

The Last Suffragist Standing

The Life and Times of Laura
Marshall Jamieson

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UBC Press • Vancouver • Toronto

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Contents

List of Illustrations / ix

Acknowledgments / xi

Introduction / 3

- 1 The Girl from the Saugeen Peninsula, 1882–1911 / 12
- 2 The New Woman as Wife, Suffragist, and Activist, 1911–18 / 41
- 3 Still Bettering the World, 1918–26 / 62
- 4 Widowed Judge and Progressive Activist, 1927–39 / 80
- 5 The Challenge of Electoral Politics, 1927–39 / 102
- 6 Suffragist in the BC Legislature, 1939–41 / 120
- 7 Legislative Veteran, 1941–45 / 141
- 8 Taking on Post-war Misogyny and Vancouver Politics, 1945–64 / 162
- 9 Faithful Social Democrat, 1945–64 / 181

Conclusion / 211

Postscript from Four Granddaughters / 215

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Abbreviations / 221

Notes / 223

Selected Bibliography / 259

Index / 263

Illustrations

- Map of Indian reserves on the Saugeen/Bruce Peninsula / 13
- Laura as a child, Saugeen Peninsula, c. 1888 / 19
- Souvenir of Owen Sound, Ontario, 1900 / 22
- Fernie, British Columbia, c. 1902 / 26
- Laura with the University College Women's Literary Society, c. 1908 / 29
- Laura's graduation portrait, University of Toronto, 1908 / 32
- John Stuart Jamieson, University of Toronto, c. 1908 / 39
- The "Great Cause" in British Columbia, 1912 / 47
- Champion of minimum wage, 1918 / 49
- British Columbia as suffrage black spot, 1916 / 56
- Vancouver Mother's Council aids the unemployed, 1935 / 99
- Five women members of the BC legislature, 1941 / 143
- British Columbia's CCF women champions, 1941 / 144
- Vancouver City Council, 1947–48 / 171
- Laura Jamieson, BC MLA, 1952 / 195

Introduction

Risk-takers come in many guises. Even as myths of all sorts prefer them young, beautiful, frequently seemingly classless, and most often male, exceptions abound. *The Last Suffragist Standing: The Life and Times of Laura Marshall Jamieson* highlights just this alternative to fashion. This BC New Woman, suffragist, social democratic activist, juvenile court judge, Vancouver alderman, and CCF politician might have lacked the glitz attributed to much risk taking, but she possessed the requisite nerve. During a lifetime that began as a soon-to-be orphaned child on a marginal farm and ended as a frail veteran of Canada's struggles for equality, Laura, as she is often called in these pages, ventured where few contemporaries dared. She stayed loyal to a vision of a more just world.

Four broad stories percolate through *The Last Suffragist Standing's* account of one extraordinary person. First, the tale of the girl from the Saugeen Peninsula (better known as the Bruce Peninsula) – who became in turn Miss Marshall, Mrs. John Stuart Jamieson, and finally Laura Jamieson – explores the evolution of political consciousness. Feminists, like feminism, are shifting products of particular times and places: some ideas and opportunities are nourished, whereas others are waylaid. Though political labels are frequently invoked to sum up individuals, the conditional nature of the journey that got them there is commonly left unsaid. From the beginning, however, I wondered how someone who was so connected with Canada's middle-class women's club movement and so generally represented as a respectable lady sufficiently questioned convention to become a suffragist, a birth controller, a peace worker, a champion of minimum

wage, a social democratic activist, and British Columbia's fourth and Canada's tenth female parliamentarian.¹ Laura became far more than might have been predicted and far more than she often seemed to contemporaries and later scholars. Her trajectory, inspired and contained as it was by the times in which she lived, helped shape modern Canada.

At first glance, Laura's origins in rural Ontario, stints as a teacher, social worker, and juvenile court judge, not to mention her marriage to a Presbyterian lawyer, might have suggested a very different path. Indeed, during the First World War, Laura toyed with the promise of the provincial Liberal Party. On the other hand, her escape from rural poverty into study and a passion for mountaineering offered clues of different prospects. In her youth, Laura joined Canada's contingent of New Women to baulk at restraint and question tradition. She joined a remarkable cohort on the left who, as the biographer of Helena Gutteridge, another such radical, has suggested, "managed their personal lives without necessarily submitting to the social strictures that still fettered women. Essentially family women, they were not 'bohemian' and they did not believe in free love, but they believed in themselves and found their own kind of liberation."² Suffrage and economic justice campaigns sharpened Laura's dissension from the status quo.

