

A Liberal-Labour Lady

The Times and Life of Mary
Ellen Spear Smith

VERONICA STRONG-BOAG



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Introduction:

Worker, Settler, Liberal, Feminist

A Liberal-Labour Lady tells the story of Mary Ellen Spear Smith (1863–1933), British Columbia’s first female member of the Legislative Assembly and the British Empire and Commonwealth’s first female cabinet minister. Talent, industry, opportunity, and oft-mentioned good looks catapulted her from obscurity in Victorian England’s mining villages into the upper ranks of imperial Canada’s respectable society. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this miner’s daughter and miner’s wife refashioned herself as a lady with a mission. Mary Ellen, as she was familiarly known, channelled a politics of hope for White workers, settlers, reformers, and women, even as she ignored Indigenous Peoples and sought to exclude Asians from the body politic. She worked for the taming of capitalism and patriarchy, the prevention of class and gender wars, and the reinforcement of the era’s “settler project.” She is often remembered for her insistence on *both* equal wages for equal work and that no child be labelled illegitimate *and* on sterilization of the “unfit” and that no Asian person gain equal rights of citizenship. In both rejecting and reinforcing injustices, this flawed but extraordinary woman deserves far more than canonization or condemnation. This biography attempts that fair hearing.

Mary Ellen’s tale advances here, as it did for many decades in life, alongside that of her husband, Ralph Smith (1858–1917). Married for almost thirty-five years, they were partners in family and political matters. Ralph initially loomed larger in Britain and Canada, but Mary Ellen gradually overtook him in the public spotlight. His premature death ensured that she would make her own mark in history. No study of either would be

complete without the other, but equally so, this liberal-labour lady merits centre stage, as indeed Ralph himself was sometimes inclined to admit.¹ Daughters, wives, and mothers supply more than truncated reminders of dominant men.

Both Mary Ellen and Ralph became adults in Northumberland, England's northernmost county, in mining villages that were restive with Methodism, cooperation, unionism, and liberal-labourism. In demanding greater democracy and a share in capitalism's rewards, such Northumbrians were often radicals of their day. When the couple emigrated to the coal city of Nanaimo, British Columbia, in 1892, they carried their founding politics, but these evolved with their changed circumstances. The Smiths joined an imperial settlement movement that placed the British at the top of a racial meritocracy, viewed other Europeans as potentially compatible, and treated women and men of Indigenous, Asian, and African origins as largely unfit for inclusion in the nation. As capitalism widened the gulf between rich and poor in the new land, just as it had in the old, Mary Ellen and Ralph intended Britannicization, liberal-labourism, the "New Liberalism" of their age, and feminism to mobilize class and gender partnerships in the extension of democracy for preferred citizens. By the First World War, this agenda had taken them far. Ralph had captained the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada and served in the BC and Canadian legislatures, and Mary Ellen had moved to the fore of a broad-based feminist movement.

In 1917, Ralph's unexpected death, just after his appointment as the BC minister of finance, launched Mary Ellen's independent political career. Governor General Lord Grey (1851–1917) described her as "comely,"² and good looks were significant in fortifying her crusading gifts as a "free woman" – a politically charged moniker, when anti-slavery campaigns were still in living memory, and the New Woman and, soon enough, the Flapper were judged threats to the sexual status quo. In a 1918 provincial by-election in Vancouver, arguably the city with the dominion's most diverse suffrage movement, the recent widow won a tough campaign. As a pioneer female MLA, Smith sought to marshal a broad progressive coalition for women's minimum wage and mothers' pensions. Such New Liberal legislation was to underpin a modern state committed to a "fair deal," a core labourist value much invoked by suffragists,³ for favoured peoples. In the 1920 provincial election, the veteran returned to the Grit fold and topped the polls. For some months in 1921, her reward was a place in cabinet. That appointment without portfolio again propelled Mary Ellen into the history books.

In fact, Canadian Liberals had little place for a feminist activist, especially one with a labourist history. As progressive gains stalled in a disappointing decade, Mary Ellen became better known for her anti-Asian prejudices. Barely winning the 1924 BC election, she languished. Four years later, she was shunted off to Esquimalt, Vancouver Island, where she would lose to a Conservative chieftain. Her defeat, and that of the provincial Liberal Party, left her a limited role as a defender of feminist causes whose time appeared to have come and gone. By her death in 1933, Mary Ellen's vision of a partnership between White women and workers in the humanization of capitalism and the assault on patriarchy lay in tatters, even as race remained a key marker of entitlement in BC and Canadian politics.

Like all biographies and histories, *A Liberal-Labour Lady* is partial. Surviving sources are often fragmentary, and few diaries or private letters offer intimate details. Mary Ellen's feelings about her life as a daughter, mother, wife, friend, and activist can be only dimly glimpsed. She and her family received at best brief mention in the institutional archives of Britain, British Columbia, and Canada. Documentation is especially slim for the early years in mining communities, and the limited legislative and state records for early-twentieth-century British Columbia further handicap recovery. Papers from the women or the organizations with whom Mary Ellen associated are likewise inadequate, and few private records of her male contemporaries remembered a female interloper. Indeed, we have no visual image of Mary Ellen before the First World War. Such recurring omissions and losses often mean that highflying women, indeed the "second sex" generally, readily slip from history. Until now, that has been the fate of this volume's liberal-labour lady.

Fortunately, the increasing digitization of many BC, Canadian, and British newspapers and magazines allows for unprecedented retrieval. Although influential feminist and labour publications such as Toronto's *Woman's Century*, Victoria's *The Champion*, and Vancouver's *Labor Statesman* await readily available electronic formatting, many of their issues survive in other forms to illuminate the landscape that moulded Smith and her contemporaries. The social media of its time, the print press was directed at both popular and particular audiences, from women to workers, businessmen, and activists. It offers a rich, diverse, and commonly highly partisan portrait that stands at the heart of the arguments in these pages. Read carefully, it reveals "many different voices" and sometimes "spaces where women spoke directly to other women" in critical "debates about gender roles and the relations

between the sexes.”⁴ A dedicated contingent of feminist journalists, increasingly well documented by critical scholars, everywhere enriched discussion of the “New Day” promised by female enfranchisement.⁵ Politics loomed large in much coverage of pioneers, a preoccupation that inevitably shaped this book. In Britain’s Mother of Parliaments, trailblazing MPs such as Conservative Nancy Langhorne Astor (1879–1964) and Labour’s Ellen Wilkinson (1891–1947) were both targets of and contributors to a print gaze that complicated and challenged democracy.⁶ The same was true for Mary Ellen, as a feminist activist and later a politician. This overdue biography relies on the resulting treasure trove, with all its favouring of the public over the intimate and of men over women. The alternative is to omit a female torchbearer when we remember the past.

