

## Exploring the “Thirteenth” Reason for Suffrage: Enfranchising “Mothers of the British Race” on the Canadian Prairies

*Mallory Allyson Richard*

In the 9 November 1910 issue of the *Grain Growers' Guide*, the editor of its “Around the Fireside” women’s feature published a list of “Twelve Reasons for Supporting Women’s Suffrage.” The *Guide* was a weekly publication for farmers on the Canadian Prairies that was founded in 1908 and had reached a circulation of nearly 30,000 before World War I.<sup>1</sup> It was written in English for an Anglophone readership and was an important source of information and advice related to farming and farm life in Western Canada. It also served as a forum for passionate political debate and championed social and political change. It was in that spirit that, in 1910, Isobel Graham included a list entitled “Twelve Reasons for Supporting Women’s Suffrage” in the women’s pages. Wedged between advice columns and humour pieces, the list suggested reasons why readers should join the movement advocating for women’s enfranchisement:

1. Because we believe in government by the people, and the people include both men and women.
2. Because women pay taxes, and taxation and representation should go together.
3. Because women must obey the laws and should take their part in making them.

4. Because men and women look at things from a different standpoint and so cannot represent each other's views.
5. Because the vote would improve the economic position of women.
6. Because the vote would tend to establish an equal standard of morality for men and women.
7. Because questions affecting the home are constantly dealt with by parliament.
8. Because the experience of women would be valuable to the state.
9. Because women already have the vote for local elections.
10. Because thousands of hard-working women demand it.
11. Because the enfranchisement of the people is a liberal principle and should include women.
12. Because it is just.<sup>2</sup>

Today the franchise is recognized as a fundamental right, something to which every Canadian citizen is entitled on the basis of their inherent dignity and humanity, and this may prompt a tendency to indicate the importance of the eleventh and twelfth reasons over the others in the present day. In 1910, however, it was more common for the franchise to be viewed as a privilege, and all women and men needed to prove themselves worthy of it. While some of the *Guide's* twelve reasons serve to justify women's receipt of the vote by measuring women's contributions in, for example, the taxes they paid, advocates of women's suffrage also argued for the franchise by measuring their contributions relative to those of ethnocultural and Indigenous groups. In effect, the implied and unspoken "thirteenth" point in support of women's enfranchisement was that women were at least as deserving of the vote as some enfranchised males, and were *more* deserving than their fellow disfranchised Canadians.

In 1910, some women in Canada could vote in municipal elections, but all were denied the vote at the provincial and federal levels. All Asian

Canadians and status Indians were disfranchised, as were people serving time in prisons or mental institutions. Thus some women, including Asian-Canadian and First Nations women with Indian status, faced multiple barriers to enfranchisement because they were disqualified from voting on the basis of both their race and gender. The movement for women's enfranchisement in Canada was, at this time, led by white, British-Canadian women and focused on the gender-based restrictions on the franchise. This held true on the Prairies as well: the best-known champions and organizations promoting women's suffrage in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta were British-Canadian women, and their perspectives were well represented in the pages of the *Grain Growers' Guide*. Nellie McClung, the best-known champion of women's suffrage in Canada, was particularly loyal to the British Empire and used *In Times Like These*, her "1915 suffrage manifesto," to praise the qualities of British-Canadian women relative to European immigrants and non-white Canadians.<sup>3</sup>

Veronica Strong-Boag has written that suffrage movements cut across class lines, uniting middle- and working-class women with a common cause.<sup>4</sup> She is correct that movements for women's enfranchisement overcame certain social and economic barriers, but it did not overcome all of them. While a common argument in favour of women's suffrage on the Prairies was that women deserved the vote because they were dedicated workers, the articulation of this reasoning by several prominent British Canadian advocates of women's suffrage made it clear they were not suggesting *all* women deserved to vote because *all* women were hard workers. In fact, some British Canadians who called for women's suffrage did so by arguing that white women were more deserving of the vote and more likely to use it responsibly than non-white Canadians, recent immigrants, or out-of-work transients.