By the end of the Great War, in taking up crusades for peace, internationalism, and socialism, she increasingly distinguished herself from the majority of her feminist contemporaries. The history she shared with suffragists who trusted in mainstream parties made Laura a highly suspect recruit for much of British Columbia's left, long associated with unions and working-class radicalism. Looking at this slim, well-spoken clubwoman, malestream socialists commonly took for granted her conventionality and their own radical superiority. Despite that reception, she remained a feminist champion of social democracy.

In sum, Laura's life offers ample reminders of the constructed, fluid, and uncertain nature of political allegiances.³ Whatever her contemporary critics believed, Jamieson was not frozen in ladylike aspic. In response to evolving challenges to conscience, from the early twentieth-century factories of Stratford, Ontario, to the Great Depression and the internment of Japanese Canadians, she kept enlarging her vision of democracy, albeit incompletely. In 1945, she could insist, as she had not done during the suffrage campaigns, that crusades for equality required the inclusion of "new immigrants, racial minorities and others." Only "equal opportunity for all" satisfied her expanding feminist agenda.⁴ In making sense of its subject, this biography seeks to illuminate the "dialectical relationship between women's experience and the creation of oppositional ideas,"

as recommended by Joan Sangster in the recovery of Canada's non-conforming women.⁵

A second big question to inspire this volume is the nature of the first women's movement and the follow-up to the initial suffrage victories. Many scholars have been transfixed by the middle-class and racist prejudices of suffragists and have paid too little attention to women's rights coalitions, post-suffrage results, or the persisting resistance to gender equality.⁶ Despite that response, feminist visions were in fact diverse and uncertain even as the vote became a common goal. In the years before women were partially enfranchised in 1917 and 1918, British Columbia produced an eclectic band of women's rights activists, some of whom found inspiration in its strong socialist and labour movements. Vancouver feminists forged broad-based partnerships in campaigns for political equality. Those networks did not quickly disappear. They provided inspiration into the 1920s and 1930s, notably in non-partisan support for Mary Ellen Smith, British Columbia's first female MLA, and, later, for the Mother's Council and Vancouver Women's Emergency Committee to Aid the Single Unemployed.

Although Mary Kinnear's observation in *Female Economy: Women's Work in the Prairie Provinces, 1870–1970*, that “only a small handful of the suffragists were later candidates for election” and that most “women who became candidates were drawn from a new and different generation” is for the most part true across Canada,⁷ exceptions were important. In fact, a significant group of BC suffragists persisted in politics, especially in municipal affairs, well after they won the vote for themselves. Mary Ellen Smith was one important example but so too was British suffragette and Canadian suffragist Helena Gutteridge, who finally won office on Vancouver City Council in 1937. In 1939, Laura Jamieson became the last suffragist in British Columbia and in Canada to be elected to a provincial or federal legislature. Her victory drew on the feminist networks that survived from the enfranchisement campaigns.

Laura was often self-conscious about her membership in that broader community. Even as she recommended feminist foremothers such as French socialist Flora Tristan, she reflected on the different political options taken up by her contemporaries. She emphasized that the great causes of justice and freedom led herself and a select group from suffrage activism to left-wing politics. She also sought to explain other choices. Her review of Catherine Cleverdon's pathbreaking *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (1950) stressed the disappointment that “socialist women” felt when “so few of the original suffragists” developed “a vision

of the kind of society that could be achieved by continuing the campaign to include social, economic and political changes.” She faulted many enfranchised women as too wedded to the status quo. She did not spare leaders such as Nellie L. McClung and Emily Murphy, seeing McClung as too narrowly preoccupied with temperance and the franchise, and dismissing Murphy for her senatorial ambitions.⁸

In stark contrast, Jamieson, Gutteridge, and radical friends such as Saskatchewan’s Violet McNaughton and Ontario’s Agnes Macphail interpreted the drive for the vote as only one stage in the inevitably long struggle for full democracy. Suffrage was neither the ultimate nor the sufficient goal. Once enfranchised, Canadian women required inspiration and education in families, schools, co-operatives, and unions. Only lifelong consciousness raising and community building could counter patriarchy and capitalism. Just as there had been no shortcuts for suffrage, there was none to a feminist or socialist future. The fact that all women and racial minorities eventually achieved the vote signalled to Laura that socialism might advance in the same incremental fashion. The alternative was backlash and setback, just what was sometimes attributed to British suffragettes. In the life that is explored in these pages, a politics that might be termed “radical caution” emerges as one legacy of the first women’s movement.

