

LARA CAMPBELL

**A GREAT
REVOLUTIONARY
WAVE**

Women and the Vote
in British Columbia



UBCPress

VANCOUVER & TORONTO



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.

Books in the series:

One Hundred Years of Struggle: The History of Women and the Vote in Canada,
by Joan Sangster

Our Voices Must Be Heard: Women and the Vote in Ontario,
by Tarah Brookfield

To Be Equals in Our Own Country: Women and the Vote in Quebec,
by Denyse Baillargeon

A Great Revolutionary Wave: Women and the Vote in British Columbia,
by Lara Campbell

Ours by Every Law of Right and Justice: Women and the Vote in the Prairie Provinces, by Sarah Carter

We Shall Persist: Women and the Vote in the Atlantic Provinces,
by Heidi MacDonald

Working Tirelessly for Change: Indigenous Women and the Vote in Canada,
by Lianne Leddy

C O N T E N T S

Introduction 1

ONE Suffrage and Reform 19

TWO Building a Movement 47

THREE The Anti-suffragists 75

FOUR Performing Politics 93

FIVE The Politics of Race 117

SIX Labouring Women 143

SEVEN A Global Movement 169

EIGHT Achieving the Vote 191

NINE Extending Suffrage 213

Conclusion 238

Acknowledgments 247

Sources and Further Reading 249

Photo Credits 286

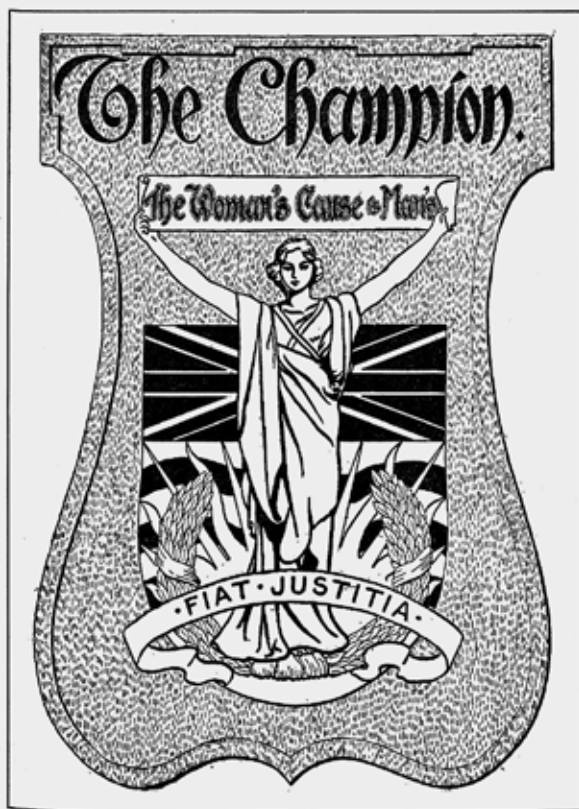
Index 288

IN 1912, VICTORIA suffragists Maria Pollard Grant and Dorothy Davis published the first issue of the *Champion*. The only Canadian suffrage journal whose copies survive, the *Champion* was the official periodical of the BC Political Equality League, and it holds a unique place in the history of Canadian print culture. During its short two-year run (ended by the outbreak of the First World War), it published reports from British Columbia and around the world, as well as political satire and writing by famous American suffragists and British suffragettes.

During its first few months, the cover of the *Champion* borrowed an image that had appeared in the *Vote*, a British suffrage journal. Its central figure of Justice – embodied in the form of a woman – was a classic symbol of democracy for both British and North American suffrage movements. This particular interpretation (called “The Appeal of Womanhood”) was designed by Louise Jacobs, a member of the London-based Artists’ Suffrage League. But someone at the BC Political Equality League reworked the cover for a provincial audience. The revised version featured Justice standing before the official shield of British Columbia: a tripartite image composed of the Union Jack (representing Canada’s relationship to the British Empire), waves (representing the Pacific Ocean), and the rays of the sun. At the bottom, the artist added a laurel wreath, a traditional symbol of victory and honour. The cover of the *Champion* conveys a British Columbia movement both immersed in local culture and connected to global suffrage activism. Though most of its members would never leave their city or their province, they saw themselves as part of what labour

Vol. I

No. 17



DECEMBER, 1913

Price, Ten Cents

When Read, Please Hand to a Friend

Published in Victoria by the BC Political Equality League between 1912 and 1914, the *Champion* was initially co-edited by Maria Grant and Dorothy Davis. It featured local, national, and international news about the suffrage movement, as well as original poems, satire, and commentary.

organizer and suffragist Helena Gutteridge called “a great revolutionary wave,” a demand for social justice and equality that was sweeping the modern world.

The evocative images and aspirational rhetoric of the suffrage movement reflect the profound desire of many women for political equality. But they also remind us, over one hundred years later, that although this dream was visionary and empowering for many women, it was enmeshed in the deepest exclusions of its time. After forty years of activism, a public referendum in 1916, and legislation in April 1917, the franchise was extended to the majority of settler women in British Columbia. But another thirty-two years would elapse before the provincial government allowed First Nations, Japanese, Chinese, and South Asian Canadian women *and* men to vote.

The women’s (or woman) suffrage movement was an international phenomenon that made up one component of first-wave feminism. Suffrage rested on multiple arguments for women’s right to political participation, including maternalism or maternal feminism (that mothers should influence legislation to protect the home and the family) and the ideals of justice and equal rights. Although its priorities fluctuated over time, the movement remained connected to nineteenth-century social reform politics and the desire to improve the situation of women in the workplace, the home, and public life. By 1910, suffragists had become focused on winning the vote, hoping it would allow them to influence legislation and help implement legal reforms.

The history of women’s suffrage challenges a simple story of steady progress toward ever greater equality and inclusion. Enfranchisement in British Columbia – and elsewhere in Canada – is understood as a continuum rather than a clearly defined right that was won at a specific time. The ability to vote was grounded in property restrictions, length of residency, job and military status, religion, race, national origin and date of naturalization, marital status, and gender. By 1876, five years after British Columbia

entered Confederation, male British subjects who were twenty-one or older and who met the residential requirements were allowed to vote. The property requirement was dropped at the provincial but not the municipal level. But as increasing numbers of settler men were added to the provincial electorate, racialized disenfranchisement was codified. Men of Chinese heritage were disenfranchised between 1874 and 1947, First Nations people with Indian status between 1874 and 1949, men of Japanese heritage between 1895 and 1949, and men of South Asian heritage (often called “Hindus”) between 1907 and 1947. Because of their faith-based opposition to military service, both Mennonites and Doukhobors were provincially and federally disenfranchised at various times between 1917 and 1952. Voting rights existed in a web of complex and ever-changing sets of restrictions that differed across the country.

The rallying cry of provincial, national, and international suffrage movements was political equality for women on the “same terms as men.” This phrase highlighted the injustice of sex discrimination but accepted existing race- and property-based exclusions. By the time suffrage opponent Richard McBride resigned as premier and Conservative Party leader in 1915, support for women’s suffrage had become more respectable. Preparing for the 1916 election, McBride’s replacement, William Bowser, promised to introduce an enfranchisement bill if a majority of the electorate voted for it in a referendum. Although the Bowser Conservatives lost the election, the referendum passed, but the legislation was delayed in the transition to the new Liberal government and by delays in counting the overseas soldier vote. The Liberals finally amended the Provincial Elections Act, and provincial suffrage for (most) women was officially proclaimed on 5 April 1917. But the legislation did not establish universal suffrage for all British Columbians, and because the provincial electoral list affected the right to vote federally, racial restrictions extended to the federal franchise.