These comparisons, along with other arguments for and against women's suffrage, were offered in the *Guide* by its columnists and its readers. Their commentaries, which effectively became discussions as they responded to one another's ideas, serve as a rich source for explaining how the idea of women's suffrage spread and was justified within the prairie region. Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta also had in common certain suffragist champions and organizations whose speaking tours, conventions, and publications brought the movement – and then the franchise – to each province. They were the first three provinces in

Canada to remove gender restrictions on the franchise, beginning in 1916 with Manitoba and then Alberta and ending in 1917 with Saskatchewan. While these regional commonalities make it possible to study how British-Canadian women compared themselves to already-enfranchised and disfranchised male Canadians to improve their standing, they bear similarities to the promotion of women's suffrage elsewhere in Canada. It was common for women in one region to borrow strategies, arguments, and literature from women who had used them effectively elsewhere. They also responded to similar impediments expressed against the vote for women, such as the need to assuage fears that agitation for the vote betrayed Christian and British-Canadian values (though the latter was not a significant concern in Quebec). Finally, the racism and nativism evident in this aspect of the women's suffrage movement on the Prairies likewise extended to other regions.

## Debating entitlement

At the turn of the twentieth century, the belief that women and men were inherently unequal was so widespread that for many Canadians, the idea of women seeking the same rights and opportunities as men was appalling. In such a climate, challenging the status quo exposed women to scorn. What made the franchise worth fighting for? Certainly the vote carried the potential to have a say in how government was formed and what legislation it passed, but its power was also symbolic. As Ian McKay has pointed out, the franchise was previously reserved for those individuals who were “self-possessed – whose body and soul [were theirs] alone” and who realized the liberal ideals of personal liberty and independence which, McKay argues, were part of the hegemonic classical liberal model that persisted in Canada until the 1940s.<sup>5</sup> According to McKay, women, Asian Canadians, and First Nations Canadians were viewed as incapable of meeting this standard and were therefore denied the rights and responsibilities that came with it. McKay's assertion that liberal values informed prevailing notions of the franchise during this period is supported by Canadian political debate.

At least as early as 1885 and continuing for decades thereafter, men (and legislators in particular, the very people with whom the authority to

extend the franchise rested) commonly discussed women's entitlement to vote by comparing them to racial and ethnic minority groups in terms of their merits and potential as engaged political subjects. Such comparisons were made in the House of Commons in 1885, when Sir John A. Macdonald presented a bill to consolidate the legislation governing the franchise so it would be solely under federal control. When it was introduced, the future Electoral Franchise Act included a clause that would extend the federal franchise to unmarried women and widows. Married women would still be ineligible to vote, but the legislation was nonetheless significant for proposing to lift, however incompletely, some of the restrictions on women voting. Macdonald had introduced bills to centralize the franchise while also extending the vote to some women in 1883 and 1884, but both times the bills failed to pass and the enfranchisement of women was not debated at any length.<sup>6</sup> Macdonald's bill survived to be passed in 1885, but without the clause that would allow women to vote. It had been dropped from the bill, though not before Members of Parliament weighed in on whether they felt women deserved the franchise.

Several members expressed their opinions on women's suffrage by comparing the perceived merits of white women (the only women whose enfranchisement seems to have been seriously considered) to the respective merits of Chinese Canadians and First Nations Canadians, whose entitlement to vote was also being decided. George Landarkin, the Liberal member representing the riding of Grey South in Ontario, opposed Macdonald's proposal to give the vote only to women who did not have husbands on the basis that it would enfranchise "an unmarried female, who may be Chinese, or a squaw, or any other person naturalized," but deny the vote to "the mothers of this country," whom he described as "the most deserving class of people that are found in the Dominion."<sup>7</sup> John Milton Platt, a Liberal representing Prince Edward, Ontario, argued that Macdonald's reluctance to enfranchise all British-Canadian women was inappropriate because they paid more taxes and purchased more taxable goods than status Indians who received government annuities. It was, according to Platt, "a monstrous proposition that we should, in the same parliament, refuse the same franchise to the women of this country and give it to the low and filthy Indians of the reserves."<sup>8</sup> Malcolm Colin Cameron, the Liberal representing the Ontario riding of Huron West, spoke debasingly of non-white women. But, rather than comparing women in

terms of who deserved the vote, he described the propriety of their values according to whom he viewed as wanting the franchise. “I have no doubt,” Cameron declared, “it will be of some consequence to some people of that Province [British Columbia], for instance the Chinese, that their women should be allowed to vote. I am, however, quite satisfied that the great mass of respectable women . . . are not desirous to exercise the franchise.”<sup>9</sup>

