emigrated from enemy countries – as a necessity for the war effort.

#### **DOWER AND HOMESTEAD RIGHTS**

Dower and homestead rights were causes unique to the suffrage campaigns on the Prairies. Both essentially involved land and the desire of settler women to have access to land they believed should be equally theirs. Land recently wrested from its Indigenous owners was at the heart of the settler colonial project, as well as the suffrage cause. Settler women were complicit in the dispossession of Indigenous land, and they sought the right to acquire more in a region where land was the main source of income. They were indignant that settler men had all the power and privilege that landownership permitted.

Dower rights mobilized a wide spectrum of women on the Prairies. Under British common law, a widow had a life interest

in one-third of her husband's property held at the time of his death. This meant that he had to obtain her signature, known as a "bar" of dower, if he wished to sell or mortgage his land during the marriage. But such limited protection soon proved fragile. In Manitoba, dower was abolished in 1885 and in the North-West Territories in 1886. It is not yet clear why, though the elimination has been linked to the fact that many settler men were married to Indigenous women, whom those in power saw as unsuitable to be the beneficiaries of property rights. It is more likely, however, that dower was perceived to conflict with the newly adopted land registration system, Torrens, at a time of rampant speculation on the Prairies, when being forced to obtain the permission of a wife would potentially delay or even inhibit property transfers. Boosters of Torrens maintained that dower laws had to be abolished for the system to work. As a result, women who had established homesteads with their husbands were left destitute, along with their offspring, if a husband absconded and then sold or mortgaged the property.

Reformers took up the issue. In letters written to the *Grain Growers' Guide*, Prairie women shared their experiences and called for dower rights. In 1914, the *Guide* published the tale of John Tightwad, a farmer from the fictitious Pleasant Valley District of Saskatchewan. John's wife, Jennie, did her full share for years but was left with nothing when he deserted her and the children and sold the farm, house, and furniture. Because Jennie had no "legal claim," the story revealed, her position was effectively that of an unpaid domestic.

Prairie women activists also protested the exclusion of most females from the right to homestead. In this case, however, unlike with dower, redress had to be sought from the federal government. The Dominion Lands Act, which determined who could homestead, denied both single and married women the 160-acre grant that was available to any non-First Nations male over the



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In 1914, Francis Beynon of the Grain Growers' Guide raised consciousness among her readers about dower rights for women through the illustrated tale of "John Tightwad," of the fictitious Pleasant Valley, Saskatchewan. The story was published in six instalments in Beynon's column, "The Country Homemakers," from 14 October to 9 December. In it, John entices Jennie to marry him by promising that all his worldly goods (a shack, a yoke of oxen, and a plow) would be hers. Jennie does her full share of work on the farm for eighteen years, both indoors and out, saving the family the salary of a hired hand. But she is left nothing when John sells the farm, house, and livestock and deserts her and their children. After years of working as an unpaid domestic, Jennie has nothing but children to support. Compassionate neighbours find her a small house in the nearby town, and she takes in laundry to make a living, work depicted here. While fictitious, the story was true for many women on the Prairies.

age of eighteen, regardless of marital status. As farming was one of the few means of earning a living on the Prairies, this legislation severely restricted women's economic well-being. Families with sons could acquire large estates, whereas those with daughters could not.

A "homesteads for women" campaign, centred on the women's column of the *Grain Growers' Guide* and conducted by Isabelle Beaton Graham, gathered steam around 1908. Supporters led by Saskatchewan farmer and English journalist Georgina Binnie-Clark concentrated on seeking homestead rights for women of British birth alone, excluding those who were viewed as foreign. This imperialist vision also saw the claims of foreign men to land on the Prairies as dangerous, or at best dubious. According to activists such as Binnie-Clark, extending the land grant to female homesteaders of British ancestry would help squeeze out undesirable immigrants and cultivate superior British civilization on the Prairies, along with crops.