A Liberal-Labour Lady depends as well on expanding scholarship on workers, settlers, liberals, and women in both Britain and Canada. Overlapping worlds of debate and engagement in the issues of the day set the crucial context in which Mary Ellen emerged as a suffragist and MLA.⁷ We have learned a great deal about the substantial and diverse resistance to the capitalist status quo offered by miners, workers in general, and labourist movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their commonplace privileging of male breadwinners is now an acknowledged part of that story.⁸ The world of British settlement and imperialism (or “Britannicization”), dispossession of Indigenous Peoples, and racism has similarly inspired important studies that inform this volume. Upper-class women or, more rarely, their less socially elevated sisters, such as Mary Ellen, are now identified as significant agents in transnational encounters that negotiated relations of class, race, and gender. They could be both heroic and imperious.⁹ Liberalism, often said to be Canada’s dominant ideology, has likewise provoked lively scholarly debate that shaped understanding here. Its recurring (but commonly unacknowledged) advancement of a White male elite once again undermined democracy even as its claims for a meritocracy sometimes left doors ajar for less privileged communities.¹⁰ New scholarship on the suffragist generation in the English-speaking world has also significantly informed my interpretation. Female activists were a complicated lot, far more than merely democracy’s readily forgotten shock troops or a White “God’s police,” as they have been dubbed in the Australian context.¹¹ It is no longer possible, as their enemies preferred, to ignore suffragists as key intervenors in crucial questions of their age. The courage, complexity, and limitations of the women (and the men) who were enrolled in the “Great Cause” of enfranchising

women need a reckoning if we are to understand the evolution of Canada and the British world.

Newspapers, magazines, and state documents spotlight public life, but no one is entirely comprehensible without reference to their family. With Ralph Smith, a miner, Methodist, cooperator, unionist, and politician,¹² Mary Ellen was one part of a power couple for many years. His response to the class, gender, and racial conflicts of their age, as well as his endorsement of her talents, helped prepare her for community leadership as their children grew to maturity. One (step-)daughter and four sons were similarly essential to the private and public lives of their parents. Offspring and other kin surface here as regularly as the scanty records permit, tangible reminders of private interests behind public acts.

As an activist wife, a responsible parent, and a talented politician, Mary Ellen was never among the “gentle ladies of the Avenue,” the self-satisfied and circumspect occasional do-gooders pilloried by sister suffragist Nellie L. Mooney McClung (1873–1951) in her memorable 1915 polemic, *In Times Like These*. As Mary Ellen moved from Britain to British Columbia, from miner’s kin to settler newcomer to parliamentary lady over the course of seven decades, she was inspired by diverse gender protocols in developing a self-conscious performance of meritorious femininity. In Northumberland, as a young Methodist who was destined to become a collier’s wife, she absorbed certain codes of behaviour. Priorities included religious faith, hard work, and wifely and maternal duty. Tough women strengthened mining communities. On the other hand, as an avid reader and motivated student of the world around her, Mary Ellen observed a pervasive “cult of true womanhood” associated most closely with the middle class. Centred on religiosity, gentleness, and purity, it promised public respectability and moral authority, important considerations for someone whose future involved significant social mobility and claims to superiority on the settlement frontier. Her early musical training, which prepared her to solo in Nanaimo operas and operettas and for intimacy with Zoe Lafontaine (1841–1921), the wife of Liberal prime minister Wilfrid Laurier (1841–1919), likewise influenced her presentation of gender and class. Further complicating Smith’s staging of self was the rise of the so-called New Woman at the end of the nineteenth century. Distinguished by wage earning (often in professions), independence, and intelligence, this controversial figure had power, as demonstrated by Mary Ellen’s recurring tributes to female nurses, teachers, lawyers, social workers, and other such pioneers. She also took heart from the courage of political trailblazers, including McClung, who became an MLA

in Alberta in 1921, Agnes Campbell Macphail (1890–1954), who entered the House of Commons in the same year, and Britain’s Margaret Bondfield (1873–1953), elected in 1923. In short, she channelled currents of her age that underscored women’s potential. Even as blind spots crippled her vision, notably regarding race relations, Smith established herself as a campaigner with broad appeal for Canada’s settler electorate.

Despite differences, versions of womanhood pervasive in the Victorian age and beyond were heavily oriented to heterosexuality and, to put it bluntly, to women’s management of dominant males.¹³ In some respects like Britain’s second female MP, Viscountess Astor, Mary Ellen put that message to work as a gifted entertainer and speaker. Few commentators of either gender failed to mention her physical attractiveness, melodic voice, personality, quick wit, and charm. As revealed by her lengthy track record of sympathizers and loyalists, as well as executive offices in diverse clubs, women regularly succumbed to her magic. So too did men. In public, she deftly employed diverse styles of persuasion. As with most suffragists, maternal virtues stood centre front in her justifications for causes from child welfare, eugenics, and temperance to equal wages, Asian exclusion, and the vote. Both her sex’s natural inclinations and her own history of child raising legitimized engagement in government and society. Mary Ellen was equally renowned for deploying womanly wiles to gain ground against the recalcitrant, including BC and Quebec premiers and Canadian prime ministers. Male listeners, whether veterans, unionists, businessmen, or legislators, could expect to be teased and cajoled into at least the semblance of gentlemanly conduct. Her third major approach to winning support relied on reason: she became a fount of irrefutable evidence of “women worthies” from the Bible to modern literature, science, and law. Natural justice demanded a fair deal for men’s equals. Smith’s diverse weapons of persuasion – from the maternal to the seductive and the reasoned – mounted a powerful arsenal in advancing a settler agenda, reforming capitalism, and challenging patriarchy. During her heyday, she had few peers in Canada; perhaps only McClung could outdo her in handling an audience.

Even with mastery of the tools of manipulation, public advocacy was always risky for women. Origins in working-class or otherwise suspect populations made champions especially vulnerable to denunciation and trivialization. Feminists in particular were closely monitored for inferiority and fallibility. Like Nellie McClung, who livened up suffrage speeches by mocking the disparagement of her foes, Mary Ellen had to withstand and deflect slurs on her femininity and reputation.¹⁴ As suggested by her

reflections on “snobocracy” and her membership in a literary club that rejected higher education as the premier sign of intellectual merit, she was sensitive to her precarious status as a working-class immigrant with relatively little formal schooling. Nor as a woman could Smith escape the insults that arose as she aged and lost the beauty that long held her in good stead with men in particular. Credibility on the public stage was hard and courageously won.

After her death in 1933, Mary Ellen Spear Smith barely survived in the public imagination, a seeming confirmation of democracy’s inevitability and, equally so, of women’s preordained limits in public life. This book charts a far more complicated truth. How could any single individual live up to the massive expectations, whether for success or failure, imposed on suffrage stalwarts in their own time and subsequently? Simultaneously intrepid and flawed, Mary Ellen stands as a key figure in the compromised struggle for greater justice in British Columbia and Canada during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I

Setting the Stage in British Mining Villages, to 1892

Mary Ellen was born a miner's daughter and soon became a miner's wife. Almost three decades in England's colliery communities, first briefly in the southwest and then more influentially in the northeast, notably Northumberland, preceded her departure for Canada. At some level, she always remained a northern Briton, and her voice never lost the accent shared by many new Canadians from that region of the "Old Country," as it was commonly called. As she moved from daughter to wife and mother, often in the shadow of male relatives, notably her publicly minded husband, Ralph Smith, these years helped prepare her for life in British Columbia and the Dominion of Canada. Old lessons resonated even as she boldly moved to defy the odds for a working-class woman.