It is noteworthy that both Landerkin and Platt used the term “of this country” to recognize the membership and contributions of white women only. Indigenous and Asian women, in their eyes, resided in Canada without enjoying the same degree of connection or belonging. Other Members of Parliament rounded out the emerging hierarchy of potential voters by comparing Chinese immigrants to status Indians – sometimes favourably, describing the former as responsible and peace-loving, and sometimes not, contrasting their “foreignness” with a characterization of Indigenous people as “sons of the soil.”<sup>10</sup> When the property and income qualifications – also enacted by the Electoral Franchise Act – were debated, the opposition members complained that the proposed qualifications would deny the vote to many members of the working class and young men who had recently served in the militia as part of the government’s response to the Northwest Rebellion. Peter Mitchell, the Independent representing Northumberland, Ontario, observed during the debate that some Members of Parliament objected to universal manhood suffrage on the grounds that “universal suffrage would include paupers.”<sup>11</sup> In this sense, women were placed in the same category as Chinese, First Nations, and unemployed men – people who were carefully scrutinized for their ability to contribute to Canada’s development as a British nation – while also making it clear that there were sharply imposed limits on what they could expect in return.

While Richard Gwyn argues in his biography of John A. Macdonald that his support for women’s suffrage was proof of his progressiveness,<sup>12</sup> among other historians “the suspicion remains that Macdonald had inserted the clause as a sacrificial lamb, never intending that it survive final reading of the bill.”<sup>13</sup> Macdonald informed his fellow Members of Parliament that “I have always and am now in favour of” women’s enfranchisement when he presented his bill to them, and yet the section extending the vote to property-holding single women and widows was removed from the final version of the bill without any particular protest on Macdonald’s part.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of whether the gesture to enfranchise

women was, indeed, an empty one, Macdonald had a profound impact on public discourse on women's suffrage simply by raising the issue in the House of Commons.

The attitudes voiced by Landerkin, Platt, and other Members of Parliament set the tone for how Canadians' entitlements to vote were conceived and measured. There was the occasional endorsement, such as the one made by Arthur H. Gillmor of Charlotte, New Brunswick, for an inclusive franchise made on the basis of inherent human equality,<sup>15</sup> but more often Canadians were treated as existing on a continuum of those worthy and unworthy of full citizenship. The franchise operated as the dividing line between the worthy and the unworthy, but there was understood to be a hierarchy even within those categories. The hierarchical location of women, Aboriginal Canadians, Chinese Canadians, and Black Canadians was debated in the House of Commons in 1885, but it was echoed and elaborated on in multiple settings thereafter.

Over two decades later, politicians continued to consider women's suffrage in relative terms, requiring a metaphorical yardstick of citizenship to evaluate the strength of their franchise claim. Janice Newton describes the argument employed by James Hawthornthwaite, a Socialist, when he introduced a bill for women's suffrage in 1906 in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, as suggesting women's enfranchisement was an insignificant issue compared to women's economic oppression, but that it was outrageous that recent immigrants from Southeast Asia could vote and women could not.<sup>16</sup> Hawthornthwaite insisted he "knew no greater civilizing force than the enfranchisement of their mothers, wives, and sisters."<sup>17</sup>

Thus, by the time prairie women were developing suffrage organizations and a relatively cohesive suffrage movement, there were precedents for debating the suitability of women's enfranchisement based on their contributions to the Dominion and for measuring those contributions through comparisons with different groups. The readiness to draw sweeping characterizations of different social and racial groups and to emphasize the inequality of their respective characteristics also surfaced in literature and education. J.S. Woodsworth's *Strangers Within Our Gates* was published in 1909, before the author had become a Member of Parliament. It drew on his experiences working as a Methodist minister and superintendent of the All Peoples' Mission in Winnipeg's North End, where many immigrants lived. He was assisted by A.R. Ford, who wrote for a local newspaper

and contributed sections on Ruthenians, Poles, and Doukhobors. *Strangers Within Our Gates* attempted to humanize the incoming waves of immigrants by describing their traits and their potential to assimilate into British-Canadian society. The book's success in this regard has since been questioned by historians because of its preoccupation with the purported weaknesses of each categorically defined nationality of immigrant, and the organization of its chapters, which effectively ranks immigrants from most desirable (British and American immigrants) to least (Asians and Blacks and, interestingly, Aboriginal people, who were hardly immigrants but were viewed by Woodsworth and his British-Canadian audience as being strangers all the same). These comparisons were drawn in education as well. As Amy von Heyking notes in *Creating Citizens: History and Identity in Alberta's Schools, 1905 to 1980*, students were specifically asked to compare people of different races and ethnicities "with the expectation that the virtues of Anglo-Saxons would be stressed [in students' responses]. The 1911 Standard VII history examination directed students to 'Point out the excellences and defects of the Greek character. Contrast with the national character of the Hebrews, Romans and Anglo-Saxons.'"<sup>18</sup>