A third significant concern running through this book is the relations of feminism with Canada’s left. Since both vary significantly in their makeup, interaction has always been extremely complicated and often contentious. Most former suffragists who hoped for political office sought progressive options in Liberal parties or in diverse parties on the left, such as Alberta’s Non-Partisan League or the Federated Labour Party, which Laura endorsed in 1920. The fragmentation and internal conflicts of the communist and non-communist left, like those of the BC Liberals and Conservatives, made choices all the more difficult in the post-war decades. Not surprisingly, some suffrage veterans opted out of electoral politics altogether to commit themselves to the radical solutions for peace and co-operation offered by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom or the Women’s Labour League. The pioneering feminist MP Agnes Macphail was typical in exploring various options, shifting from the Progressive Party to the Ginger Group and eventually to the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF).

By the Great Depression that latter party, with its partnership of farmers, socialists, labour activists, and progressive intellectuals, offered justice-seeking women far more than its mainstream competitors. Although its recognition of exploitation rarely highlighted gender or, for that matter,

race, its condemnation of class privilege addressed concerns that had mobilized more radical suffragists such as Laura. Whereas BC Liberals could promise a “little New Deal,” the CCF focus on working people and social security attracted far more outspoken feminist recruits. They trusted the sympathetic reception they received from men such as the first CCF leader, James Shaver Woodsworth, who had endorsed suffrage campaigns. When she became a BC MLA, Laura joined an ongoing effort to establish the CCF as a champion of the rights of women as well as workers.

Yet if the CCF was more promising than conventional parties, priorities and prejudices always troubled its relations with feminists. The influential Second Socialist International (1889–1916) set the stage when it viewed “feminism as a rival enterprise and attempted to counter its attractiveness by smear and counterclaim, by allegations that feminism was irremediably ‘bourgeois,’ that capitalism was the fundamental problem, that class conflict was the motor of history, and that only socialism could resolve the ‘woman question’ – but only after the victory of the proletariat.”⁹ Though they have largely let far more egregious mainstream political offenders off the hook, most scholars have confirmed this distrust. Socialists in the CCF, like members of other progressive parties, frequently preferred to sidestep the radical message of gender equality. This meant treating Laura and other feminists as suspect interlopers on terrain that belonged above all to male labour socialists and progressive intellectuals.

The feminist writers of columns variously titled “Women’s Views,” “The Women’s View Point,” “Mainly for Women,” and “A Word to the Wives” in the CCF newspaper highlighted hostility. One 1939 contributor captured the recurring clash: “I find that among men of my acquaintance I am said to ‘carry a torch’ ... for women ... A few years ago and it was only men who stuck together, women supposedly selling each other out with every breath ... We have travelled far in the right direction.”¹⁰ Few early feminists would have been happy with subsequent histories of the Canadian left. Many repeat the original disrespect. Historian James Naylor’s key recognition that the BC CCF was never homogeneous and always diverse has been more honoured in the breach than in the observance.¹¹ Recent fascination with supposed populism or labour socialism in the CCF typically does little more than re-enact original indifference to feminism and gender analysis.¹² The struggle of Laura and others to win recognition of feminism as essential to a truly radical politics is, however, a central part of the story that follows.

The final current animating *The Last Suffragist Standing* infused the entirety of the years under scrutiny. Only recently have Canadians begun

to consider racism as a fundamental flaw, and recognition of the magnitude of gender prejudices has been equally slow. Misogyny and anti-feminism have always crippled parliaments and assemblies, churches, schools, professions, employments, and the media. My research for this biography supplied ample reminders of the steady assault on women's self-respect and material well-being, and this is essential to understanding Canada in these years. Reading the determinedly conservative *Saturday Night* magazine from its inception in Toronto in 1887, soon after Laura was born, provided only one lesson in male disparagement and too often as well in women's apparent self-hatred. The usually less reactionary *Maclean's Magazine*, *Chatelaine*, and mainstream and labour, socialist, and communist newspapers were frequently little better. Leading anti-suffrage intellectuals from Goldwin Smith to Andrew Macphail and Henri Bourassa had many misogynous heirs who found ready audiences across the dominion.¹³ Few commentators fit Agnes Macphail's description of "men who think a woman should get a fair break."¹⁴