THE SPEARS

Mary Ellen was born in 1863 to a mining family in Cornwall, circumstances that did not invoke music, romance, or high prospects. Her parents, Mary Ann Jackson (1837–95) and Richard Sleep Spear (1839–1913), had roots deep in England's southwestern counties, with their deposits of copper, tin, and arsenic. Life there was often hard. Joining the waves of migrant hewers who contributed industrial sinew to the British Empire's "replenishment of the earth" in the nineteenth century, the family would travel from Cornwall and Devon to Northumberland, and then to the United

States and Canada.¹ Like many migrants, Mary Ann and Richard pursued ambitions that exceeded their limited beginnings.

In Cornwall and Devon, the Spears depended on diggings, which produced a rich living for dynastic landlords such as the Russells, a prominent Whig family that held various titles in the English peerage, including Duke of Bedford. In contrast, most working people survived by the skin of their teeth. In the nineteenth century, their hardscrabble lives, invoked on the sidelines of the BBC *Poldark* drama (2015–19), suffered in the struggle with resource depletion, growing pollution, market competition, and persistent rock falls and flooding. The prevalence of the tributing system in Cornish mines, essentially a form of self-employment much like the zero-hours contracts of the twenty-first century, kept toilers vulnerable and handicapped the era's fledgling trade union movement.²

In mining, men dominated the waged labour force. Women, often dubbed “bal maidens” in a mix of Cornish and English, nevertheless regularly worked on-site and in processing ore, as did children. Exposés in Victorian newspapers and government inquiries increasingly roused public outrage at evident distress and possible sexual impropriety. One result was Britain's 1842 Mines and Collieries Act, which excluded all women and all children under age ten from underground labour. Yet, for all its evident brutality, mining was often preferable to unregulated servitude in agricultural and domestic labour. Well after Mary Ellen left for Canada in 1892, some Cornish and Devon women, like “Pitt Brow lasses,” “Tip Girls,” and “Pit Bank women” elsewhere in England, persisted in heavy work at light pay near the top of excavations. Ultimately, however, for all their proof of women's capacity, such jobs threatened evolving notions of gendered respectability that required decent wives to toil at home. Only male miners ultimately won kudos as working-class heroes, strong men enrolled in industrial capitalism's dangerous and essential toil.³

When Devon-born Mary Ann Jackson married her sweetheart, Richard Sleep Spear, in 1862 in the Cornish copper-mining parish of Calstock, they initiated an ambitious partnership of the type that underpinned much male employment. Setting up house in the nearby village of Gunnislake, the Spears produced their first child, Mary Ellen, on October 11, 1863. However, unlike the pattern in most miners' families, she was not followed in short order by numerous siblings. A brother, William John (1868–1919), would not arrive for five years. That gap helped keep Mary Ann healthy enough to join Richard in the vibrant regional community produced by temperance societies and Primitive Methodist chapels (a puritanical form of Christianity that stressed strict morality while offering the hope

of salvation). Nor did the small household require the relentless domestic labour commonly demanded of daughters. Mary Ellen's talents, like her brother's, could be cultivated. Music, both singing and playing the piano and the organ, became a mainstay of family life and a sign of propriety and ambition.

BRITAIN'S MINING COMMUNITIES

Almost immediately after Mary Ellen's birth, the family moved to Tavistock, Devon, birthplace of her parents, in search of pit jobs for Richard. That move produced no security. Soon enough, the Spears joined other economic refugees further fleeing bleak prospects. Whereas some tested the diggings in South Africa, South America, Australia, and North America, many desperate and hopeful travellers took advantage of new railways to reconnoiter northern England and Scotland, where booming coalfields buttressed the expanding British Empire with the promise of better jobs than traditional agricultural or newer factory employment. Substantial ore reserves, rising industrial demand, and proud miners produced relatively high wages in the counties of Northumberland and Durham, and married men often received a rent allowance or free housing plus financial help in case of injury.⁴ Such pitmen have been reckoned "probably the highest paid proletarians anywhere in the world outside the USA."⁵ Prospects for a breadwinner wage for adult males promised family security and respectability for those who survived toil in the depths of the earth.

Underground labour was never for the faint of heart. Even as new technologies and protective legislation gradually improved its safety, tragedy dogged the industry, with a British miner being "killed every six hours, seriously injured every two hours and injured badly enough to need a week off work every two or three minutes" between 1868 and 1919.⁶ In Earsdon, Northumberland, the birthplace of Ralph Smith, some eighty miners died in 1860, followed by another two hundred in 1862,⁷ a casualty rate that taught hard lessons. The toll of industrial diseases was less visible, but underground workers' lungs were commonly "loaded with black matter, solid or fluid, like printers' ink, or common ink, or lamp black, or charcoal powder, all insoluble and tasteless." Asthma and bad health haunted miners and their families, adding to domestic labours and fears.⁸

Though occasionally charged as feckless, thriftless, and failures in combating "the many risks of a dangerous occupation,"⁹ nineteenth-century

hewers nevertheless won a heady place in the pantheon of working-class heroes. Popular tabloid coverage of pit disasters fuelled the industry's association with a hypermasculinity of physical performance and courage. In tests of manliness, miners, such as Richard Spear and Ralph Smith, had no reason to kowtow to would-be social superiors. As they backstopped Britain's industrial machine, Northumberland and Durham communities seethed with restiveness, and northern coalfields developed a reputation for producing radical hard men and strong women who denounced any status quo that did not accord respect.¹⁰ Only the ordinary British soldier, the so-called Tommy,¹¹ would rival pitmen in the popular imagination. This reputation long empowered politicians with mining backgrounds and helps explain why the British Conservative prime minister, Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013), later set out to break miners in the great strike of 1984–85. Canadian hewers likewise shared in the pit legend, providing a powerful genealogy for would-be politicians such as Ralph Smith and, by extension, his helpmate.

Despite their dangers, restive northern mining villages drew diverse job-seekers. Northumberland's 1891 census reported birthplaces well beyond the British Isles, including "Sweden, the United States, Canada and even on a ship off the Cape Colony in South Africa."¹² The cosmopolitanism of much mining, for all the sense of global brotherhood it sometimes fostered, included clear social and ethnic boundaries. As Mary Ellen and Ralph grew to maturity, doctors, schoolteachers, stationmasters, ministers, local landlords, and colliery managers and owners peopled the local elite. Miners did not, but those who laboured deep underground, such as Ralph, were at the top of the industrial workforce; those engaged elsewhere near the rim of the pits, such as Richard Spear, received lower status and pay. Such hierarchies generated conflict, but mutual dependence on successful resource extraction and respect for tough labour also prompted "cordial and even friendly" relations across social and economic divides.¹³

Whereas the British Midlands demanded girls and women for the Victorian age's bustling mills and factories, the collieries of Northumberland and Durham privileged men and boys. Their coin was not for women, especially after their legal exclusion from underground labour in 1842. Mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters nevertheless remained indispensable.¹⁴ Marriage and families created economic partnerships, with female labour replenishing and maintaining male wage-earners. At home, women and girls were never off shift. In the two- to four-room row cottages that lacked indoor toilets, running water, or furnaces, characteristic of mining villages, they hauled water and fuel, cleaned, washed, cooked,

gardened, kept pigs and poultry, preserved, sewed, shopped, and nursed relatives and boarders. Their workplace hazards included domestic violence, repeated pregnancies, high levels of infant mortality and morbidity, and poor nutrition, in effect counterparts to the industrial deaths, diseases, and injuries of miners.¹⁵ Women like Mary Ann and Mary Ellen had good reason to value their own sex.