## Calling for an extension of privilege

The women's suffrage movement in Western Canada can be traced back to the 1890s, when a group of Icelandic women organized a suffrage association. The cause was subsequently picked up by the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which viewed women's enfranchisement as strengthening their bid for prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol, which it hoped in turn would reduce rates of domestic abuse and poverty. Additional organizations with women's suffrage as their primary aim formed later, and included the Political Equality League, the Manitoba Equal Franchise Club, the Manitoba Suffrage League, the Provincial Equal Suffrage Board of Saskatchewan, and the Equal Franchise League of Edmonton.<sup>19</sup> The goals of these organizations were supported by female and male members of the Grain Growers' Associations in Manitoba and Saskatchewan and the United Farmers of Alberta.

Prairie advocates of women's suffrage, like their counterparts elsewhere in Canada, were tasked with educating the public on women's



suffrage and convincing legislators that women wanted (or, better yet, demanded) the vote. They extolled the benefits of women's suffrage and dispelled myths about its risks at conventions, agricultural fairs, mock parliaments, and public debates, and through pamphlets, newspapers, and the *Grain Growers' Guide*. It was not, however, just male voters and lawmakers who needed to be convinced that women should have the vote. As Francis Marion Beynon noted in her column in *The Grain Growers' Guide*, public education would most importantly convince women that enfranchisement was desirable.<sup>20</sup>

Many women were hostile toward the concept of voting. As *Guide* reader Minnie Kieler observed when sending the Country Homemakers' section editor a letter and a poem in 1913, "Some women seem to think that if they had the vote and mixed in politics, that they would lose their womanliness and modesty."<sup>21</sup> This fear was founded in the belief that participation in politics was incompatible with a commitment to one's family. In a period when women's employment prospects were severely restricted and the home was the epicentre of women's accepted roles and activities, the prospect of losing their "womanliness" threatened to undermine their influence in that one area where they were acknowledged to have a central role. If perhaps not as often as women in Quebec, women on the Prairies were consistently told by opponents of women's suffrage that if they wished to participate in activities outside of their designated sphere, they could best achieve their aims by exerting subtle influence within the home. This line of thinking preserved men's power as decision makers within the family. Such a division was not practical for single women or families where both partners were members of the paid labour force, but many middle-class women would need to be brought around to believing political engagement could be an extension of – and not detrimental to – their status as wives and mothers.

Meanwhile, women's suffrage had to gain the support of male voters and lawmakers. For them, the franchise was a privilege and, as with male privilege more generally during this period, there were legal and attitudinal barriers to its extension. Few advocates of women's suffrage took issue with the then-prevalent notion that the franchise was a privilege by calling for universal suffrage. Even when women stated that they should be enfranchised, "because it is just," their definition of justice was sufficiently vague as to not contradict dominant notions. Those advocates who saw the

franchise as a right to which all citizens were entitled were among the minority. Francis Marion Beynon left Winnipeg for New York during World War I when she was punished socially and professionally for her pacifism and opposition to the government's plan to disfranchise immigrants from enemy countries.<sup>22</sup> For the most part, however, arguments that advocated extending the privilege of enfranchisement to women demonstrated that female suffragists accepted the dominant society's conceptions of the franchise and intended to use their votes, once obtained, in a manner that contributed to – without significantly challenging – British Canadian society and values.

A range of arguments was employed by Western Canadian advocates of women's suffrage. Some were founded on women's inherent equality, others drew on proof of women's hard work, and some relied on the promise of changes that could be effected by women's votes. Rose Turrell used examples of each in her 1910 letter to the *Guide* when outlining her reasons for supporting women's suffrage:

Because a big section of our women demand it, and must have it ... Because it is proven that women can fill any position (physical strength excepted) that man can hold, so the time-worn, thread-bare theory that a female brain is inferior to a male's is put out of date and relegated to a place in a museum as a curiosity of the density of man ... [and because it is necessary to] the extinction of the White Slave traffic, ... to reform the divorce laws, ... to adjust the wage scales, ... [and] to put down child labor [*sic*].<sup>23</sup>

Turrell concluded her letter by reassuring readers that she was not a “man-hater.” Certainly for some Canadians at the time, speaking in favour of women's suffrage was tantamount to criticizing or betraying men. Turrell and other white women who were anxious for the vote, however, mitigated the threat they were considered to pose to the country that enfranchised men were credited with building. They managed this by positioning themselves as “mothers of the British race” who stood side-by-side with enfranchised Canadian men as partners in settling and developing the country and strengthening the Empire.