The most prominent suffrage organizations and leaders were in central Canada or the Prairies, and it is they who have been most frequently commemorated. No suffragist in British Columbia held the same national platform as Winnipegger Nellie McClung, who travelled extensively across North America. And the emergence of the first Canadian suffrage organization in Toronto, the Canadian Women's Suffrage Association (1883), often overshadows efforts in other provinces. This tendency to focus on Ontario and the Prairies excludes the diverse histories of other regions and the long political careers of reformers Maria Pollard Grant and Cecilia Spofford, labour activist Helena Gutteridge, and socialist Bertha Merrill Burns. This lack of attention has led some historians to assume that British Columbia was backward or insular in comparison to other Canadian provinces. In fact, its suffragists were active

Maria Pollard Grant (1854–1937). The best-known BC suffragist Maria Grant was a member of the Victoria middle class and daughter of a Methodist minister. With a property gift from her father, William Pollard, she was one of the first married women in the province to meet municipal property qualifications for the vote. Her activism began in the 1870s and spanned more than forty years. In 1883, she became a founding member of the BC chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the province's pre-eminent suffrage and reform vehicle. Grant also established its first suffrage organizations (the Victoria Political Equality League in 1910 and the BC Political Equality League in 1911) and the Victoria Local Council of Women. In 1895, she became the first elected female school trustee in the province. Initially a devout Methodist, she later joined the Unity Church.

and connected to national and international women's movements by the early 1880s.

The history of women's suffrage in British Columbia shares similarities with that of other regions, and with the national story documented by Joan Sangster's book in this series, *One Hundred Years of Struggle: The History of Women and the Vote in Canada*. The most prominent early suffrage leaders in British Columbia had much in common with those in other parts of English-speaking Canada: generally of British descent (mainly English and Scots), Christian and largely Protestant (mainly Methodist, Presbyterian, and Anglican), they had deep connections to temperance and Christian social reform organizations. The BC branch of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) declared support for female enfranchisement on its founding day in 1883. The development of a network of women's groups in the 1890s allowed women to co-operate on a range of projects related to improving their political and legal status, and to securing the vote at the municipal and school board level.

Although women had acquired limited voting rights at the local level before the turn of the century, suffragists grew increasingly frustrated at the slow pace of change and the stubbornness of Premier Richard McBride, who opposed enfranchisement. They were convinced that only by founding suffrage-focused and female-led organizations could they win the provincial vote. In 1910, Victoria's leading suffragists founded the Political Equality League; one month later, a Vancouver branch was established. After this, suffragists dedicated their energy to extending the campaign beyond the two major cities, creating a wide network of branches across the Lower Mainland and the interior in places such as Kelowna, Revelstoke, and Summerland. This distribution reflected the demographic pattern of the province, as the vast majority of the white settler population lived in either Victoria or Vancouver and their adjacent municipalities. The Vancouver branch soon declared its independence and became the Pioneer

Political Equality League, with an Evening Work Committee dedicated to working women. Vancouver also boasted numerous neighbourhood-based groups, as well as the BC Woman's Suffrage League (WSL), whose purpose was to forge connections with the labour movement. Breakaway associations formed along other lines: the Victoria-based Go-Aheads accepted enfranchisement that was restricted by age and marital status, whereas the BC Equal Franchise Association rejected confrontational campaigning. The leagues and their sister organizations flourished and grew more disciplined as they focused on winning the provincial vote.

Most Canadian suffragists shared an arsenal of tactics designed to win the vote within the system of parliamentary democracy. They concentrated on public education, rhetorical persuasion (writing many newspaper columns and letters to the editor), petitioning, and lobbying the government. At the same time, most firmly believed that the acquisition of the franchise was only one way of bettering women's status. They also sought improvements to women's property rights, access to higher education and professional training, child guardianship rights for mothers, and workplace reforms such as a minimum wage and equal pay. Suffragists acted strategically, lobbying all levels of government (municipal, provincial, and federal) for changes in legislation that would give women the right to vote for school board trustees, municipal councillors, and candidates for provincial and federal office.

Arguments for and against enfranchisement in British Columbia resembled those made elsewhere in North America. Claims about women's equality were rooted in a rich tapestry of political, intellectual, and philosophical traditions. The feminist humanism of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) linked women's freedom to emerging ideas about self-determination and democracy and asserted that women's inequality was not natural but created by institutions of religion and education. Early-nineteenth-century socialists believed that

marriage oppressed women by turning them into property to be owned by men. Echoes of these earlier ideas resonated in mainstream suffrage arguments that gender inequality was destructive to men, women, and harmonious human relations, that women's subordination to men was a form of slavery, and that freedom lay in the opportunity to achieve one's full potential. Nineteenth-century feminist liberals fought to remove barriers to economic and individual autonomy, and emphasized the importance of legal equality and women's capacity to reason. Progressive Christian suffragists evoked powerful Biblical ideals of justice and spiritual equality. And socialist and labour suffragists argued that the concentration of wealth under capitalism exploited women's labour. Later, many suffragists espoused what scholars often call the "new liberalism" because they imagined that regulation of the economy and state social welfare programs might minimize the worst effects of capitalism.

Suffragists also situated the development of women's rights within ideas about progress and global modernity. They drew on popular ideas in the natural and social sciences that societies and cultures progressed from the savage, or primitive (characterized by life in a state of nature), to the most civilized (characterized by reason and law). These ideas about progress were connected to assumptions about race and racial hierarchy, in which the most civilized and superior societies were held to be northern European and British, and the least civilized were subject to colonial rule. These concepts emerged as European societies grappled with the impact of revolutions in France and America (which overthrew monarchical rule), industrialization (which introduced rapid technological development and a separation between the workplace and the home), and colonial expansion (which sought to justify rule over Indigenous and non-European nations).

Progress and civilization, however, could be interpreted in differing ways. Those who rejected expansive definitions of democracy justified the exclusion of women from politics by arguing

that the most civilized societies should protect them from the roughness of public life. Anti-suffrage men and women believed that both God and nature had established fundamental differences between men and women. This “separate spheres” framework portrayed women as naturally suited to the private sphere of the home (children and domestic life) and men as naturally suited for the public sphere of politics and breadwinning. The concept assumed that women had little interest in politics and that enfranchised women would upset a divinely ordained hierarchy in which men, as household heads, were responsible for protecting dependent women and children. Women could influence their husbands informally but should remain content in their role as “Guardian Angels” of the home.

Many suffragists subverted the separate spheres argument by claiming that women’s domestic responsibilities gave them a special mandate to shape laws and policy that affected motherhood and the family. Maternal feminists believed that women’s difference from men, and their superior skills of domestic organization, would clean up the corrupt world of politics and balance men’s point of view. This reasoning was sometimes presented as if women had an inherently more refined morality than men. But it was also rooted in the belief that women’s primary responsibility for children and domestic work gave them the right to a voice in matters related to family life.

But maternalism was just one line of argument for enfranchisement. Suffragists also used ideas of justice and equality to contend that women and men shared a fundamental humanity, intelligence, and ability to reason. As one half of the population, women had the right to legislative representation and to a voice in making the laws that governed them. Victoria’s Agnes Deans Cameron, whose photograph graces the cover of this book, voiced what she called “simple justice” in her arguments: “Woman should have the right of suffrage because she is judged by the law ... Since I am man’s equal *under* the law, then surely I should

A Very Good Idea



Mrs Vancouver – Just give me that brush, Captain, and you will not have half the trouble with your clothes in future.

This *Vancouver Sun* cartoon of 1913 illustrates the maternal feminist argument for enfranchisement. If “Mrs. Vancouver” wins the vote, she will clean up the political dirt and corruption that accumulate when men hoard political power.