Mining settlements in north Britain expected wives to stay home, but single women, whose domestic labour was not entirely absorbed by kin, might compete for pitiful remittances, most often in household service and, less commonly, in teaching and dressmaking. However, they were not encouraged to become the era's independent New Women. Their ambitions were firmly directed to subsidizing their families and, soon enough, to wedding locally, birthing a new generation, and sustaining husbands and sons in their contribution to the nation's industrial might. As a recent history of the region confirms, "it was a matter of pride for miners that their wives did not take on paid work outside the home."¹⁶ Such was the expectation for Mary Ellen.

When they fled north, the Spears, like many economic exiles, met an uncertain reception. In the 1830s and 1840s, Northumberland and Durham mine owners had imported Cornish and Devon strikebreakers, whom local workers roundly condemned as "black jacks" or "Blackleg Miners." "Bootleg Miner," a popular ballad originating in an 1844 lockout in Seaton Delaval, near where the Spears would settle and Mary Ellen would marry, expressed English tribalism and targeted class treachery. Its lyrics, sung into the twenty-first century, hailed the righteous strikers:

Across the way they stretch a line,
To catch the throat and break the spine
Of the dirty blackleg miner.

Equally significantly, the song celebrated the fact that

There's not a woman in this town-row
Will look at the blackleg miner.¹⁷

Indeed, Northumbrian women had a rowdy history of supporting their menfolk against the bosses, a tradition that would aid them in other forms of political protest.¹⁸

Conflict between Northumberland miners and southern interlopers, like that between British and Chinese migrants in BC mines, simmered

for decades. In 1865, mine owners predictably turned to newcomers to crush a strike in Cramlington, the heart of the county's collieries.¹⁹ Ethnic hatreds were never, however, inevitable. "Bootleg Miner" concluded with both a death threat and an invocation of class solidarity:

So join the union while you may,
Divvin't wait till your dying day,
For that may not be far away,
You dirty blackleg miner!²⁰

During the drawn-out Cramlington contest, many Cornish miners opted to honour picket lines and join the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association, which had been established in 1864 and was soon renamed the Northumberland Miners' Association (NMA).²¹

Like most newcomers to the northern coalfields, Dick Spear left few records. Only after his daughter became a noted Canadian politician did memories surface of him as a deputy overman, effectively a safety supervisor, in Cramlington, and "one of the canniest men that ever 'stepped in leather shoon,'" alongside similarly rare acknowledgment of his wife's piety and devotion to Methodism.²² Evidently, the couple joined an *émigré* contingent that increasingly sided with native Northumberland miners, even as it preserved its own cultural distinctions. The latter could be important, as some contemporaries credited the Cornish with more advanced gender relations: "They had none of that feeling, still strong in the north, that a man has amply performed his share of the marriage compact when he has handed over to his wife the bulk of his earnings. They did not shame to help their wives to wash, or even to cook."²³ Such egalitarianism benefitted ambitious consorts. Marriage did not bar Mary Ann from commitments to church and temperance. Her daughter, Nelly, as she was familiarly called, was encouraged to use the "great ability" that she demonstrated as a pupil at the Cramlington Colliery School.²⁴ Such support laid the base for Mary Ellen's confidence and insistence on equality.

However, before her marriage and for some time afterward, the future BC cabinet minister shared her parents' near invisibility in the historical record. Only at odd moments did she surface as a teacher, though it remains unclear whether she taught solely at Primitive Methodist Sunday schools or in the local primary school, where promising senior students sometimes apprenticed. In any event, the 1881 English census identified her as a teenage seamstress living with her parents. This respectable

occupation gave Mary Ellen some personal experience of waged employment while providing useful preparation for a future as a wife, mother, and activist. In an age when most clothing was made at home, her superior sewing skills would allow her and her family to assert propriety and even style, as attested by repeated Canadian reports of the elegance of her dress. Such talents facilitated the *embourgeoisement*, or adoption of middle-class habits and presentation, that would form an essential part of her later political and social capital. In tight-knit communities, potential sweethearts found plentiful opportunities to show their charms, sartorial and otherwise, in Methodist chapels, cooperative stores, temperance societies, and popular lectures. Like many colliery village girls, Mary Ellen found a local husband in her late teens.

THE SMITHS

Born on August 8, 1858, Ralph Smith was working in the pit at the Hartley mines near the Spears' home by age eleven. By the late 1870s, he had gained a local reputation as a lay Primitive Methodist preacher, an advocate for the cooperative movement, and an activist miner. The 1871 English census placed his family in Holywell, Northumberland, described two years later as "an old-fashioned country village" near the North Sea, boasting two collieries, albeit one near exhaustion.²⁵ Ralph's father, Earsdon-born Robert, had roots in rural labour, but he was employed as a coal hewer. He and his wife, Irish-born Mary (her maiden name is unknown), produced four sons – John, Robert, Ralph, and Mathew – the first three identified in the 1871 census as miners and the fourth as a student. Two girls – their daughter Mary and foster-daughter Sarah A. – were both "scholars," perhaps at the Primitive Methodist Sabbath School in Holywell. Twelve-year-old Sarah carried the surname Riddle (sometimes given as Riddell or Riddel). Like John, the eldest Smith child, and unlike his siblings, she came from the county of Durham, which lay to the south of Northumberland. The 1861 census records an Irish-born Riddel family in that county, with a daughter of her name. Perhaps they were kin to Ralph's mother. Sarah's presence a decade later in the Holywell household may well reflect a need for more domestic hands or even family tragedy, since relatives sometimes rescued orphans from bleak asylums or workhouses.

Close ties were further affirmed in 1880, when Ralph and Sarah wed in the nearby seaside village of Tynemouth. They soon became parents to Mary Elizabeth (1881–1944), born at Bates Cottages, Holywell.

Conditions were far from ideal in the “fifteen tenements with sixty inhabitants and a limited privy accommodation.” Smallpox, diphtheria, and other diseases visited frequently.²⁶ Childbirth often injured women, which may explain why Sarah was dead by 1882. Soon enough, she was largely forgotten, glimpsed only in a rare document, such as the 1905 BC marriage licence for her daughter, Mary Elizabeth, and John Carr (c. 1880–1918). For the most part, however, Mary Elizabeth was publicly linked with her stepmother, Mary Ellen, who quickly eclipsed Ralph’s foster sister and first wife.

MARRIAGE AND DOMESTIC LIFE

On February 10, 1883, nineteen-year-old seamstress Mary Ellen Spear espoused the recent widower and miner for the East Holywell Mining Company in the Primitive Methodist chapel in North Shields.²⁷ She immediately became mother to toddler Mary Elizabeth and probably lodged in the same cottage where Sarah’s short life had ended. Such substitutions were commonplace. When death stole wives and mothers, their inputs had to be quickly replaced if offspring were to survive and breadwinners to earn. Such tragedies underscored life’s fragility and the value of kin, church, and community.