In 1911, as African Americans from Oklahoma arrived in Alberta as homesteaders and more sought to follow, Isabelle Beaton Graham's rhetoric reached new heights of racist intolerance; here was a "negro invasion" of men who had committed "atrocities," the "only corresponding punishment for which is the lawless lynching, and even burning at the stake." Why, she asked, did Canadian women not have "at least an equal share with the foreign negro, in the rich heritage of the Dominion's homestead lands?" Such racist views were, unfortunately, widely shared. Ella Synge, an English doctor and women's suffrage supporter practising in Edmonton, publicly protested the "invasion" as well, warning against the potential for an "enormous increase of outrages on white women." Prejudice persisted even as other rationales for homestead rights emerged, including deterring female migration to cities and attracting white wives for lonely bachelors. Canada's daughters should not have to go to the United States to receive homesteads, reformers argued. In February 1913, the Canadian

Parliament received but ignored a petition with eleven thousand signatures that demanded the homestead privilege for British-born women.

The tactic of elevating some women and denigrating others split the homestead campaign. Winnipeg's labour newspaper, the *Voice*, damned the circulating petition as blatantly discriminatory. The strategy of manipulating fears of racial and ethnic others as part of the campaign to bolster the claims of British-born women to homesteads failed in the end. Prejudice and exclusion did not go well with calls for equality and justice, a lesson that would inform the work of many suffragists. Petitioners for the vote would not make the same mistake of explicitly singling out the worthiness of the British-born, though the superiority of British settler women was often stressed. Some suffrage supporters did seek to curtail the voting rights of immigrants, but raising fears of the foreign woman's vote was mostly a tactic of those who opposed the enfranchisement of women.

#### **PROVINCIAL POLITICS AND THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT**

In his essay "The Pattern of Prairie Politics," political scientist Nelson Wiseman argued that in each of the Prairie provinces the first wave of settlement, following the British and French Canadian fur traders, was largely Ontarian. Ontarian settlers formed the "charter group" in each province, but they had the greatest impact on Manitoba, where a nineteenth-century-Ontario Liberal Party tradition with a Tory touch became the most powerful political force. In Saskatchewan, a contest arose between Ontario liberalism and British socialism/labourism. In Alberta, American agrarian populist liberalism took hold. No sustained analysis has been done on how the composition of the suffrage movement fits or challenges these characterizations. On the face of it, there appear to be some parallels, with Ontario-born activists such as Cora Hind and Nellie McClung prominent in Manitoba. In

Saskatchewan, activist leader Violet McNaughton was an English socialist. Some leaders in the Alberta campaign were American-born, such as Alice Jamieson. These categorizations do not survive closer scrutiny, however. American Zoa Haight was prominent in Saskatchewan activism, and Quebecer Henrietta Muir Edwards was highly influential in Alberta, along with Ontarians such as Emily Murphy.

In all three provinces, petitions to the legislature were at the heart of the suffrage campaigns. Throughout the Western world, petitions were used to mobilize support; they were one of the few channels of political expression open to women. They were an ancient and fundamental right of citizens who sought redress for an injustice, and the British House of Commons' tradition of petitioning was inherited by Canada's Parliament and legislatures. There was no guarantee that petitions would be considered and acted upon. Yet, they fostered a sense of unity, as suffragists shared the experience of collecting signatures and finding advocates in the legislatures.

It was the Liberal Party in all three provinces that passed the 1916 legislation permitting most women to vote in the Prairie provinces. That did not mean, however, that the Liberals were the drivers of change and consistently devout supporters of the cause. In Manitoba, it was not until the election of 1914 that the Liberals made female suffrage a plank in their platform (if elected, they did not promise to enact legislation until petitions demonstrated adequate support from the women of the province). In Saskatchewan, the Liberal premier, Walter Scott, prevaricated as long as he could, demanding more displays of support from women through letters and petitions right up until the winter of 1916. In that province, the Conservatives posed as supporters of the cause from as early as 1912. In Alberta, the Liberal premier, Arthur Sifton, tried to ignore the issue as long as he could, and he too demanded ever more evidence of support from women until late in 1915.