Agnes Deans Cameron (1863–1912) was born in Victoria, trained as a teacher, and taught in Vancouver and on Vancouver Island. She was the first woman in the province to teach high school (1891) and the first female principal of a public school (1894). A journalist and travel writer, she travelled throughout the West and the North and worked for the Western Canada Immigration Association. She was active in the Victoria Teachers' Association, the Local Council of Women, the Women's Press Club, and the YWCA. When suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst lectured in Victoria in 1911, Cameron sat on the stage. She died in 1912 of an infection from an appendectomy.

be his equal *before* the law.” And most suffragists interpreted ideas about progress and civilization in emancipatory ways in relation to gender equality. In particular, the ideas of French socialist Charles Fourier – that a society could be judged on the basis of its treatment of women – became a common tenet in suffragist thought. It was Fourier who suggested that “the extension of the privileges of women is the fundamental cause of all progress.” In other words, the more a society moved toward greater liberty and emancipation for women, the more civilized it became.

Some historians have assumed that maternal feminists were more traditional than those who championed women’s political equality on the basis of justice. But most suffragists – whether liberal, conservative, religious, secular, or socialist – accepted gender differences between women and men, believed that women had a special role in the political sphere as wives and mothers, and

rarely imagined a world beyond heterosexual family life. They hoped to widen the public sphere to include more women, but very few in Canada challenged mainstream beliefs about gender and sexuality. In making their case, most cited maternalism, justice, humanity, modernity, and citizenship rights. This refusal to adopt a single message might seem confusing, but it was a pragmatic way of bringing people with diverse views into one “big tent” of political activism.

But pragmatism is not the only reason that suffragists held multiple perspectives. Like feminists today, they struggled to understand the reasons for women’s subordination and debated how best to counter it. Most recognized that women’s legal, economic, and political inequality contributed to their oppression, but they were unwilling to deny the value of motherhood and did not assume that men and women must be treated in the same way if women were to achieve equality. This tension between difference and sameness – and how to address inequities arising from gender – troubles feminist politics to this day.

Yet, most suffragists did not extend the ideals of justice, humanity, and equality to Asian and First Nations men and women, none of whom could vote in provincial elections until the late 1940s. By the late nineteenth century, suffragists had joined political leaders in British Columbia in the confident belief that white settler population growth and economic development would lead to a prosperous future. This vision was built on permanent white settlement and the implementation of British laws and institutions in an established Euro-Canadian society. The suffrage movement developed in concert with settler colonialism, anti-immigrant xenophobia, and anti-Asian racism, and its members prioritized the concerns of white settler women and took British superiority for granted. These values played out in a province where white and British-born colonists were a demographic minority until the mid-1880s and in which politicians, labour leaders, and citizens proclaimed their desire to build “a white man’s province.” But

assumptions about cultural superiority were slowly challenged after 1900 by the discovery that women in non-British nation-states were demanding and achieving political equality. Like all social movements past and present, the campaign for female enfranchisement was steeped in the larger values of its time, even as it defied some of them.

If suffrage history in British Columbia echoes that of other provinces, the United States, and Great Britain, why should historians tell regional stories? The suffrage movement is regionally diverse – or “decentralized” as Joan Sangster explains – in part because of Canada’s federal political structure. Provinces had the authority to establish their own voting eligibility criteria on any basis, including race and gender. These criteria also affected the ability to vote federally, and many battles were fought over which level of government would control federal voting qualifications. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald proposed to extend the right to vote to widows and unmarried women in the 1885 Electoral Franchise Act. But after extensive debate, in which most MPs made their opposition clear, the plan was dropped. After the federal Liberal government introduced new voting legislation in 1898, removing racial restrictions, British Columbia responded in 1901 by instituting a literacy requirement that had the effect of disenfranchising many Chinese and Japanese residents. The Dominion Elections Act of 1920 made the provincial electoral list the basis of the federal vote: as a result, anyone who could not vote provincially was also excluded from voting federally. Furthermore, the constitutional division of powers in the British North America Act gave provinces the responsibility to legislate on family law, labour standards, and education. In a large and geographically dispersed federal nation-state, achieving such reforms necessitated a provincial focus.

The women’s suffrage movement and later campaigns for post-war enfranchisement emerged from and responded to specific conditions in a region that historian Adele Perry calls the “edge of

empire.” As the former Colony of British Columbia, which was created by the merger of two British colonies on the mainland and Vancouver Island in 1866, the province existed within regional, national, and transnational networks. The province’s late (1871) entry into Confederation, its early years as a small and male-dominated white settler community and majority Indigenous population, its geographic distance from the centre of federal power in Eastern Canada, its primary resource extraction economy (fur, coal, minerals, lumber, and fish) and economic roots in the gold rush and the fur trade, and its trans-Pacific economic and population ties to Asia, especially China, often render it peripheral in Canada’s national story. Political, economic, and labour historians of British Columbia have rectified this exclusion, but few have paid attention to women’s political activism.

British Columbia’s economic, political, and cultural conditions shaped the tactics and priorities of provincial suffrage organizations. Despite similarities to other Canadian suffrage stories, the BC history is noteworthy in particular ways. The first attempt in Canada to pass a provincial women’s suffrage bill came from elected politicians in British Columbia in 1875 as they debated the meaning of responsible government in the new province. British Columbia was the first province to officially extend municipal voting rights to property-owning women regardless of their marital status (1873–74), although propertied women had voted in some pre-Confederation colonies until they were formally excluded in the late 1840s. The BC Political Equality League formed later than similar organizations in Ontario, but the BC Woman’s Christian Temperance Union seems to have been the first branch in the country to officially endorse female suffrage and to create a Franchise Department to lobby for the vote. Canada’s only successful dedicated suffrage movement periodical (the *Champion*) was published in Victoria by the Political Equality League. And though a number of Ontario municipalities held local referendums on the franchise, British Columbia was the only province

to put provincial voting rights to a public referendum, in the fall of 1916.

Whereas most suffrage organizations across the country saw themselves as part of a global movement, transnational politics took a unique shape in Canada's westernmost province. BC suffragists often employed a discourse of Western progressivism in their claims for political equality. Linking themselves to suffragists in the Canadian Prairies, the American West, and the Pacific Coast, they contended that the "frontier" spirit of an emerging white settler society had created a distinctively independent woman whose work ethic proved that she deserved the vote. And though suffragists were attuned to these Western movements, they were heavily influenced by developments in Great Britain. In a province with a large British immigrant population, they felt stronger connections to the militant suffragettes of the British Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) than most others in Canada. They assured the public that they would not adopt the confrontational and increasingly violent tactics of the WSPU, but provincial suffrage leagues were the only ones in Canada to adopt the WSPU colours of purple, white, and green, and Victoria suffragists organized a short-lived WSPU-affiliated branch.

Finally, the class makeup of the BC suffrage leagues was more diverse than elsewhere in Canada. The movement's early years were dominated by middle-class and elite women who did not work for pay and who lived primarily in Victoria and New Westminster. But its supporters were more diverse than their best-known leaders. At times, women's organizations in British Columbia included small numbers of black women, Jewish women, and Catholic women. They also included the descendants of Indigenous women and former colonial officials and Hudson's Bay traders of British background, and who therefore did not hold Indian status under the federal Indian Act. But what makes the province particularly distinctive is the important role that white working-class women played in suffrage leagues after the turn of the century, especially

Born in England, Helena Gutteridge (1879–1960) apprenticed as a cutter and was a WSPU member. After arriving in Vancouver in 1911, she joined the Vancouver Political Equality League, became vice-president of the Journeyman Tailors' Association, and was the first woman to serve as secretary of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council. In 1913, she formed Vancouver's first working-class suffrage organizations: the Evening Work Committee and, shortly after, the BC Woman's Suffrage League. Gutteridge edited a regular suffrage column in the B.C. Federationist, joined the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, and was the first woman elected to Vancouver City Council, in 1937.

as leadership shifted to Vancouver. Some had connections to the major socialist parties, including the Socialist Party of British Columbia (which merged with the Canadian Socialist League in 1904 to become the Socialist Party of Canada) and the Social Democratic Party, as well as to the labour movement. Vancouver was the only Canadian city that had an independent suffrage association founded by a working-class woman (Helena Gutteridge) and designed specifically to reach working women. The BC Woman's Suffrage League emphasized the dual impact of unregulated capitalism and political disenfranchisement on working women's lives.