The Smith village, Holywell, was described as far from a “clean place,” suffering from “a want of drainage, and a deficiency of sanitary arrangements.” The dismal housing awaiting the young wife suggested routine neglect by the lord of the manor, the conservative Duke of Northumberland. As an 1873 article in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* stated,

To speak plainly, it is very far from what it ought to be ... Each house has two rooms, a large kitchen on the ground level, and a cold dismal garret of the same size above, which is reached by the accustomed break-neck ladder. The pantries project from the rear of the cottages ... Privies and ashpits there are none.²⁸

Although their home in Bates Cottages (or East Holywell) might have been somewhat superior to much working-class housing in Britain’s industrial cities, it remained cramped and dependent on public water taps until the later 1890s, well after the Smiths had departed. Digestive and respiratory ailments flourished, as did typhoid, scarlet fever, measles, and whooping cough. Ever-present slag heaps and smoke threatened

breathing, and the pigsties common in back gardens added to dirt and pollution. Porcine contributions, like those of chickens, rabbits, and gardens, nevertheless mainstayed family diets as well as adding to the chores of household life.

Such domestic settings kept colliery wives, mothers, and daughters hard pressed to keep families presentable and healthy. Pervasive community oversight nevertheless fostered high standards of housewifery and the commonly observed “cleanliness and brightness of the houses” on miners’ row.²⁹ Difficult to miss was the message that female industry and talent buttressed respectability and provided proof of superior morality. Women like Mary Ellen readily measured themselves by their public reputation for excellent housewifery. Pride in hard work well done bolstered women’s claims to fair dealing in personal relations and much else. Relatives and neighbours did more than set high standards for housewifery. Their networks, strongly dependent on women’s friendships and kinship, supplied critical assistance in childcare, budgets, and managing husbands. The nearby presence of the birth families of Mary Ellen and Ralph was likely to be useful, all the more when the babies arrived.

Relatively high wages, opportunities for sons in the pits, and the short-fall in waged labour for women encouraged fertility. Company housing in many villages also sometimes put larger households at the front of the queue.³⁰ Whatever the cause, the young Mrs. Ralph Smith, unlike her own mother, produced children in rapid succession. Richard William (1885–1925), Robert (1885–1927), and Ralph Gladstone (1887–1963) quickly joined their half-sister, all their names invoking the previous generation and blood ties, not to mention William Ewart Gladstone (1809–98), the grand old man of British liberalism and long-serving prime minister. They crowded the cottage, where the 1891 English census also listed Ralph’s brother, twenty-seven-year-old Mathew, as resident. Although Mary Ellen had led a somewhat protected life as a daughter, she soon had to worry about making ends meet. In the mid-1880s, her parents and brother, William, joined the Cornish diaspora’s continuing search for better prospects, first in the American western states, San Francisco, and perhaps Grass Valley, California, and then in Nanaimo, British Columbia. Their departure could only have made life tougher for kin left behind.³¹

The Smiths’ last child, John Wesley (1893–1960), was not born until the family had relocated to Nanaimo. Perhaps the gap in childbearing between 1887 and 1893 was due to miscarriages, a special danger for women who continued to work hard during pregnancy. It might also

reflect efforts to regulate fertility, to bring it in line with limited resources. Given Mary Ellen's appearance of robust health throughout much of her life, birth control seems likely. Certainly, discussion of its value was commonplace among the British reformers whom the Smiths favoured. In his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) and *The Subjection of Women* (1869), the influential Liberal theorist John Stuart Mill typically endorsed family limitation as a condition of women's emancipation and progress in general.³² Though contraceptive options remained limited and sometimes illegal in both Britain and Canada, the couple could only benefit from an "upsurge of commercial literature in the 1890s which publicized sex manuals, contraceptives, and abortifacients."³³

For the ambitious Smiths, fertility and domestic relations in general were further informed by Victorians' growing idealization of family life overseen by industrious, moral, and respected wives and mothers, the female counterpart to the male aristocrats of labour who have fascinated historians of the working class.³⁴ In particular, the Methodism that anchored their lives (and inspired the name of their last-born son) embraced a familial culture that assigned a prized role to women, and its ideals, sometimes embodied in the cult of true womanhood, permeated both private and public life. Whereas the "balance of power" in matters from wages to diets routinely favoured men, companionship became an increasing ideal in many working-class marriages,³⁵ perhaps aided in Mary Ellen's case by her Cornish roots. By the close of the nineteenth century, some women built on that regard, as well as older traditions of working-class family solidarity, to assert their right to respect and to a role in public life.

Although they were always a minority in mining villages, as elsewhere, female activists often stood in solidarity with other women who devoted themselves solely to their own households. They might be regarded as odd or extraordinary, but many were admired for their courage and diligence. Such approval underlay the region's emerging support for female preachers in Methodist chapels and as office-holders in the cooperative movement and in local government.³⁶ Even community champions, however, were required to meet domestic expectations and to prioritize their families, just the identity that Mary Ellen would later publicly espouse as a maternal feminist. This stance would help her secure invaluable approval when she campaigned for suffrage and other reforms in Canada. In contrast, as he climbed socially, her politician husband would have difficulty in maintaining claims to a working-class male identity and, with this, support from organized labour.

PUBLIC LIFE AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Miners, like fathers and husbands in other occupations, met the primary requirement for their sex in generating income and not drinking or gambling it away. Despite or because of pervasive agreement about men's obligations, the pits fostered "a hypermasculine culture centered around the trade union, working men's club, allotment, and football field."³⁷ Women were encouraged to "treat men like kings" in exchange for their wage packet.³⁸ If crowded housing, endless domestic chores, and frequent pregnancies shortened all tempers and lives, men could escape to pubs or inns far more readily than women. Holywell boasted the Fat Ox and Half Moon, just down the road from the Smith home. Such commercial spaces offered men drink, gambling, and companionship, but they also hosted discussion of public issues, from cooperatives and unions to electoral candidates. Wives more frequently relied on gatherings associated with homes, chapels, the local primary school built by pit owners and dubbed "a handsome edifice," or Seaton Delaval's cooperative store.³⁹

Religion, notably for the Smiths in the form of Primitive Methodism, was a powerful presence in everyday life, strongly associated with "well-kept homes and well-run households," where women were upheld in expectations that men would turn over their wages.⁴⁰ Local chapels encouraged self-help, individual restraint, and personal improvement at home and at work. Evangelical itinerant preachers, both male and female, spread national and global networks of faith and activism. Little in personal or political life escaped their scrutiny. In particular, Methodism armoured many miners in demanding a better deal from employers and governments, even as it communicated two sometimes contradictory messages: on the one hand, worthy men and women should be industrious and dutiful; on the other, they should challenge unfairness and corruption.⁴¹ In other words, respect and position had to be earned; abuse, whether by bosses or men, justified demands for remedy. The era's radical class and gender politics resonated with those principles.