**MAKING COMMON CAUSE**

Although the struggle for dower and homestead rights was unique to the Prairies, suffragists in these three provinces shared other causes with suffragists elsewhere. Calls for prohibition, or temperance, consolidated the enfranchisement campaign in the Canadian West and created links with national and international organizations and agendas.

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) stood in the vanguard of the movement. Originating in 1874 in the United States, it blossomed across Canada, where it became for decades the largest national women's organization and the major voice of activist evangelical Protestant women. The WCTU argued that prohibition would alleviate female suffering in families where drink led to neglect, impoverishment, or violence. The organization also embraced prison work, travellers' aid, maternity hospitals, the abolishment of prostitution, and child welfare. In the 1890s, the Dominion WCTU began to call for female enfranchisement in order to accomplish the wide array of reforms in its broad-based platform.

A variety of explanations have been posited for the close link between temperance and suffrage. One is that both causes were inherently conservative, reinforcing ideas of women's special nature. Another is that temperance was a feminist means of combatting the domestic violence that WCTU members saw as the result of alcohol abuse, to which "foreign" men were thought to be particularly susceptible. For the Prairies, it has also been argued that the preponderance of single male settlers, along with their rates of alcohol consumption, encouraged settler women to support the WCTU and the franchise in hopes of establishing a more stable environment. Suffrage activists could appeal to wide audiences and garner considerable support through their association with temperance. Yet, we will see that leaders such as Amelia Yeomans were careful to separate the issues of temperance and suffrage, so as not to alienate potential supporters who had no

wish to “banish the bar.” Activist Violet McNaughton was not especially keen on temperance but was willing to work with devotees to that cause. The situation was complicated, and recent studies show that the links between suffrage and temperance were more complex and less conventional than previously thought.

WCTU meetings and activities provided women with public speaking, lobbying, fundraising, and organizational skills. Young Ontarian teacher Louise Crummy, for example, settled in North Dakota during the early 1890s and became “State Evangelist” for the WCTU. She learned to be an effective orator, a skill she later used in Alberta under her married name of McKinney, as the province’s first female MLA and one of the Famous Five.

Scholars have emphasized the whiteness of the WCTU. Members wore white ribbons to symbolize purity and health. A child who signed a WCTU pledge never to consume intoxicating drinks was known as a Little White Ribboner. The pledges, further adorned with the father’s signature, bore a photo of a smiling blond child above the words “The Hope of the Race Is the Child.” Metaphors regarding the superiority of whiteness permeated the organization.

Most activists in the WCTU and other women’s groups throughout Canada were middle class and might well have depended on the work of servants to permit them to forge lives outside the home. In 1915, Nellie McClung wrote that women (of her class) everywhere talked about how to acquire capable and reliable girls. She favoured improved working conditions, with standardized hours, specified duties, and respect. McClung wrote that housework required more “brains, more originality, and [more] good judgement than many occupations” in industry.

For all its underlying racial and class biases, however, the suffrage cause on the Prairies attracted working-class supporters, particularly in Winnipeg. From the mid-1890s, the province’s Trades and Labour Council (TLC) was an open advocate of enfranchisement,

and meetings of the Social Democratic Party discussed reforms of interest to women. Some high-profile women, such as Mary Hislop and Winona Flett Dixon, moved between middle-class circles and those of the labour and socialist parties. None of this prevented a vocal critique that the suffrage movement did not represent working-class interests. For socialist women, the struggle against capitalism was the fundamental issue, a perspective that was not shared by liberal activists such as Nellie McClung.