## Partners in empire building

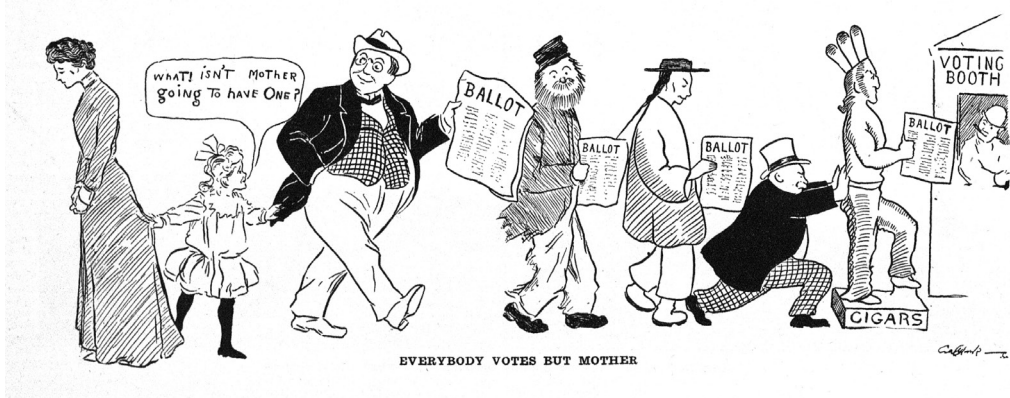
As mothers of the British race, white women had a responsibility to apply to all of society their maternal instincts for nurturing and protecting their families.<sup>24</sup> The franchise, by allowing them to have a say in legislation that was passed, would allow them to do that. Mrs. A.V. Thomas espoused this view in a speech to the Springhill Grain Growers in Manitoba, declaring, “The race cannot get any higher than its women” and that women therefore had both social and political responsibilities to elevate it.<sup>25</sup> This characterization of white women cast political engagement as a necessary extension, rather than an unseemly contradiction, of women’s socially accepted roles as wives and mothers. Embracing their power to protect the future of the British race meant raising their children to share its language and values and using politics and charitable activity to extend these to their fellow Canadians, who were portrayed as unfortunate or ignorant in comparison. It was a form of maternal feminism that gave them licence to agitate for the franchise in a way that was understood to be compatible with their British-Canadian values and Christian faith. Reconciling their activism and faith was particularly significant in convincing prairie women that the franchise was both desirable and socially acceptable, as opponents of women’s suffrage often cited Bible passages declaring man’s dominion over women to justify their inequality at the polls.<sup>26</sup>

The rhetoric about women having a crucial role to play in protecting the future of the British Empire and its people also seems to have been intended for enfranchised males, in hopes of gaining their support. Stella Richardson wrote to the *Grain Growers’ Guide* to say that she knew men who opposed women’s suffrage on the basis that “foreign women would also have the power to vote” and their allegedly shaky grasp of the English language would make them ignorant of political issues and therefore unable to make reasoned political decisions.<sup>27</sup> In 1915 the United Farmers of Alberta and its women’s auxiliary discussed the topic of an “educational qualification for woman suffrage” at their joint meeting for just this reason.<sup>28</sup> It was not, however, only female immigrants who were accused of being unworthy of the franchise. Nellie McClung referred to enfranchised male immigrants as “the corruptible foreign vote” swayed to vote by “political heelers, well paid for the job, well armed with whiskey, cigars, and money.”<sup>29</sup> McClung did claim to have sympathy for “the poor fellow who

sells his vote,” though, and instead reserved her ire for the corrupt politicians who attempted to buy the votes of recent immigrants as well as the immoral drinkers who influenced them since, according to McClung, “around the bar they get their ideals of citizenship.”<sup>30</sup> Her criticism is consistent with McKay’s assertion that during this period the franchise was reserved for those considered capable of making sound judgments that honoured liberal values and the greater good, and was seldom entrusted to people whose appreciation of those concepts was held in suspicion.