A Great Revolutionary Wave follows the story of the women's suffrage movement from 1871, the year that British Columbia entered Confederation, through the development of women's movements in the 1880s and 1890s and the birth of an independent suffrage movement in 1910, to the enfranchisement referendum

of fall 1916. It extends the question of political citizenship into the 1940s, as racialized groups and First Nations drew on years of community activism to end their exclusion from the franchise. The chapters follow suffragists as they sought both enfranchisement and legal reforms to improve the lives of women and children. To achieve change in the face of powerful resistance, they worked within existing political structures and cultivated sympathetic male allies, but they also built dynamic associations led by women and developed a vibrant culture of non-partisan dissent and debate. They understood the importance of local and provincial organizing while connecting to global networks across North America and the British Empire, and of staying attuned to worldwide trends in women's rights.

Like the other books in this series, *A Great Revolutionary Wave* rethinks the legacy of the suffrage movement. The books ask us to value the courage and creativity of the suffrage movement without characterizing its leaders and members as uncomplicated heroines and champions of equality. The motivations of people in the past are often messy and difficult to understand from the perspective of the present. Like all of us today, suffragists made choices within a larger system not of their own making and in the context of what they imagined possible at the time. Sometimes, those feminist futures challenged fundamental beliefs about gender and human equality, but sometimes they did not. The stories of their successes but also of their limitations, failures, and exclusions – and what those stories mean to understanding the past and the future of movements for equality, freedom, and liberation – lie at the heart of this book.

If in the purpose of the ages, this woman's movement has been called into existence to teach the world the value of human life and human freedom then it is well worth while – for that is the greatest lesson we need in this age.

– FLORENCE HALL,
CHAMPION, SEPTEMBER 1913, 14–15.

It sounds so shallow for a man to tell us that motherhood is the crowning glory; for when the first opportunity affords, the man-made laws cause this crowning glory to become a crowning sorrow ... Nice, isn't it?

– SUSIE LANE CLARK,
VANCOUVER DAILY WORLD, 24 NOVEMBER 1913, 11.

SUFFRAGE AND REFORM



Cecilia McNaughton Spofford (1859–1938). Born into a Nova Scotia Baptist family, Cecilia McNaughton worked as a teacher prior to her 1883 marriage to William Spofford. In Victoria, she was president of both the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Local Council of Women. Elected a school trustee in 1919, she lobbied for female enfranchisement, supported progressive legislation, and ran twice for provincial office, once as an Independent and again as a Liberal.

AT THE TURN of the twentieth century, British Columbians were told that they lived in a modern province whose future was one of unlimited progress and economic growth. With Richard McBride and the Conservative Party at the helm of government (1903–15), the province experienced rapid population expansion and economic development. The white settler community increased eight-fold in just thirty years: from 50,000 in 1881 to 400,000 in 1911. But although settlers and politicians embraced the promise of economic prosperity, they could not ignore the effects of unregulated capitalism. As elsewhere in North America, concerns deepened about the impact of unfettered industrial growth, rapid urbanization, and non-British immigration. And as women increasingly worked for pay and middle-class women demanded higher education, the public role of women in modern Canada was up for debate.

A growing number of women's groups pointed to the problems associated with unregulated capitalism, including unemployment, low wages, and unsafe working conditions. Between the 1870s and the 1920s, they mobilized across the country – and globally – to address these concerns. Historian Joan Sangster refers to these associations as a “women's movement,” which encompassed educational clubs, professional organizations, missionary societies, and religious and philanthropic groups. They brought women together to provide social services during an era that lacked adequate welfare and to advocate for reforms that would improve the status of women and children.

But suffragists and reformers did not always agree about how to solve these problems. Some hoped to make change mainly at the individual level, though increasing numbers sought state intervention to prohibit alcohol consumption, restrict immigration, and regulate capitalism through protective labour legislation. Others called for state-funded social welfare programs to redistribute wealth and address poverty. Most were convinced that politically active women of British background would improve society. And though some groups were not explicitly sectarian (that is, they did not advocate a particular Christian denominational ideology), most believed in both the spiritual superiority of Christianity and the cultural superiority of Britishness.

Most women's associations gradually concluded that gaining the vote was essential for wielding political influence. By the 1890s, almost all of them supported municipal and school board suffrage, legal reforms to restrict a husband's authority over wives and children, and a living wage to allow economic independence from men. By the 1910s, it was rare to find a women's organization that opposed enfranchisement, and most shared resources with the suffrage movement to achieve both the vote and the reforms that were necessary for equality.

RELIGION, REFORM, AND THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

The rise of the suffrage movement was intimately connected to Christian social reform, even though white settlers in the province – especially in the male-dominated mining towns of the interior – had the highest Canadian rates of what historian Lynne Marks calls “irreligion.” Predictably, the churches were concerned about the morality of BC men. Working- and middle-class settler women made up the majority of congregations in the three largest denominations (Anglican, Presbyterian, and Methodist), and as their numbers increased, they played an important role in developing reform organizations. Religious groups gave women an

authoritative language to criticize male power while still remaining respectable. And although only men could join the clergy, some Protestant denominations supported suffrage for maternalist reasons. For example, Anglican William Perrin, the bishop of British Columbia (1893–1911), believed that women’s suffrage could improve society; in later years, Anglican reverend Henry Edwards was an active member of the Vancouver Political Equality League. On an institutional level, BC Baptists endorsed suffrage in 1912, and the Methodist Conference did the same in 1913, stating that it was a matter of justice that would “greatly aid in the moral uplift of social and political affairs for which we are all working.”

Who were Christian reformers, and how were they connected to the suffrage movement? They believed that individuals suffered under exploitative economic conditions and agreed that prostitution, poverty, and dangerous working situations were problems of modern capitalism. But reformers differed widely about how (or whether) the state should respond. Some felt that charity, hard work, modest sexual behaviour, and conversion to Christianity would solve social and economic problems, but by the end of the nineteenth century, an increasing number believed that the authority of the state should be harnessed to produce a greater social good. The most active nineteenth-century suffragists were shaped by this faith in the power of social reform. Methodist Maria Grant participated in numerous women’s organizations along with her mother and sister, and her contemporary Cecilia Spofford was a Baptist temperance activist who attended the same church as future Liberal leader and premier Harlan Brewster.

The social gospel tradition, which interpreted the Gospels with an eye toward social justice and not solely individual salvation, became increasingly prevalent among Protestant denominations (mainly Methodists) in the years leading up to the First World War. Social gospellers supported a range of policies that promised to address injustice and build the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth – which they imagined as a more egalitarian world, based on the

values of co-operation and compassion rather than competition and private profit. The social gospel emphasized spiritual equality before God and offered a feminist reading of the Gospels that called for an end to the legal and economic exploitation of women.

This Christian commitment to justice and feminist spirituality was outlined in Florence Hall's columns in the *Western Methodist Recorder*. Her "Suffragette Sermons" argued that "man and woman were made in the image of God, both stood on equal ground when the Creator placed them in this world." Hall extended the idea of spiritual equality to everyday life, writing that a man and a woman were "mates, companions, not master and slave . . . She was as fully equipped a human being as the man, and therefore destined to share equally in all pertaining to human rights and human life, and this prerogative is still hers, for it is founded on eternal justice." Both Hall and her husband, William Lashley Hall, were deeply concerned about poverty and believed that capitalism cheapened humanity because it valued profit more than "precious lives."