In common with activists elsewhere, suffragists of the West stressed the innate maternal qualities of women. Scholars have affixed various labels to this generation of activists, whose members have overwhelmingly been criticized as maternal feminists. Drawing on a popular reverence for motherhood, with its appeal to sisterly solidarity, social purity campaigners urged women to apply their special maternal and nurturing qualities to public life. These activists did not question the notion that women should be responsible for home and family, and in fact they believed that legislation should protect this ideal. Yet, even as prominent advocates of the suffragist cause stressed the importance and sanctity of motherhood, they supported reforms that would dramatically expand and alter women's roles. Nellie McClung is a good example. She spoke eloquently of the sacred nature of motherhood, yet she believed that women should forge lives beyond the home. Why, she asked, could men have several roles – storekeeper, school trustee, and church warden – whereas women with homes had to be housekeepers all day and every day? McClung felt that women could have both careers and raise children, as long as other family members did their share. Like that of many others, her vision of the future could be simultaneously radical and reactionary. Hoping to maximize support, suffrage activists rarely overtly challenged gender roles, whatever their own feelings. Expediency regularly trumped justice.

Most suffrage activists on the Prairies shared British ancestry. There were a few exceptions, including Edmonton activist Jennie

Boyaner (née Rittenberg), who was Jewish and whose parents were from Lithuania, and Russian-born Mary Nicolaeff, an Alberta contributor to the *Grain Growers' Guide*. Manitoba's Icelandic women were active in the suffrage movement from the late nineteenth century on. But many suffragists were ardent imperialists who believed in British superiority. As in other British colonies, feminism often took on a profoundly imperialist tone. When these activists extolled maternal virtues, they were talking about white, preferably British Canadian mothers, and they posited that the enfranchisement of white women would secure the nation from "race degeneration." By 1911, the *Grain Growers' Guide* was also paying considerable attention to the "science" of eugenics, in columns with such titles as "Parenthood and Race Culture." The word "eugenics" was first used in the cause of safer childbirth in the West; births had to be safe if women were to go about their work of "peopling the prairies," which was understood to mean peopling by white Europeans, preferably the British. Concern for the eradication of the "feeble-minded" focused on the non-British immigrant population and became more widespread after the First World War. Eugenic feminists, such as Edmonton's Emily Murphy, were especially visible in Alberta.

But there were suffragist critics of the British Empire too. Before arriving in Manitoba from England, Gertrude Richardson was among those who viewed the South African War as ignoble and shameful. As the atrocities and the death toll of the First World War mounted, Prairie campaigners such as Richardson, the Beynon sisters of Manitoba, and Saskatchewan's Violet McNaughton vocally chose peace over imperialism.

Most suffragists could be described as deeply religious and Protestant. In the United States, Methodist women such as Frances Willard were prominent suffragists, and this was also the case in Prairie Canada. Methodist Nellie McClung was convinced that God intended a "fair deal" for everyone. In her view, Christianity emphasized the human over the masculine. Christ's teachings

were truly “democratic,” without “distinction between men and women,” and she railed against churches that departed from these principles. Like the Beynon sisters, she supported the evangelical outreach of social gospeller J.S. Woodsworth of the All People’s Mission in Winnipeg. Woodsworth was a Methodist, and the Beynons too were raised in that denomination. Henrietta Muir Edwards was a devout Baptist, described by her biographer Patricia Roome as an evangelical feminist. Again, however, there were exceptions. Not particularly religious, Violet McNaughton criticized the treatment of women in the churches. Gertrude Richardson favoured the great inclusion offered by the Quakers.

More work needs to be done on the suffrage movement and religion, including how some supporters, such as Anglicans, departed from a church hierarchy that did not embrace voting rights for women, and how the theologies of various denominations restricted or equipped female activists. For example, the Unitarian Church played an important role in the effort to secure the vote in Manitoba, where there were Icelandic congregations, and in Edmonton, where academics and reformers, including socialists, gathered. New settlers to the West, including Doukhobors from Russia, believed in voting rights for women, as did Mormons from Utah, where settler women first exercised the franchise in 1870.