McClung’s emphasis on foreign voters can partly be explained by the fact that many racialized Canadians were already disfranchised, so it was hard to point to evidence that women were more capable of voting than they were. Members of the “Asiatic or Mongol race” were prohibited from voting in federal elections and provincially in British Columbia. Indigenous men could only vote if they did not have, or had forfeited, their Indian status, and very few who had status felt that the benefits of enfranchisement outweighed the cost. Although women of all ethnicities were in the same position as Asian and First Nations men in being barred from full participation in the democratic process, some advocates of women’s suffrage sought to discourage any association between disfranchised men and white women. In the pages of the *Grain Growers’ Guide*, the Chinese were regularly referred to in relation to their dependence on opium. A political cartoon published in a 1914 edition of the guide, intended to incite sympathy for the respectable white woman, showed her excluded from a line forming at a polling station that included stereotypical representations of a male transient, an Asian man, and a status Indian man being led to the polls by a well-dressed white man.<sup>31</sup>

Nativism surfaced in the writing of McClung and fellow suffrage activist Emily Murphy, both ardent maternal feminists who used their writing to warn about the potential threat Asian immigrants posed to British Canadian society and values. Murphy implicated the Chinese, in her 1922 book *The Black Candle*, as playing an insidious role in spreading opium addiction, with its destructive effects on the white race.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, a group’s perceived compatibility with British-Canadian society and values was commonly the lens through which Murphy assessed their value in her writing. In 1910, she described the diverse American and European immigrants in Winnipeg as foreign but “rapidly becoming irreproachably



5.1 “Everybody Votes but Mother,” 1. *Grain Grower’s Guide*, 1 July 1914, courtesy of Peel Library, University of Alberta.

Canadian.”<sup>33</sup> She expressed a less optimistic view of First Nations people. McClung observed while writing in *Janey Canuck in the West*:

One hardly knows whether to take an Indian as a problem, a nuisance, or a possibility. He may be considered from a picturesque, philanthropic or pestiferous standpoint, according to your tastes or opportunities.... Regarding his future, we may give ourselves little uneasiness. This question is solving itself. A few years hence there will be no Indians. They will exist for posterity only in waxwork figures and in a few scant pages of history.<sup>34</sup>

As Devereux notes, Nellie McClung used her fiction (including some works published after gender restrictions on voting were lifted on the Prairies) to convey parables and messages about Asian Canadians and First Nations Canadians that emphasized their “otherness” relative to her British-Canadian and European immigrant characters and, by extension, the differences between Asian Canadians and Indigenous Canadians and her white audience. Racial difference was seen as creating an insurmountable barrier between British-Canadian women and the Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and First Nations Canadians who shared their position of exclusion from the franchise. Racial distinctions were also made between British

Canadians and European newcomers who were not members of the “British race,” although they were seen as having desirable qualities in common with British Canadians and as having the potential to assimilate with the dominant society.

Women also traded on their contributions to settlement and development of the Prairies to criticize the enfranchisement of men who were supported by the state rather than contributing to it. These included men in prisons and insane asylums, and the out-of-work men who travelled from one community to another in search of employment or relief. In 1913, the *Grain Growers’ Guide* republished a political cartoon from *Life* magazine which provided a biting commentary on the enfranchisement of transients by hyperbolizing their filth and apparent indifference and offsetting it with the caption “Woman is not fit for the ballot.”<sup>35</sup> Nellie McClung cited the scourge of the transient voter as one of the reasons women’s suffrage was necessary to protect the interests of families in Western Canada. She argued this in *In Times Like These*:

It is said that [women] would all vote with their husbands, and that the married man’s vote would thereby be doubled. We believe it is eminently right and proper that husband and wife should vote the same way, and in that case no one would be able to tell if the wife were voting with the husband or the husband voting with the wife. Neither would it matter. If giving the franchise to women did nothing more than double the married man’s vote it would do a splendid thing for the country, for the married man is the best voter we have; generally speaking, he is a man of family and property – surely if we can depend on anyone we can depend on him, and if by giving his wife a vote we can double his – we have done something to offset the irresponsible transient man who has no interest in the community.<sup>36</sup>

A reader named Norma used her letter to the *Grain Growers’ Guide* to try to convince other women that the franchise, as a dividing line that differentiated between contributing and non-contributing citizens, was forcing women to keep poor company. “Do you want to stay classed with minors, idiots, lunatics and criminals?” she asked the *Guide*’s female readers.<sup>37</sup> Catherine Cleverdon wrote in her history of women’s enfranchisement

in Canada that prairie women had an easier time convincing provincial governments that they deserved the vote on account of the hard work they put into establishing homesteads. Accepting the idea that the franchise was a privilege and calling attention to their significant contributions to Western Canadian settlement allowed women to argue that they did not belong among the disfranchised.