Reformers and suffragists shared a belief that the universe was gradually moving toward greater equality. This force was described in spiritual terms, though it was not always understood as emanating from an interventionist Christian God. Popular British suffragette Barbara Wylie informed a Vancouver audience that the suffrage movement was a powerful "fight of spiritual against physical force and spiritual always wins . . . A spirit is above force. The victory is bound to be on our side." Quaker suffragist Helen Sturge visited from Bristol in 1913 to speak on the "necessity of spiritual force and concentration of mind power toward obtaining the great end for which all intelligent women are working." Similarly, American Charlotte Perkins Gilman told her Vancouver audience that the "world mind" would be moved forward by suffrage activism.

Christian suffragists such as Florence Hall imagined Wylie's spiritual force as a "great propeller" powered by God. But a few

Florence Sarah Hussey Hall (1864–1917). Florence Hussey (or Huzzey) was born in Newland, Gloucestershire, England. Prior to her marriage to Methodist minister William Lashley Hall, she worked as a teacher in Wales and England, and with Sisters of the People, a Methodist urban mission located in London, England. Together, the Halls served the Methodist Church throughout British Columbia. He became president of the BC Methodist Conference in 1913. She was the founding president of the Vancouver Political Equality League and a member of the WCTU and the Women's Missionary Society. In 1912, she became a paid organizer for the BC Political Equality League, touring the province to help set up local branches. She died in North Vancouver in 1917. William remarried and died in 1947.

suffragists participated in non-traditional spiritual systems, such as Theosophy, which saw the universe as alive and divine, emphasized the truth in all religions, and promoted the values of human equality regardless of gender, race, or caste. Though it had few official adherents, Theosophy attracted leading Canadian suffragists such as Augusta Stowe-Gullen and Flora MacDonald Denison. Leading Theosophists lectured to packed audiences through the auspices of the Vancouver Theosophical Society, and the Vancouver Political Equality League held its founding meeting in the Theosophical Hall. Helena Gutteridge was involved with Theosophy before moving to Vancouver. Socialist Bertha Merrill Burns was raised Baptist and identified as agnostic but was influenced by Theosophical thought. She was deeply critical of the Christian Church and its followers, who claimed to love God while simultaneously seeking profit and power. She suggested that Jesus

himself would have been “despised and forsaken” by most Christians and that only socialism could create the conditions that would enable humans to “love one another as we ought to do.” But Burns spoke in the language of justice and compassion, and her writing rang with a spiritual certainty that would not have been out of place in a rousing social gospel sermon. In 1903, her Thanksgiving column in the *Western Clarion* reminded readers that true prosperity would prevail for women and men when economic justice was achieved:

Some day there will be a real thanksgiving in the land. It will be when Greed shall have been dethroned from among the lives of men and when Justice shall have apportioned to each a share in the means of life; when “prosperity” that blesses the few at the expense of the many shall have been repudiated by the nations of the earth ... when, in fact the dead Christ of a crucified Manhood shall have arisen to a new life of fraternity and fellowship that will leave no son or daughter of humanity sadly wondering what they can be thankful for.

Victoria suffragist Maria Grant was raised Methodist but later joined the Unity Church, which took a universalist approach to religion and focused on the potential within all humans to harness the power of the mind to solve social problems. Grant’s particular spiritual journey was unique, but her life shows how spirituality complemented the suffrage view of women’s political enfranchisement as modern and forward thinking. For Grant, attaining the vote was “the outcome of an internal process of unfoldment and development in harmony with the law of Life. This growth experiences itself in the demand for liberty and equality.” She saw women’s desire for equality as a transformative process, with women gradually “freeing themselves” and realizing their full potential through the “annihilation of all that hinders the upward

and onward winging of their way.” References to “being awake” resonated across belief systems. Those who were asleep were un-attuned to the light of God or the movement of the universe, whereas those who were in the process of awakening were growing toward greater compassion and equality. This belief in forward movement and progress drew together suffragists with a range of beliefs: Methodists, Baptists, Theosophists, liberals, and socialists all had faith that individuals *and* the social order could be perfected. Overlapping interests in spirituality and reform are sometimes seen as less radical than a sole focus on women’s political equality. But many suffragists first found their political voice in religious or reform movements, which were important incubators of women’s political activism in North America.

**“DO EVERYTHING”: THE WOMAN’S CHRISTIAN
TEMPERANCE UNION**

The most influential women’s reform organization of this period was the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), which was founded in the United States in 1874 and led by Frances Willard, a Methodist. Local, provincial, national, and transnational branches made the WCTU a driving force in women’s activism. Not all Christian reformers agreed that the sale and consumption of alcohol should be strictly prohibited, but many believed that men’s intemperance damaged the larger social fabric, contributed to poverty and violence, and harmed the economic security of women and children.

Willard was an inspirational international figure known for her charismatic presence and oratory. A contemporary described her as magnetic and as “possessing that occult force which all leaders must have.” In 1883, Willard was invited by Victoria’s Pandora Street Methodist Church to help organize a provincial branch of the WCTU and to hold a convention for the “Ladies of this Province.” Her hour-long speech provoked both tears and outbursts of applause as she spoke about the devastating effects of



The well-known leader of the WCTU, Frances Willard was welcomed to Victoria in 1883 by local clergy, politicians, and their wives and daughters. She delivered a public address at the Pandora Street Methodist Church, which is pictured here on the occasion of her visit, dramatically decorated with flowers, banners, the Stars and Stripes, and the British Ensign.

alcohol on women's lives. The following day, she met with Maria Pollard and her daughters Annie and Maria (Grant), Cecilia Spofford, and Margaret Jenkins, who quickly set up a provincial and local Victoria WCTU branch and endorsed female suffrage with a classic maternal feminist argument: "As woman is the natural conservator of the home, she should be endowed with the use of the ballot as a means of protection of her home." With this, the WCTU became the first temperance group in Canada to formally support suffrage, and it remained the primary vehicle for suffrage activism until the establishment of the BC Political Equality League in 1910.

The WCTU's first task was to lobby the provincial government for legislation on prohibition and suffrage. It moved quickly. By June 1884, it had formed a Committee on Petitions, headed by Maria Grant and two others who announced they were planning to petition the Legislative Assembly "to grant to woman the privilege of the ballot box." Grant and Margaret Jenkins were nominated to "call on the legislators and solicit their influence on behalf" of the bill. The provincial body and local WCTU branches established lobbying subcommittees, which they called Departments of Legislation, Petition, and Franchise. Vancouver, Victoria, New Westminster, and Chilliwack all boasted these departments by 1888. By April 1885, the WCTU had circulated its first petition and convinced two MLAs, Montague Tyrwhitt-Drake and James Cunningham, to present it to the legislature. Tyrwhitt-Drake introduced a private member's bill that same year to extend the franchise to women.

Middle- and upper-class Protestant women dominated the WCTU executive, but the organization attracted women across the boundaries of class, denomination, and occasionally race. The 1885 petition, signed by more than nine hundred people, demonstrates the support that the WCTU had amassed during its first two years. The signatories included clergy, reformers, former Hudson's Bay Company officials, and the children of their marriages with women of Indigenous descent, including multiple generations from the Finlayson, McNeill Moffatt, and Tolmie families. Unlike the Ontario branches, the BC WCTU did not have racially segregated local unions, and numerous black women and their husbands signed the petition. Most WCTU members were Protestants, but a few Jewish women also joined, and at least one Jewish woman and man from Victoria – Mrs. (Sophia) Gustav Leiser and Frank Sylvester – signed this first petition.

By the 1880s, the WCTU had become a global organization, with missions on six continents and travelling speakers from the United States, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. It sent women

to establish branches throughout the province, and by 1908, it had expanded outside of Victoria and New Westminster to create at least twenty-four new locals in the Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island, and the interior. Women travelled widely to give speeches and attend conventions, where they met with members from across the country and the world. Maria Grant spent a month journeying to Toronto for the world WCTU convention in 1897, where she met international delegates and spent time with Frances Willard. Her updates were published in the *Daily Colonist*, allowing locals to stay abreast of events.