The vast tapestry of religious denominations and beliefs makes it challenging to delineate all the variations in attitudes toward the rights of women, but Catholics certainly expressed little discernible support for suffrage. In Quebec, as elsewhere, the Catholic hierarchy opposed women’s right to vote. The first Catholic Women’s League in Canada was established in 1912 in Edmonton by Katherine Hughes, an Irish journalist, librarian, historian, and adamant opponent of female enfranchisement. Franco-Manitoban suffragist and Catholic Lorena “Dollee” Chevrier resented the restrictions of church and community, eventually departing Winnipeg for the United States, where she joined the 1913 women’s march on Washington, according to family sources.

Many activists in the suffrage movement were urbanites, but during the earliest years of the Manitoba campaign, activists and petition signers were overwhelmingly rural, and the rural-urban divide was not clear-cut on the Prairies. McClung and the Beynons, for example, were raised on homesteads and had lived in small towns before arriving in Winnipeg, so they knew the rigours of rural life. And in many cases, activists on isolated homesteads had started out as urbanites in Ontario or England. Jessie Turnbull McEwan, who settled with her family on a homestead near Brandon in 1884, had helped found the Toronto Women's Literary Club in 1877, and she became its first president in 1883, when the club was reorganized as Canada's first suffrage society, the Canadian Women's Suffrage Association. Gertrude Richardson became a rural Manitoban but was originally from the city of Leicester.

Prominent Saskatchewan reformers Violet McNaughton and Zoa Haight were farmers, subsequently described as agrarian feminists. Whereas the Saskatchewan Women's Grain Growers Association, formed in 1913, played the leading role in the movement for suffrage in that province, the women's section of the Manitoba Grain Growers Association was not formed until 1918 and therefore played no role in the campaign. The United Farm Women of Alberta, established in 1915 as an auxiliary to the United Farmers of Alberta, was never in the suffrage vanguard but nevertheless provided vital support at a critical and final stage. For farm women like McNaughton, the vote was a tool to employ in a common struggle alongside male farmers to bolster the agrarian reform agenda.

Like suffragists elsewhere in Canada, Prairie activists largely agreed to shun the confrontational and militant activities of the British suffragettes. Broken windows, jail terms, hunger strikes, marches, demonstrations, or even parades were seen as anathema. With newspapers exaggerating tales of the lawless British suffragettes and holding such violence as injurious to enfranchisement, local activists had all the greater reason to avoid militancy. Some

of them nevertheless agreed that militant tactics were appropriate in England, where activists had tried peaceful strategies and failed, and welcomed visiting speakers such as Emmeline Pankhurst and Barbara Wylie.

In strategically stressing that militancy was not necessary in Canada, Prairie suffragists drew on the myth of the West as equalizer, where the men in power recognized the worth of settler women, even though they themselves knew that the region was certainly not an idealized egalitarian idyll and that the franchise would not be quickly or easily granted. Invoking the pioneer spirit and values of the Prairies, activists stressed the newness of the region, ignoring the ancient Indigenous presence. The hope was that if they talked enough about it, the “Land of the Fair Deal” would be realized without resort to confrontation. After the vote was won, this flattery would continue in some quarters, with declarations of undying gratitude to the male legislators who had honoured women with this gift.

Government-supported women’s clubs such as the Home Economics Societies of Manitoba, the Homemakers’ Clubs of Saskatchewan, and the Women’s Institutes of Alberta helped to keep women domestic and discouraged them from joining the suffrage cause. In return for small provincial grants, members of these groups were pressured to remain apolitical. This was also the case in other provinces, most notably Ontario, through the Women’s Institutes, which began there in 1897 and were later adopted in other countries. Despite their design as apolitical, however, the meetings of these groups provided space and scope for feminist activity, and suffrage, dower, homestead rights, and other causes were sometimes discussed, with activists acquiring valuable allies.