## Provincial and federal milestones

The petitions, public events, media campaigns, conventions, meetings with politicians, and the other work of suffrage activism began to pay off in January 1916, when Manitoba passed legislation allowing women to vote in provincial elections for the first time. Saskatchewan followed suit in March, followed by Alberta a month later.<sup>38</sup> Then, in 1917, in anticipation of a crucial federal election on which the fate of Canada's conscription policy would rest, Prime Minister Robert Borden extended the vote to women serving in the military and women who had a husband, father, or brother in the military. At the same time, he stripped the vote of enemy aliens – recent immigrants whose country of origin was a wartime enemy of Canada – and conscientious objectors – Canadians whose religious convictions prohibited them from bearing arms against or committing acts of violence toward fellow human beings. The distinctions white women drew between themselves and Canadians whose assimilability they questioned were becoming reflected in provincial and federal franchise legislation.

After all, by voicing criticisms of enfranchised and disfranchised men that called into question their entitlement to vote, white women on the Prairies had not been enthusiastically endorsing universal suffrage. Rather, for the most part, they were reaffirming popular notions about the franchise being a privilege rather than a right, and weighing in on whether they felt various segments of the population had earned that privilege. While all advocates of women's suffrage made the case that women's intelligence, hard work, and contributions to Canadian society were proof that they deserved to be enfranchised, some sought to further underscore this point by comparing women's contributions to those of marginalized men. They reinforced the social and racial inequality by praising British-Canadian men for their reasoned and responsible political participation while



criticizing recent immigrant voters and men who had no vote at all. They were, as Martin Banton and Gurnam Singh have put it, members of a marginalized group who had themselves succumbed to oppressive ideologies, seeking “to identify a position within the strata [of society] that is superior to as many other groups as possible.”<sup>39</sup>

White prairie women invoked arguments for their comparative superiority while calling for the franchise because many sincerely believed them, and because these arguments had the potential to convince British-Canadian men and women that white women deserved the franchise. This hierarchy had already been accepted by politicians and public figures, and reinforced women’s roles as protectors of the British race. It may also have been sheer pragmatism that led some white prairie women to advance their claim to the franchise by arguing their superiority to marginalized and racialized Canadians. Attitudes in Western Canada – where women had worked so hard for the vote, Asian Canadians’ efforts to gain the franchise had proven unsuccessful thus far, and voters in some provinces still had to meet property qualifications – made it clear that the franchise was still viewed as a privilege and that there was strong resistance to universal adult suffrage. It was enough of a challenge for some women to achieve an expansion of the franchise; a redefinition of its entire role in Canadian society may have been too radical.

Admirably, some women did call for universal suffrage. Francis Marion Beynon was the women’s editor for the *Grain Growers’ Guide* from 1912 to 1917 and was an active member of the Political Equality League. Her advocacy for women’s suffrage was rooted in her firm belief in women’s equality, which she voiced most prominently in her novel, *Aleta Day*, and which was considered more radical than the maternal feminism of women such as McClung who were more accepting of distinct gender roles. The distinction between these two perspectives was especially evident during World War I when Canadians naturalized after 1902 were stripped of their right to vote in the general election of 1917. “The franchise can never be considered a reward for service rendered,” Mary McCallum argued in the *Grain Growers’ Guide* in September 1917. “The franchise is and always shall be a sacred right, and one with which no government may tamper.”<sup>40</sup> Another *Guide* writer agreed. When Prime Minister Robert Borden’s Wartime Elections Act disfranchised Canadians with enemy alien or conscientious objector status, but extended the vote to women with immediate



male relatives in the military,<sup>41</sup> s/he informed the *Guide's* readers that "those citizens of alien birth or extraction who will be disfranchised will pay their taxes in the same manner and to the same extent as before and will exercise all the duties and privileges of citizens except the franchise. Those women who will not receive the franchise will have the same obligations and duties to the state as will their sisters who will be permitted to cast a vote."<sup>42</sup>

However, other women, most notably Nellie McClung, had supported the Wartime Elections Act. McClung had met with Borden earlier in 1917 and used the opportunity to urge him to deny the vote to immigrants with enemy alien status. Francis Marion Beynon was quick to point out in her column in the *Grain Growers' Guide* that McClung had not been speaking for Beynon when she made that request to Borden, but some of Beynon's readers wrote letters in support of McClung. In the end, Canadians with enemy alien or conscientious objector status were unable to vote in the 1917 general election, which returned Borden to power while the political backlash he faced from Canadians focused more on the issue of conscription than enfranchisement.