The WCTU hoped for prohibition but it embraced other causes, including government-subsidized homes for elderly women, a minimum wage, and female factory inspectors. Recognition of women's economic vulnerability made the WCTU a frequent ally of organized labour on projects including a living wage for women. When the provincial branch was formed, Willard was developing her powerful "do everything" approach – an assertion that all social issues were interconnected. She supported women's suffrage, higher education, the labour movement, and the socialist Fabian Society. Many of her followers were deeply inspired by her expansive approach to reform. Maria Grant took on a range of causes and named her youngest daughter Frances Willard in her honour. Mary Ann Cunningham, married to Liberal politician James Cunningham, was active in both suffrage and the WCTU. She echoed Willard and Grant in her determination to link temperance and enfranchisement, telling women that the "WCTU woman must possess all the rights of the franchise, and exercise them; it is useless to pray 'Thy Kingdom Come' and vote contra or stay away from the polls." But she believed that women deserved the vote not just because they were mothers who might enact temperance but because they were intelligent beings who had "the right to express their opinions as decidedly as their husbands do."

Why did nineteenth-century women find the WCTU so attractive? Some historians suggest that middle-class women saw it as a

Mary Ann Woodman Cunningham (1841–1930). Born in St. Thomas, Ontario, Mary Ann taught for two years at the St. Thomas Central School. A devout Methodist, she also supported prohibition. She married Irish-born James Cunningham in 1865 and lived in New Westminster, where he co-owned a hardware store. James supported the Liberals and was elected an MP (1874–78), an MLA (1884–86), and mayor of New Westminster (1873). Mary Ann sat on the executives of the WCTU, Ladies' Aid, the Missionary Society, the Local Council of Women, the YWCA, and the Political Equality League. She voted municipally in New Westminster from 1894 onward and was an active member of the Franchise Department of the New Westminster WCTU.

tool through which to control the behaviour of poor, working-class, and European immigrant men, who were often portrayed as irrational and irresponsible. Other historians argue that temperance activism is best understood as what Sharon Cook calls a “constellation” issue. In other words, it safely challenged men’s economic and cultural power at a time when even the most privileged women were legally subordinate to men. Temperance invested household and domestic responsibilities with a sense of moral righteousness. Contrasting women’s respectable behaviour with the irresponsible economic and social behaviour of men who drank (or who profited from the sale of alcohol) allowed temperance supporters to refute arguments that women were too irrational to vote intelligently. Grant believed that enfranchised women would balance the votes of “irresponsible men, who are so often led by the saloon owners and who have not one noble idea or high interest in life.”

But alcohol use was a contentious issue in the nineteenth century. Temperance women were outraged that men could spend the household income on anything they wished, including liquor. However, tavern owners earned high profits from male labourers, and many male workers enjoyed drinking and resented attempts to limit their consumption. The Vancouver Island and Kootenay mining communities from which socialist politicians drew their support did not favour temperance and had reputations for heavy drinking. The Socialist Party of Canada maintained that temperance was a restriction on working men's leisure and independence. But though socialist suffragist Bertha Merrill Burns was critical of the WCTU's narrow focus, she was perhaps shaped by her Baptist upbringing. She believed that male alcohol consumption was harmful, and that "beer and tobacco are the narcotics which capital has used to deaden [men's] senses."

The WCTU never lost interest in enfranchisement even as dedicated suffrage leagues grew more prominent by the 1910s. But its power declined after women won the vote and prohibition failed. Support for prohibition peaked during the First World War, and the majority of the BC electorate voted for it in a 1916 referendum, but it was difficult to enforce. In 1921, British Columbia became the first English Canadian province to repeal prohibition, and social reformers shifted their focus to other issues.

WOMEN'S CLUBS AND PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

By the 1880s, secular women's clubs were proliferating across Canada, as white middle-class women accessed university education and professions such as teaching. Most clubs were reluctant to fully endorse suffrage, though they approved of the New Woman of the late nineteenth century. A reflection of women's greater public presence, the New Woman was educated, trained in a profession or skill, and interested in current affairs, though she was still expected to marry and become a mother. To be a New Woman was to reject old-fashioned limitations on women's

public role. It is “the woman’s age,” argued the Victoria Local Council of Women (LCW) in 1895, in which “custom is the enemy of progress.” But the New Woman would not enter the modern era alone. She was ideally accompanied by a husband of good “manly character.” Such men were worthy of respect not because they were authoritarian patriarchs but because they were willing to help improve women’s status. Many BC suffragists were married to New Men, who signed petitions, attended public talks, and joined suffrage leagues. Laura Jamieson’s husband, Jack, who studied theology at the University of Toronto before becoming a lawyer, was inspired by progressive theologians who emphasized women’s equality, and he helped educate women’s groups on family law. The English-born Liberal MLA, Fabian Society supporter, and newspaper editor John Sedgwick Cowper spoke in the language of the New Man when he pointed out that suffrage was not a favour to be granted by chivalrous men to deserving women. “Knight errants and such heroics have gone out of fashion,” he argued. Rather, suffrage should be granted “on the grounds of simple justice.”

In addition to joining the WCTU, many leading women in British Columbia and across the country also joined the National Council of Women of Canada. In 1894, its founder, Lady Aberdeen, arrived in the province to help establish the Vancouver and Victoria Local Councils of Women, with New Westminster (1898), Vernon (1895), and Nelson (1900) soon following. The LCWs were designed to be non-sectarian and to bridge Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic divides. By 1914, for example, the Vancouver LCW enjoyed representation from a small but growing Jewish community, and one of its affiliated committees included the Ladies’ Auxiliary of the Temple Emanu-El, a semi-reform congregation established in 1894. LCWs were a research hub on the status of women and children in the family and in the workplace, and they pressed for everything from factory regulations to better treatment of women in the criminal justice system.

The National Council of Women of Canada was established in Toronto in 1893 by Lady Ishbel Aberdeen, wife of the newly appointed governor general. Both she and her husband were supporters of liberal reform causes, such as broader suffrage rights, labour rights, and non-sectarian politics. LCWs soon formed across Ontario and the country. The national council was connected to the International Council of Women, which was founded in 1888 as an international umbrella organization for a wide range of women's groups that were interested in improving the status of women.

Dominated by middle-class and elite women, the LCWs initially had an ambivalent relationship to the suffrage movement. In Canada, the Victoria LCW became the first to endorse suffrage in 1908, followed by Vancouver in 1909, and the national council in 1910. This early reluctance did not extend to the municipal and school board franchise, however, and LCWs petitioned for an expanded local franchise. They also worked to nominate women for the position of school trustee, which was the only elected office that women were allowed to hold prior to 1917. Many club members hoped that women's involvement in local politics would reform corrupt political structures and build better schools, towns, and cities.

The small but growing cohort of middle-class women with university degrees and professional training founded more exclusive associations. Reflecting the increasing number of university-educated women, the University Women's Clubs (UWCS) were established in Vancouver (1907) and in Victoria (1908). Their members undertook research, hosted talks, and sponsored legal reforms.

Members were often married to influential men, and though they were passionately committed to women's higher education, their class and race status meant that most withdrew from paid labour upon marriage and were heavily involved in voluntary work. A founding member and first president of the Vancouver UWC, Evlyn Fenwick Farris held degrees from Acadia and was married to lawyer J. Wallace de Becque Farris, a prominent Liberal and future attorney general. Farris helped the Victoria UWC organize in the spring of 1908. The club also offered the small number of female doctors a place to connect. Drs. Helen E. Reynolds Ryan, Etta Paterson-Devon, and Belle Wilson were all UWC members who were also active in the suffrage movement.