Scholars have divided the strategies of suffragists into “outsider” and “insider” categories. Outsider tactics, aimed at educating the general public to gain allies and secure signatures for petitions, included speeches, pamphlets, mock parliaments,

debates, and articles published by influential journalists. At picnics such as one organized in 1913 by the Roaring River group, speeches were given by prominent male supporters, including social gospeller William Irvine, who decorated his buggy with "Votes for Women" placards. Insider strategies focused on finding male supporters in the legislatures to introduce suffrage, dower, and temperance legislation and on trying to infiltrate the elite circles of lieutenant governors and premiers, sometimes through sympathetic wives, even if those women could not support the cause publicly. Only in Manitoba did suffrage activists become involved in provincial election campaigns.

As with suffragists elsewhere in Canada, historians and other commentators have assigned a long list of labels to Prairie suffragists, categorizing their feminism as maternal, agrarian, evangelical, equal rights, imperialist, socialist, liberal, and eugenic. The activists of the time would not have recognized most of these terms, however. Emily Murphy, for example, rejected the term "feminist," writing, "I do not like the word 'feminist.' It is a poor and paltry word when applied to a movement which today dominates all other questions, that involves the social, individual, and moral freedom of the entire world. This, *this*, is a humanist movement."

Throughout Canada and beyond, activists encountered anti-suffrage opposition that was consistent in depth, persistence, and nature; wherever the movement took hold, the same rationales and anxieties were pressed into service. Prominent opponents in Canada included the spouse of the prime minister, Lady Zoé Laurier, who declared in 1910 that English suffragettes were "indecent and unwomanly" and that it was "unheard of for a woman to compete with masculine superiority." Opposition was most vocal and intransigent in Manitoba, where Premier Rodmond Roblin regularly trotted out his fears that the sanctity of the home would be shattered, causing discord between wives and husbands; that children would be neglected; and that involvement in politics would taint the purity of women. Most of all,



This porcelain match holder from the 1910s in Winnipeg expresses the anti-suffrage sentiment common at the time, equating women suffragists with quacking geese.

Roblin stressed that more proof of support was needed from women themselves. The premiers farther west, Walter Scott in Saskatchewan and Arthur J. Sifton in Alberta, were less outspoken in their opposition, but both effectively used the delaying tactics that Roblin introduced – requesting delegations to return again and again with more signatures. Strategically, both Scott and Sifton indicated that they personally favoured enfranchisement but were not convinced that the majority of women agreed. In all three Prairie provinces, women were required to beg for the vote, again and again.

#### **DESERVING SETTLER WOMEN**

Almost all suffrage organizers on the Prairies were settlers born elsewhere. They had to acclimatize themselves to an unfamiliar

and often inhospitable environment. In the West, farms and towns were scattered, transportation and communication networks were weak, and winter descended for many months of the year. After displacing the original inhabitants, settlers laboured hard to make the Prairies their permanent home, and suffragists frequently claimed that the sacrifice and toil of pioneer women had helped to establish settler hegemony. In 1912, Byrtha L. Stavert, Winnipeg suffragist, journalist, and president of the International Congress of Farm Women, was pleased to report that at a recent Lethbridge meeting the organization had decided to “erect a memorial to the pioneer farm woman,” which would be placed somewhere in the West on the forty-ninth parallel. The sculpture, “a woman shielding a young boy [with] both . . . grasping a gun,” would “commemorate the struggles of the lonely pioneer woman in defending her home and children from the attacks of Indians.” Though no such attacks occurred on the Canadian Prairies, and it is not known whether the monument was erected, the initiative demonstrates the use of racial stereotypes by suffrage supporters to bolster their cause and to establish who deserved rights and privileges and who did not. Women such as Elizabeth Wasacase would have to wait forty-five more years for their rights to be recognized.

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