Patriarchy's champions frustrated feminist activists and corrupted parties in the years that Laura was active politically. On the left stood many men like Tom Uphill (1874–1962). A former coalminer in Wales, long-time labour and socialist alderman, mayor, and MLA from Fernie, British Columbia, Uphill was an irrepressible misogynist. From the beginning, he unfurled his standard as "one of the boys," with "hundreds of 'nieces'" and an office featuring "pictures of pin-up girls on the walls."¹⁵ Between 1939 and 1945 and from 1952 to 1953, Laura had to endure his presence in the Victoria legislature. Uphill's arrogance was easily matched on the respectable right. In 1930, one of Canada's many supposedly "grand old men" of political life, Conservative journalist and senator Grattan O'Leary (1888–1976), comfortably pontificated, "Men, too, especially the old-line, hard-boiled partisans, are suspicious of the woman politician, disdainful of her efforts, and often openly contemptuous of her achievements."¹⁶ Like Fernie's good old boy, O'Leary viewed women as incapable of playing the legislative game, which had to follow male rules. No wonder Laura declined to run in the 1930 federal election. Despite their pragmatic endorsement of women suffrage, Liberals proved little better. Even as Laura battled for a second term on Vancouver City Council, Bruce Hutchison, the reputable dean of BC journalists, flaunted his derision for half of humanity. Writing in the *Vancouver News-Herald* in 1949, he mocked women as "the all-powerful, unknown, deified, glamorized and unintelligible, riddle" who "will spend anything" and "believe anything." Far from ideal democratic subjects, such creatures could only be inferior

legislators.¹⁷ Such blatant bigotry, like wandering hands and taken-for-granted domestic violence, undermined all pretensions to equality. The persistence of that deeply immoral landscape ensured that Laura's choices to seek education and professional employment, to demand suffrage and peace, to insist upon economic justice, and eventually to enter politics always trespassed on dangerous territory.

Such feminist trailblazers, with all they mean for the state of democracy, merit far better treatment than they received in their own time. Biographies, such as the appropriately titled *The Struggle for Social Justice in British Columbia: Helena Gutteridge, the Unknown Reformer*, by Irene Howard, and *Rose Henderson: A Woman for the People*, by Peter Campbell, offer the obvious redress to faulty observation and memory. Fortunate biographers have access to significant personal papers and/or the iconoclasts themselves as well as those who knew them well. No scholar investigating Canadian suffragists, with the conspicuous exception of the path-breaking Catherine L. Cleverdon who was able to interview suffrage veterans, has yet been so lucky. Few private or personal records survive of that critical generation. This study of Jamieson is no exception: like those of Gutteridge and Henderson, her papers are minimal, indeed misleading, and memories of her are scant. Few expressions of her innermost thoughts survive. The BC Provincial Archives holds the pages of her unpublished autobiography, but they portray a rose-tinted life that is often at odds with reality. Much information in her papers at the archives can be found elsewhere, and the limited correspondence tells little.

Lacking a treasure trove, *The Last Suffragist Standing* relies heavily on a diverse array of evidence and spotlights particular historical contexts and places to make sense of Laura. Autobiographies and biographies of her contemporaries, histories of Ontario and British Columbia, accounts of suffrage campaigns and female politicians, studies of the CCF, and investigations of the employments and causes she took up set the stage on which her life unfolded and illuminate her contributions. Magisterial and doctoral theses, first of all the compelling assessment by my former student Susan Walsh of the CCF quartet Jamieson, Gutteridge, Dorothy Gretchen Steeves, and Grace MacInnis – but many others as well – proved a godsend in charting activism and political movements that Laura joined or opposed.¹⁸ Foundational scholarship on women activists, the Canadian left, and British Columbia by Joan Sangster, Linda Kealey, Irene Howard, James Naylor, Benjamin Isitt, Robert A.J. McDonald, Mark Leier, Peter Campbell, Jean Barman, Lisa Pasolli, and Thomas Socknat, among others, has mapped the critical terrain on which Laura tried to make a difference.

Primary materials in archives, periodicals, and the Internet provided other clues to reconstructing a largely forgotten activist. Though all too scarce, useful archival sources appeared in CCF and related papers at the University of British Columbia, in clubwomen's holdings at the Vancouver City Archives, in student records at the University of Toronto Archives, in Violet McNaughton's papers in the Saskatchewan Archives, and in Kathleen Shannon's at Library and Archives Canada. Newspapers and magazines added substantially to the emerging portrait. First of all, Laura's extensive writings, notably in CCF publications, offered a running commentary on many battles. Newspapers in Fernie, Burnaby, and Vancouver similarly did much to compensate for the lack of key records, such as a BC *Hansard* for the years that Laura was an MLA (1939–45, 1952–53), official minutes of Vancouver City Council on which she served (1948–49), and reports of the juvenile court overseen first by her husband (1923–26) and then by Laura herself (1927–38). A raft of local and popular histories had much to teach about settler farming on the Saugeen or Bruce Peninsula in the late nineteenth century, Kootenay mining towns where she taught, and Burnaby, a Vancouver suburb where she lived as a wife and ventured forth as a widow. I have also been repeatedly grateful to the Internet. One afternoon, for example, it unexpectedly produced a picture of Eliza Marshall, Laura's indispensable and far more forgotten nursing sister, without whom she would have been hard pressed to escape rural poverty.