One of the first campaigns undertaken by Farris and the Vancouver UWC was support for Mabel French, a New Brunswick-trained lawyer who was refused admission to the Law Society of British Columbia in 1910. The UWC successfully lobbied the provincial government to amend the Professions Act to allow women to practise law and campaigned to force the newly established University of British Columbia to allow women to sit on its Senate. Farris eventually came to favour suffrage, although unlike her fellow club members Helen Gregory MacGill, Mary Ellen Smith, Laura Jamieson, and Mary McConkey, she never formally joined the movement.

As increasing numbers of women wrote for newspapers and periodicals, their keen observational skills and ability to harness the power of print culture played a key role in spreading suffrage propaganda. Canada had few professional female journalists: according to historian Marjory Lang, only about thirty-eight worked in British Columbia in 1921, though census numbers do not capture those who worked part-time or freelance. The Vancouver Women's Press Club (1909) did not officially endorse enfranchisement, but its membership of writers and journalists often overlapped with that of the suffrage movement. Prominent

Evlyn Fenwick Farris (1878–1971) was born in Nova Scotia, received her bachelor's and master's degrees from Acadia, and taught in Connecticut for six years before her marriage and her move to Vancouver in 1905. A devout Baptist and committed Liberal, she was a founding member of the Women's Liberal Association. Farris was appointed to the Senate and Board of Governors at the University of British Columbia.

members included Sara McLagan, owner of the *Vancouver Daily World*, and PEL members Helen Gregory MacGill, who had worked as a journalist in California, and concert promoter, journalist, and editor Lily Laverock.

Although higher education had become more accessible by the beginning of the twentieth century, it remained out of reach for the vast majority of women. But by the end of the nineteenth century, caregiving was understood as a profession that required education and training in modern techniques of housework, cooking, and child care. Advocates of this new “domestic science” hoped to convince women that marriage and motherhood was a serious profession. The home economics or domestic science courses offered in public schools and universities were intended to modernize domestic labour and allow women to raise healthier families. Victoria suffragist Margaret Jenkins, also an elected school trustee, organized the first domestic science curriculum in the province in 1903. Not all suffragists agreed that domestic science was the best avenue for women’s education; both Farris and teacher Agnes Deans Cameron, for example, preferred intellectual rather than practical education for girls and young women.

The domestic science trend found a home in the women's movement through the Women's Institutes (WIs), which were founded in 1897 by Ontarian Adelaide Hoodless. After her infant son's death, believed to be caused by drinking unpasteurized milk, Hoodless championed the modernization of housekeeping. The BC WIs were established in 1909, housed within the Department of Agriculture, and focused on bringing household science to rural women. Institutes viewed white settler families as the heart of the modern province and wished to work with the government to make the lives of rural families healthier and more productive. Hoodless was decidedly not in favour of suffrage, and the WIs did not officially endorse it. But many of their members did. The institutes recommended that members educate themselves about unequal laws, organized lectures by prominent suffragists such as Laura Jamieson, and encouraged women to run for school trustee.

Born Margaret Robertson in Collingwood, Ontario, Madge Watt (1868–1948) was a professional writer, teacher, and suffrage and women's rights supporter. Watt held a master's degree from the University of Toronto, was a member of the UWC and the International Council of Women, and was appointed to the University of British Columbia Senate in 1912. Passionate about domestic science, she helped organize the BC WIs and was appointed to their advisory board. After 1913, she introduced the WI model to Britain. Upon returning to Canada in 1919, she founded an international rural women's group, the Associated Countrywomen of the World (1933) and served as its president between 1933 and 1947.

REFORMING THE LAWS ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN

By 1900, BC women's groups were enthusiastically researching women's legal status. What they discovered was not heartening: women were subordinate to men in property and inheritance rights, marriage and divorce, and guardianship of children. Despite some minimal protections, men held legal authority as head of the household. The ideal family model was a lifelong union in which women and children were economically supported by men, and fathers had sole authority over dependent children. Suffragists did not criticize the principle of marriage, but they did believe that couples should live together in companionate relationships, and they deplored the fact that women were forced to rely on marriage for economic security yet had little remedy against an abusive or neglectful husband. As British suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst argued, women's marital life was dependent on "getting a good ticket in the lottery."

Suffragists were horrified by the laws that governed women and children. Under British common law, husbands retained control over family property until the mid-nineteenth century. In Ontario, slow legislative changes began to increase married women's property rights in the 1850s, and similar developments occurred in British Columbia during the 1870s and 1880s. The Deserted Wives Maintenance Act established minimum obligations of economic support in cases of desertion, and the Married Women's Property Act offered legal protection to women who owned property in their name. But reforms remained limited. Married women in British Columbia did not have the protection of a dower law (use of one-third of a husband's estate after his death), unlike women in a number of other provinces. Unless a wife held property in her own name, her husband could sell it without her consent. If he died without a will, she could lose family property to a male relative. Even into the 1970s, women had no legal right to the property they had helped build during marriage, an issue that deeply affected the unpaid labour of farming women. Legal protections

remained minimal because legislators worried that economic independence would encourage women to remain unmarried or to divorce their husbands and because they saw wealth and property as a male prerogative.

The research undertaken in the 1890s by LCW and WCTU subcommittees discovered such deep inequities that they published a series of reports and began a concerted educational campaign about women's legal subordination. In 1908, the Vancouver University Women's Club (UWC) invited local lawyer and judge A.E. Bull to speak on the legal status of women, inspiring Helen Gregory MacGill – who had received legal training in California – to create a Committee for Better Laws for Women and Children. In 1909, the LCW and the UWC petitioned the provincial government to revise inheritance laws and give equal guardianship rights to mothers. Legal reform had widespread support because it addressed not just women's status as individuals but their position as mothers and wives.

But numerous failed lobbying campaigns made it clear that women's informal influence would never produce change. A limited 1911 dower law barely passed in the legislature, and though it promised a wife one-third of her husband's property after his death, he could still dispose of it without her consent during their marriage. As a result, legal issues came to dominate public talks given by suffrage leagues, which used them to raise women's consciousness about the importance of the vote. The leagues relied heavily on their male allies in these public campaigns. John Stuart (Jack) Jamieson, the husband of suffragist Laura Jamieson, was a lawyer and judge who worked with LCWs to educate women on family law. Socialist lawyer R.B. Kerr spoke about women's lack of property rights and argued that the law forced them to stay in "brutal" and violent marriages for fear of losing their children.

Organizations also disseminated information through pamphlets and newspapers. The first publication released by the BC



Helen Gregory MacGill (1864–1947) was born in Hamilton, Ontario, earned a master's degree at Trinity College, Toronto, and moved to California with her first husband, where she co-owned and edited a newspaper with her mother, Emma. In 1902, she moved to Vancouver with her second husband, James MacGill, and was appointed a Juvenile Court judge in 1917. She stands at the far right, during the May 1926 cornerstone-laying ceremony for the Vancouver Women's Building, which provided meeting space for women's groups throughout the city.

Political Equality League, a pamphlet on women's legal status, was written by novelist Alice Ashworth Townley and was widely shared by provincial suffrage groups. The unequal status of women under a British-based legal system was a bitter pill for those who saw British culture as the highest achievement of civilization. Townley resolved this contradiction by arguing that though British law was the "best and fairest" in the world, provincial laws had not adequately evolved in "an age of progress." She also drew on anti-immigration rhetoric to highlight the unfair treatment of settler women of British background. They had stood by their men as they built homes in their new country but did not have the same political rights as European immigrant men, whom she described as "ignorant foreigners."