To spread their activist message, Methodists, mostly men but a few women too, were trained in public debate, committee work, and fundraising. Teaching in the chapel Sunday school, as Mary Ellen did, regularly demonstrated female competence and respectability, but churches occasionally offered their distaff members opportunities for greater service. In 1891, a female lay minister from Newcastle, the metropolitan centre just down the coast, joined Ralph in rallying coal village congregations, and

she was not alone.⁴² For the most part, however, men dominated Methodism's public ranks. By the 1880s, Ralph Smith stood out as a promising candidate for leadership. The local newspaper typically applauded him for inspiring attentive audiences in special Sunday services to large congregations in the United Methodist Free Church at Seaton Sluice.⁴³ The talented young miner appeared to be following in the footsteps of Thomas Burt (1837–1922), an influential local MP (1874–1918) who lectured regularly in the Methodist chapels and schoolrooms of Bates Cottages and Holywell.⁴⁴ Local success encouraged Ralph to dream of training for full-time ministerial employment. However, the responsibilities of a growing family and his own chronic respiratory problems doomed that future, though he retained his determination to spread a gospel of individual and collective salvation.

Even as Methodism cultivated confidence and courage among ambitious miners, it found allies in the higher ranks of Victorian society. Many local land holders, colliery owners, business people, and professionals shared its faith in the promise of self-improvement. Their diverse contributions to community projects, ranging from land and buildings to heating, insurance, and scholarships, aimed to cultivate orderly habits and demonstrate responsible leadership.⁴⁵ In colliery villages, repeated evidence of elite engagement reminded beneficiaries of possible cross-class solidarity, not to mention the need for gratitude. Before the appearance of the welfare state, this potential assistance supplied a significant basis for social cohesion, even solidarity.

Yet if the gifts of the powerful were hard to miss, advancement in colliery communities depended above all on individual effort by workers and their families. Education was increasingly central to their hopes for a better future.⁴⁶ On the one hand, state schooling gradually improved. The Elementary Education Acts of 1870 and 1880 offered girls and boys under thirteen basic training and levels of literacy and numeracy that typically outstripped those of their parents. Many miners nevertheless took for granted that sons would apprentice in early adolescence in their own relatively well-paid occupation.⁴⁷ Bright girls like Mary Ellen, for whom no pit jobs existed, whose mothers were not weighted down with childcare, and who might aspire to teaching, sometimes stayed on longer in school. Such opportunities could pay dividends when young women negotiated their own marital relations with less literate and numerate pitmen. Ultimately, like Methodism, schooling delivered mixed messages. It integrated working-class pupils into a national culture that encouraged deference to authority, even as it could recognize academic talent, develop

skills, and open doors for the imagination, better employment, and challenges to the status quo.⁴⁸

In any case, the relatively short stay of many youngsters in schools meant that auto-didacticism and adult education were critical bolsters to ambition.⁴⁹ Itinerant booksellers recruited buyers for the growing output of Britain's democratizing presses, with their mass-market "classics for the masses." Texts from literary greats such as William Shakespeare and John Milton joined those of newcomers such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Thomas Carlyle, Christina Rossetti, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Emily Bronte, and Charles Dickens, many of whom would be cited in later speeches by both Smiths. History and politics attracted a popular readership that was trying to make sense of the world. Northumberland mining households could appraise their own hard lives in reading popular exposés, such as Andrew Mearns and William Preston's *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883), which condemned poverty as a product of human greed.⁵⁰

They might not have had much in their pockets, but the Smiths were inspired by the great debates of their age. In Canada, a cartoonist would later single out Whig historian and politician Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–59) as an ongoing spur for Ralph. Macaulay's opposition to universal suffrage would have given him pause, but his idol could be applauded for defending popular education, anti-slavery, the civilizing mission of the British Empire, and Jewish political emancipation. Ralph likewise encouraged friends to discover "inspiration in the pages of the older economists," particularly Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), whose writings on self-reliance he had consumed as a young man. Unfortunately, nothing is known about Ralph's views of Spencer's shift from pro- to anti-suffragist.⁵¹

The Smiths and their village contemporaries did not have to depend on their own purchases for stimulation. The lectures, reading rooms, and libraries of local Mechanics' Institutes and mutual improvement societies, including the Ancient Order of Foresters, which Ralph later fondly remembered,⁵² offered scientific and technical texts as well as cherished fiction. From the 1880s on, Cambridge, Oxford, and Durham Universities offered science, literature, and philosophy extension classes to miners, supplying further opportunities for the talented and determined.⁵³ One enthusiastic instructor hailed

the sturdy intelligence of the pitmen, their determined earnestness, the appreciative and responsive way in which they listened, the down-right

straightforwardness of their speech ... I am persuaded that in the Northumberland and Durham district the pitmen are ripe for a scheme that will bring Higher Education and Culture within their reach. The financial difficulty is the only serious one.⁵⁴

Albert Grey, the progressive Liberal MP for Northumberland South (1880–85) and then Tyneside (1885–86) and future governor general of Canada (1904–11), lobbied for Cambridge classes as part of his commitment to cross-class collaboration. Whereas ties to mine owners and managers and aristocratic and middle-class philanthropists sometimes incurred suspicion, just as they might in local schools, educational initiatives reflected widespread investment in the principles of *Self-Help*, an 1859 bestseller written by Samuel Smiles.⁵⁵

Elite support was critical since the Northumberland Miners' Association (NMA) had few resources to subsidize additional schooling for its members. Nor, as the father of a growing brood, did Ralph have money to spare. In 1886, even the minimal tuition fee for the extension lectures on "Work and Energy" offered near Bates Cottages would have been hard to find.⁵⁶ Ralph was remembered, however, as a student of coal mine engineering and other technical studies that helped win promotion and respect.⁵⁷ Caring for young children and housewifery meant that Mary Ellen was unlikely to contemplate such opportunities, which were in any case directed at men. When much later she moved in Vancouver's suffragist circles, where the University Women's Club held pride of place, she would keenly feel the lack of extended formal education.

One of the Victorian age's most powerful sources of edification, however, welcomed both sexes and all classes for self-improvement. Temperance groups, such as the International Order of Good Templars and the Bands of Hope associated with Primitive Methodist chapels, swept the pit villages with popular "weekly meetings, fund-raising concerts, inter-club visits, and annual summer concerts."⁵⁸ Although later identified with prohibition and middle-class efforts to discipline male workers, temperance campaigns stressed radical messages of individual redemption, moderation for all classes, and self-respect. Like many Britishers, Ralph and Mary Ellen Smith became resolute teetotallers, convinced that sobriety and discipline determined life's outcomes. That conclusion was shared by many in the so-called labour aristocracy of skilled workers.⁵⁹

Sobriety lay similarly close to the heart of another powerful inspiration to self-improvement. Predating the insistence of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on class conflict, a surging cooperative movement promised

empowerment to ordinary folk. Early apostles, such as the utopian socialist Robert Owen (1771–1858), insisted that shared production and consumption could override the divides of class, and indeed sometimes of gender, en route to social progress and justice. In 1869, this vision inspired Britain's first Cooperative Congress in London. Six years later, thirty-one cooperatives in Northumberland and thirty-nine in Durham, many in colliery villages, testified to its widespread appeal.⁶⁰ By the 1880s, the British movement had enrolled some half a million members and by the First World War more than 3 million, with strongholds in the Midlands and the north. Ralph and Mary Ellen supported the Northern Section, which recruited almost a third of Northumberland and Durham's total population.⁶¹ By the early twentieth century, the movement had outpaced the combined enlistment in the British Labor Party and its socialist rivals.⁶²