With much help, *The Last Suffragist Standing* tells its complex story of a single individual and her times in nine substantive chapters. The first examines Laura Emma Marshall as a farm child, student, teacher, mountain-climber, and YWCA secretary from 1882 to 1911. Progress was marked by hard work, scant money, and stubborn accomplishment in an environment where Anglo-Celtic hegemony and the displacement of the First Nations were taken for granted. In testing settlers' boundaries of education and employment for her sex, she became one of Canada's New Women. [Chapter 2](#) considers Laura as a middle-class wife, mother, suffragist, and activist from 1911 to 1918 in the BC Lower Mainland, increasingly the centre of the province's feminist protest. Married to John Stuart Jamieson, a University of Toronto classmate and liberal lawyer, she shared with him a commitment to the social gospel and women's empowerment even as she gave birth to three children. Both Laura and John joined the BC suffrage movement. [Chapter 3](#) turns to the years after the First World War, when Laura balanced marriage to a rising legal professional with her embrace of radicalism in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Parent-Teacher Association,

and socialist politics. No longer part of the liberal mainstream, she forged a post-enfranchisement activism that was committed to raising feminist consciousness and expanding democracy. In 1926, John Jamieson, her stalwart anchor into the middle class, unexpectedly died. His death ushered in the next chapter in Laura's evolution. [Chapter 4](#) considers her experience as a widow, juvenile court judge, and steadfast reformer from 1927 to 1939. As her children grew to maturity, she supported her family and joined other activists in tackling the Great Depression's deepening of domestic and global injustice. [Chapter 5](#) sets forth the challenge of electoral politics that increasingly engaged her during those years. With gender and class her central concerns, she joined the social democratic wing of the newly formed CCF, which was led by her early mentor James S. Woodsworth. In 1939, she became the successful CCF candidate in a provincial by-election in Vancouver Centre. [Chapter 6](#) then turns to Laura's first term in the BC legislature (1939–41). Joining the other female MLAs, CCFer Dorothy Gretchen Steeves and Liberal Helen Douglas Smith, she quickly made her own mark as a dedicated advocate for women and workers. In addressing issues from juvenile delinquency to childcare, female employment, and housing, she emerged as an effective parliamentarian. [Chapter 7](#) continues the legislative story to focus on Laura's second term, from 1941 to 1945. She proved herself a distinguished member of the largest group of women elected to any Canadian parliament until the 1970s. Commitment and skill in promoting social justice did not protect her from defeat in 1945. [Chapter 8](#) describes the reactionary climate that created the conditions for her spirited engagement as a city councillor and activist in Vancouver's post-war municipal politics. Civic democracy was her banner. [Chapter 9](#) then addresses her efforts as an MLA during 1952–53 and as a CCF activist until her death. Her opposition to doctrinaire Marxism and emphasis on the centrality of women's rights to the overthrow of capitalism during the Cold War placed her firmly on one wing of Canada's left politics. Old age and the conservatism of her times slowed Laura down, but disabilities never extinguished her passion for justice. She survived to become a founding member of the CCF's successor, the New Democratic Party. Ultimately, Canada's last suffragist standing remained an irrepressible champion of greater democracy.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Strong-Boag, Veronica, author
The last suffragist standing : the life and times of Laura Marshall
Jamieson / Veronica Strong-Boag.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-3868-9 (hardcover). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3870-2 (PDF). –

ISBN 978-0-7748-3871-9 (EPUB). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3872-6 (Kindle)

1. Jamieson, Laura E, 1882–1964. 2. Politicians – British Columbia – Biography.
3. Suffragists – British Columbia – Biography. 4. Biographies. I. Title.

FC382.4.1.J34S87 2018

971.1'04092

C2018-903301-0

C2018-903302-9

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Set in Garamond by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Copy editor: Deborah Kerr

Proofreader: Kristy Lynn Hankewitz

Indexer: Cameron Duder

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpres.ca