Inequitable laws relating to intimate family relationships were perhaps most deeply felt. Discrimination was built into the divorce law until 1925. For example, though both parties could sue for divorce, a husband merely had to prove that his wife was unfaithful, whereas a wife had to show "aggravated adultery," such as desertion or cruelty, by her husband. But most contentious were the laws related to the guardianship of children. Suffragists railed at the hypocrisy of a system in which motherhood was glorified yet women had no rights to their children. Fathers were the sole legal guardians of their children, and they controlled their wages, schooling, living arrangements, and bodies. In British Columbia, fathers had the sole right to approve the marriage of minor children. Bertha Merrill Burns argued that these laws forced women to "barter" for their children by exchanging economic support in return for custody. Male authority over children was a sore spot, given the cultural weight attached to motherhood. This paradox helps explain the suffrage tendency to compare the status of women with that of children: in legal terms, a married woman was not dissimilar to a dependent child.

These were not just abstract arguments for suffragists: many had a personal experience of vulnerability under family law. Marriage

Born in California, Susie Lane Clark (1875–1956) became involved in American suffrage politics. A teacher, she emigrated to Vancouver in 1906 with her husband, John Allen Clark, a printer, where she joined the LCW and the Vancouver Political Equality League. She wrote and edited the “Suffrage Movement News” column for the Vancouver Daily World and contributed regularly to the B.C. Federationist. After women won the vote, she organized and became president of the New Era League. Divorced during the 1920s, she ran for the school board under the banner of the Independent Labor Party. She later joined the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and was elected to the Vancouver Park Board in 1937.

was supposed to be lifelong and companionate, but it did not always live up to this ideal. Vancouver suffragist Rose (Mrs. Roy M.) Taylor was pregnant as a teenager before marriage, twice divorced, and had several children under her care. Although there is no record of her relationship with the fathers of her children, she warned women that they had no legal right to custody of their children and bitterly noted the chasm between the idealization and reality of motherhood. “Mother” was the “sweetest word in the English language,” she stated, “yet how little that word means in British Columbia, where mothers are not even entitled to their own children.” Other leading Vancouver suffragists, including Ida Douglas-Fearn and Susie Lane Clark, were also divorced and raising dependent children. Theirs was a relatively rare status in a country where divorce was both expensive and difficult to get.

But the argument that all women were subordinated on the basis of sex glossed over significant differences of class and race.

Many women – and men – had little property to share in the case of divorce or death. This was especially true for immigrants who worked in low-paying jobs and were banned from employment in better-paid positions. Suffragists drew on liberal traditions to suggest that it was undemocratic and dehumanizing for one portion of the citizenry to make laws for the other and that women were rational citizens who should not be subject to laws they had no voice in making. But this reasoning never acknowledged how governments regulated the lives of immigrant and Indigenous men and women. Asian men were not allowed to work in certain industries or the professions, and discriminatory legislation prohibited them from bringing their families to Canada. The lives of Indigenous women were governed by the federal Indian Act, which stripped them and their descendants of Indian status if they married non-Indigenous men, preventing many women and their children from living with their communities on-reserve. The act also excluded Indigenous women from participating in band council elections and coerced residential schooling for children. Suffragists neither acknowledged nor addressed these profound legal harms.

THE SEXUAL DOUBLE STANDARD

By the end of the nineteenth century, suffragists had become increasingly concerned with what they called the sexual double standard – the expectation that women would remain sexually pure before and during marriage. The same standard did not apply to men. This seemed to be an extension of female subordination in the home, the workplace, and politics. Most suffragists supported monogamous and heterosexual marriage, especially at a time when birth control was illegal and unreliable. But they encouraged a “single standard of morals for men and women – both socially and before the law.”

The most visible outcome of the double standard was the prevalence of prostitution. Reformers across North America referred to

sex work as a vice or a “social evil” and condemned it as immoral because it involved sex outside of marriage. But nineteenth-century reformers increasingly understood it as rooted in external factors rather than individual sin. The popular term “white slavery” came from exposés written by muckraking British journalist W.T. Stead, who portrayed prostitution as coerced sexual labour where economically vulnerable young women were “kidnapped” by procurers to satisfy a global sex trade. This belief was grafted onto racist ideas that white women were vulnerable to exploitation by Chinese men and that Chinese sex workers were in desperate need of rescue by respectable white women. Coercion no doubt existed, but women were not kidnapped on a global scale. And even though small numbers of Chinese and Japanese women were brought to the province to work in the sex trade – in the cities or mining towns – they were vastly outnumbered by white women. The Victoria Methodist Woman’s Missionary Society founded the Chinese Rescue Home in 1888 to “rescue” Chinese sex workers, but they used the home for their own needs: to leave situations of domestic violence, for example, or to access the medical treatments they could not otherwise afford.

Women’s organizations and suffrage groups gathered statistics, researched municipal policies, and wrote newspaper columns on the impact of sex work on women. In most BC towns and cities during this period, red light districts were tolerated, but suffragists had faith that female voters would shut them down – and convince legislators to prosecute male clients. They did not see sex work as a job or listen to worker concerns about their safety. But the language of coercion allowed them to emphasize factors such as low wages and the double standard. As Reverend Charles M. Sheldon told parishioners of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Vancouver during a guest sermon, “it was not by choice that girls live immoral lives, but from the fact that they cannot in many stores in the cities earn a living wage.” Helena Gutteridge agreed that sex work resulted from low wages and capitalism, and

pondered why the men who bought sexual services were not arrested. The shift from the language of “white slavery” to “traffic in women” in 1909 was initiated by the International Council of Women, and it reflected a growing sense that women opted for prostitution largely due to economic coercion.

Differences among socialists, reformers, and suffragists regarding sex work were a matter of degree rather than kind. Socialists argued that capitalism was its primary cause: men could not afford to marry, and women’s wages were so low that they were compelled to choose between “starvation or shame.” This assumption fit well with mainstream beliefs that men had a right to sexual relationships and to a dependent wife. Socialists also used sex work as a metaphor for exploitation, seeing it as just one way in which working people sold their bodies to survive. An editorial in the socialist *Western Clarion* contended that “every merchant on earth today is trafficking in human life in some form or other.” But the emphasis on exploitation elided the fact that some sex workers earned a good living. Historian Patrick Dunae used the 1901 census to show that the mainly young white women who worked in brothels could make almost \$1,000 a year. By comparison, the annual wage for female store clerks ranged between \$300 and \$500, and it was even lower for domestic workers. Suffragists refused to acknowledge this reality, however, choosing instead to stress exploitation and to lobby governments to eradicate red light districts. There is little evidence that these tactics were effective, and many feminists argue that they actually made the industry more dangerous for sex workers.

The women’s movement spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, retaining a focus on improving the lives of women even as its priorities shifted over time. Shaped by widespread cultural beliefs about the important roles that women played as wives and mothers, it also called for economic and legal equality between white settler men and women. Some women’s groups were initially reluctant to embrace suffrage as the main vehicle

for achieving that equality, but most eventually agreed that women could only improve the social order if they were enfranchised. The vote mattered, and women throughout the province increasingly dedicated their time and energy to building a movement that prioritized winning it on the same terms as men.

© UBC Press 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: A great revolutionary wave: women and the vote in British Columbia /
Lara Campbell.

Names: Campbell, Lara, 1970- author.

Series: Women's suffrage and the struggle for democracy; v. 4.

Description: Series statement: Women's suffrage and the struggle for
democracy; v. 4 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200219871 | Canadiana (ebook) 20200219901 |
ISBN 9780774863223 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780774863247 (PDF) |
ISBN 9780774863254 (EPUB) | ISBN 9780774863261 (Kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Women – Suffrage – British Columbia – History. |
LCSH: Suffrage – British Columbia – History. | LCSH: Women – Legal status,
laws, etc. – British Columbia – History. | LCSH: Women – British Columbia –
Social conditions. | LCSH: Suffragists – British Columbia – History. |
LCSH: Voting – British Columbia – History.

Classification: LCC J192 .C36 2020 | DDC 324.6/2309711 – dc23

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.

Set in Gill Sans and Tundra by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Deborah Kerr

Proofreader: Kristy Hankewitz

Indexer: Judy Dunlop

Cover and series design: Jessica Sullivan

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpres.ca