Northumberland cooperative stores led in consciousness raising about sharing in the fruits of capitalism. Winning members' loyalty with lower prices, accurate weighing, safe products, and dividends, they left previously often dominant company stores in the dust. By the time Ralph and Mary Ellen were adults, co-ops' often impressive buildings stood alongside Methodist chapels, mechanics' institutes, and union rooms "as a symbol of the miners' growing interest in both the principle and the practice of self-help."⁶³ Whereas men controlled the vast majority of executive positions in cooperative societies, women, as family shoppers and, frequently, financiers, proved ardent supporters.⁶⁴ In 1883, the creation of what became the Women's Cooperative Guild introduced what has been termed a "relational" feminist agenda, which "argued for public roles and voices for women in order to help them perform their traditional duties as wives and mothers." Essentially a version of the domestic ideology more commonly known as maternalist feminism,⁶⁵ this philosophy – much like Methodism – legitimated respectable activism for women such as Mary Ellen. They could remain proud of domestic pursuits, even as they questioned the profits and the brutality of capitalist competition. As the thoughtful mother of young children, Mary Ellen supported her husband's forays into local cooperative politics as a way of assisting the family and improving the community.

In October 1890, Ralph demonstrated his mastery of key movement arguments in a well-received public lecture titled "High and Low Dividends," a controversial subject as co-ops struggled to balance books and principles.⁶⁶ At much the same time, he joined the board of directors of the Seaton Delaval Co-operative Society.⁶⁷ In 1890, he ran for election to the Northern Central Board, and though he was defeated by a

more seasoned activist, he was chosen as a local delegate to the Twenty-Second Annual Cooperative Conference of Great Britain and Ireland. Held in Glasgow's monumental city hall that May, this historic assembly of mighty and more humble cooperators took the young miner beyond England's northeast, probably for the first time.

In the lectures and the crowds in attendance, Smith glimpsed a far bigger stage than that he knew. Lord Rosebery (1847–1929), the conference president, chairman of the London County Council, great Whig landowner, and later Liberal prime minister, set out a creed to unite otherwise warring classes in the industrial age. His well-received keynote address began persuasively, suggesting that he was present “to listen and to learn.” Linking cooperatives firmly to Christian socialism, Rosebery argued that

it is not so many years since movements of a social character – of a socialist character or Socialist character – were regarded as anathema ... and Fourier, St Simon, and Owen were words of ill-omen and ill-favour in the eyes and in the nostrils of the country. But now the case is widely altered ... Much is included in the word socialistic which is not merely unobjectionable but desirable ... We cannot – public men cannot, statesmen cannot afford to disregard the solid mass of adult and intelligent opinion which you represent ... We hear much of the jealousy of the working classes ... If co-operation can remove that jealousy it will be a great advantage to the State ... It is an evil for the State not to be able to recognise leaders among the working classes.⁶⁸

Deftly separating Liberal-Labour MPs Thomas Burt, Henry Broadhurst (1840–1911), and John Burns (1858–1943) from all the prophets of class conflict, Rosebery suggested that a politics of conciliation and prosperity would be ushered in by cooperatives and, not so incidentally, the Liberal Party.

Rosebery was followed on the podium by another Liberal, Lord Aberdeen (1847–1934), also a grandee of Scotland, later governor general of Canada, and a feminist, like his influential wife, Ishbel Marjoribanks Gordon (1857–1939), the founder of the National Council of Women of Canada. Aberdeen proclaimed the “great cause” of cooperation as the solution to the “urgent” problems of poverty and industrial conflict.⁶⁹ The congress's vision of a radical new world of human collaboration and self-betterment aligned closely with intellectual influences surrounding the Smiths in their pit village. For the next twenty-five years, that Scottish convention loomed particularly large in Ralph's life story. At his death in

1917, it was remembered. In Canada, he had to surrender his hopes for the cooperative movement, but he harboured his faith in its spirit.

For the ambitious miner, regional class politics sometimes fed the same vision. Northumberland and Durham produced powerful Whig aristocrats, often dubbed “friends of the people,” with long traditions of service as Liberal MPs. Like Lord Aberdeen, such magnates sometimes linked Canada to a heritage of aristocratic duty. “Radical Jack” Lord Durham (1792–1840) and Albert Grey were similarly outspoken governors general, for 1838–39 and 1904–11 respectively. Champions of an expanded franchise, such authorities seemed to counter the inevitability of class conflict.⁷⁰ One of Ralph’s personal heroes, long-time Northumberland MP Thomas Burt, cherished the northeast’s great Whig families, praising them as

the Reformers of their day, and they fought bravely and disinterestedly for the liberties and for the political enfranchisement of the people when those without votes had few friends and helpers among the rich and powerful. In the Greys and the Lambtons of Northumberland and Durham afforded splendid examples of Whig noblemen who had for generations championed the claims of the poor and the political outcasts when these were voteless and voiceless, politically, in the land of their birth.⁷¹

High regard could be mutual. Earl Grey, Canada’s former governor general, once described Burt as “the finest gentleman I ever knew.”⁷² The shift of the late Victorian British royal family into a “cult of benevolence,” though not, with rare exceptions, into the suffragism endorsed by Aberdeen and Grey, likewise encouraged optimistic workers to anticipate mutual respect from elite reformers.⁷³

Well-published industrial conflicts in Britain during the years that the Smiths were sorting out their own views sometimes offered the same lesson of mutual aid while confirming links to radical non-conformity. Victorious strikes by East End London match girls and dockers in 1888 and 1889 mobilized a broad band of public opinion. Allies among Britain’s middle class and aristocracy, such as noted feminist writer Annie Besant (1847–1933), progressive Liberal MP Charles Bradlaugh (1833–91), Catholic Cardinal Henry Edward Manning (1808–92), and the Aberdeens succoured unions that contested brutal conditions and pitiful wages. Still closer to home for the Smiths were the benefits of cooperation evident in the Northumberland and Durham Miners’ Permanent Relief Fund. Instituted in response to the 1860s’ underground disasters, it presented

the edifying spectacle of accident insurance managed jointly by mutually attentive miners and colliery owners.⁷⁴ The Northumberland Coal Trade Joint Committee, of which Ralph was a member, was in the same spirit.⁷⁵

For decades, the Northumberland Miners' Association embodied the regional sinews of Methodism, self-education, temperance, and co-operation.⁷⁶ Insisting upon a "manly independence," the NMA demanded respect and equality in the course of achieving a universal male franchise for which it mounted a massive demonstration of pitmen, their wives, and children in Newcastle in 1872.⁷⁷ Its liberal-labour, or labourist, radicalism was informed by "continual contact with the sympathetic middle-class radicals" and "the long standing alignment of middle- and working-class reformers dedicated to the parliamentary system."⁷⁸ Those allies constituted the left wing of the great reform coalition that the Liberal Party marshalled under Gladstone. The first general secretary of the NMA, William Crawford (1833–90), who had entered Hartley Coal Mines as a boy, preached as a Primitive Methodist, and campaigned for co-ops, became an MP in 1885. His successor in the NMA was the like-minded Thomas Burt, who was elected a Liberal-Labourite in 1874. Burt survived to be dubbed the "Father of the House of Commons."⁷⁹ Almost a half a century later and some halfway around the globe in Vancouver, BC, Nicholas Thompson (c. 1853–1934), a former president of the city's Board of Trade and a native-born Northumbrian, invoked Burt's long shadow when he mourned the loss of Ralph Smith, dead at less than sixty years of age:

In the old days in Northumberland he was ever working in the interests of the underdog. I remember his fight in the interests of compulsory education, the extension of the franchise to workingmen, the co-operative movement and other activities that were in the interests of the working classes. He was an associate of Tom Burt and other famous Labor men and throughout his long career from the time when he went to work in the mines at 11 years of age, he has never deserted his principles.⁸⁰

Emblematic of the alliances embedded in the era's radical liberalism, Burt presented an 1881 petition from his Bates Cottages constituents to the House of Commons. It endorsed a petition launched by Liberal MP Charles Bradlaugh, demanding that he be permitted to take his parliamentary oath as an atheist.⁸¹ The broad-based reform faith was similarly asserted when, in an 1884 speech to some five hundred Bates Cottages miners, Liberal MP Albert Grey endorsed proportional representation "as

more just and equitable.”⁸² In the same spirit, Burt addressed the Seaton Delaval Co-operative Society on “co-operation, temperance and education” as the key principles of social progress.⁸³ Many miners were convinced that “the interests of capital and labour could be balanced through bargaining on the basis of trade union strength and good will on both sides.”⁸⁴ They rallied to Britain’s New Liberalism, set forth by theorists such as John A. Hobson (1858–1940) and politicians such as David Lloyd George (1863–1945), with their faith in an “organically evolving human community” in which the state guaranteed a social minimum and class conflict was avoided.⁸⁵

Before the First World War, such convictions made Northumberland “one of the most successful sites of the Lib-Lab alliance and of consensus between employers and employees.”⁸⁶ Even when socialist and social democratic alternatives to Britain’s long-standing two-party system gradually emerged, a pervasive gospel of self-help, personal responsibility, and respectability grounded in Methodism and the cooperative movement buttressed the NMA as a “bastion of liberalism.”⁸⁷ This was the steady inspiration for Ralph, whom a Canadian Presbyterian minister later lauded as hurling “with such destructive effectiveness into the socialistic camp, the doctrine of the individual will.”⁸⁸

Influence never travelled in one direction. To attract increasingly self-conscious workers, many of whom were enfranchised after the Third Great Reform Act of 1884, the Liberal Party had to be proactive. In exchange for resisting more revolutionary doctrines, it offered the expanded electorate prospects for political, industrial, and social improvement. Democratic progress might be slow but its promise, unlike that of more revolutionary doctrines, was inevitable and bloodless. Very tellingly, *The Speaker*, a leading proponent of progressive liberalism, declared in January 1892 that “the Liberal party has reached a point at which the consideration of the claims of Labour takes precedence over all others.”⁸⁹

Cooperation among the classes was not the only cause hanging in the balance. Like workers, women were increasingly mobilizing in demands for a better life. A threatened war between the sexes supplied the era’s gender equivalent of class conflict. Liberal feminists argued that cooperative partnerships of women and men were similarly essential to peace and progress. When the legendary Burt praised his wife (and cousin) Mary Weatherburn (1842–1926), with whom he had ten children, as a “daughter of the people,” someone “in complete sympathy with my public work” and a “brave and loving helpmate,” he located his class politics firmly within a familiar tradition, that of marital solidarity in mining villages

and mutual respect fostered by Methodism. Such declarations associated principled working men with women's right to respect and equality.⁹⁰ In the mid-1880s, the Northern Counties Women's Liberal Associations (WLA) for Northumberland, Durham, and Yorkshire, part of a national federation numbering some fifty to sixty thousand members, asserted the possibility of cooperation between reform-minded women and men.⁹¹ WLA meetings in Mechanics and Temperance Halls and Methodist chapels throughout the region tapped overlapping loyalties of class and gender. This message clearly resonated with the self-conscious Smiths, who would become one of Canada's power couples in liberal-labour politics.

Yet for all its advocacy of class and gender cooperation, liberalism proved an uncertain ally. Its political parties readily regarded both workers and women as noisy and obstreperous, believing that they would not reliably submit to party discipline and that they would expect to have input into policies and positions claimed by elite male power brokers.⁹² National leaders, such as William Gladstone and Herbert Asquith (1852–1928) in London and Wilfrid Laurier and William Lyon Mackenzie King (1874–1950) in Ottawa, displayed indifference or hostility to many reforms, including women's representation in Parliament, a stance that sowed much disillusionment with liberalism. That letdown, however, was only in its infancy when the Smiths set off for Canada.

Just days before their departure in September 1892, Ralph Smith spoke to the Bates Cottages Debating and Mutual Improvement Society. His speech, titled "Disestablishment and Disendowment," criticized the privileges enjoyed by the Anglican Church. In probably his last public engagement before closing the door on British politics, he placed himself firmly in a non-conformist radical tradition of righteous protest. The local Anglican vicar, whose support subsidized the society, mounted a spirited rebuttal, but Ralph trounced him without apology. In the following months, the society continued to advance an independent course and a progressive agenda, staging a model parliament with working-class MPs and sanctioning woman suffrage.⁹³ By then, however, the Smiths had set their sights on improving themselves and Canada.

The coal-mining communities in which Ralph Smith and Mary Ellen Spear came of age largely trusted that the radical politics of liberal-labourism represented a realistic option for self-conscious workers. Rejecting socialist dismissal of class cooperation as politically irresponsible, believers insisted that "their own proletarian origins and direct practical experience of industrial life" made them superior guides to a transformed politics and that a sympathetic elite could be enlisted as allies.⁹⁴ That faith

appeared especially confident during the late 1880s, King Coal's boom years. Very soon, however, Britain's pit families faced wage cuts and deepening hardship.⁹⁵ Slowly, the Lib-Lab ship foundered upon the shoals of rising industrial conflict, Irish nationalism, woman suffrage, and elite intransigence. After its creation in 1903, the British Labor Party increasingly carried the political hopes of organized miners in Northumberland, as elsewhere.

In September 1892, the Smiths set sail for Canada, hoping to restore Ralph's health and acquire assistance from the Spears who had settled in British Columbia. By that time, the "well known public man" and his respected partner had developed a politics of resistance to capitalism's depredations,⁹⁶ to counsels of class warfare, and to male abuse of power. They took pride in hearing Ralph acclaimed as a "radical leader" of the Bates Cottages Debating and Mutual Improvement Society and seeing Mary Ellen rewarded with "a gold mounted bracelet" for her service as a "leader of the children and an organizer of concerts for the Methodist chapel." The ardent liberal-labourite left the farewell gathering of admiring neighbours with an conclusion that surely resounded with his wife: "I do not want to go to heaven yet, for I want to do all the good I can for humanity."⁹⁷ As it turned out, Canada would provide a far brighter stage for both Mary Ellen and Ralph to realize the ambitions that Britain's colliery villages had first nourished.

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