## Conclusion

Devereux has noted that maternal feminists, such as those who advocated women's suffrage on the Prairies at the turn of the twentieth century, are often "seen to be capitulating to patriarchal gender ideology, investing blindly and unquestioningly in the rhetoric of race, empire and reproduction."<sup>43</sup> I agree that many white women on the Prairies invested in that rhetoric, but it was hardly done blindly. Rather, these women shied away from a radical reconsideration of rights and citizenship by focusing on expanding the franchise just enough for themselves to enjoy it. This is an important consideration, given how the historical legacy of Nellie McClung and other maternal feminists is so hotly debated and how important the recognition of privilege is to dismantling persisting barriers to equality. As Devereux points out, women such as McClung are commemorated today as national heroes for their work to remove gender restrictions on the franchise.<sup>44</sup> That these same women fought for privilege, in the form of a legal authority and a set of assumptions about their character and abilities,

makes their contemporary memory and commemoration significant in its potential to reflect – positively or negatively – on contemporary values and our commitment to equality.

Reaffirming the nativist views of the dominant society as they were espoused in the House of Commons and elsewhere enabled white women (especially British-Canadian women) to demonstrate that, if enfranchised, they were unlikely to upset the status quo in ways that might further erode white male power and privilege. It is, after all, significant that prairie women were quick to praise their male supporters in their bids for enfranchisement and claim to have the power to double men's voting power, while criticizing both the voting behaviour of those marginalized males fortunate enough to be enfranchised and the social and economic contributions of disfranchised men.

The women's suffrage movement on the Canadian Prairies unfolded during a period of major growth and expansion in that region. The advocates of women's suffrage were in a position to influence the future directions for social and political movements in Western Canada and beyond. And they succeeded in doing this in two distinct ways. First, they promoted women's rights, not only by lobbying for women's enfranchisement but also by convincing women of the necessity of enfranchisement because it would offer them the political power to demand and win legislation that would improve working conditions in factories, protect children, and provide dowers and mothers' allowances to women.<sup>45</sup> Second, they applied their activism, wherever possible, within the constraints of the dominant society's norms and values. Thus, while white women were demanding the vote, they were using the language of the dominant society to do so, leaving many of its core values and assumptions uncontested. Although arguments for women's suffrage that insisted on women's inherent equality with enfranchised men and "no taxation without representation" would have facilitated subsequent bids for enfranchisement by marginalized groups, the most prevalent arguments among advocates of women's suffrage accepted and echoed the dominant society's belief that the franchise was a privilege to which not everyone was entitled.

Those arguments paid off for white women in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. And while their hard work proved that the dominant society could be convinced to extend the vote to previously disfranchised communities and demographics, it also reinforced ideas about race and

class that were responsible for the continued disfranchisement of Chinese Canadians until 1946, Indo-Canadians until 1946, Japanese Canadians until 1947, Inuit Canadians until 1950, Indigenous Canadians with First Nations status until 1960, and prison inmates until 2000 (2002 for inmates serving sentences of two years or more).<sup>46</sup>

One final aspect of the legacy of prairie women's suffrage activism continues to be felt. White women lobbying for enfranchisement spent years arguing that they deserved the vote more than their fellow disfranchised Canadians (such as Chinese Canadians and First Nations Canadians) and even some enfranchised males (specifically recent European immigrants and unemployed transients). When the legislated gender barriers to the provincial franchise were lifted in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and then federally, each victory was celebrated as winning the vote for women. They still are.<sup>47</sup> However, since removing gender-based restrictions on the franchise still left thousands of prairie women unable to vote, mostly due to race-based restrictions, to describe 1916 as the year Manitoban, Saskatchewanian, and Albertan women "got the vote" is to accept and perpetuate the early twentieth-century argument that suffrage was extended to all the women who mattered. It is now, in effect, compulsory to at least acknowledge the racism of the maternal feminists of early twentieth-century Canada. Accounts of women's enfranchisement likewise temper their praise for McClung, Murphy, and their peers with an admission that their victories were incomplete.<sup>48</sup> But the marginalized women and men who remained disfranchised are so often portrayed as left behind that it obscures white women's role in distinguishing between themselves and members of disfranchised racial minorities to an extent that ensured they would not be enfranchised together, or at the same time.

The maternal feminists advocating for the enfranchisement of British-Canadian women were hardly alone in defending social and racial inequality in Canada, and were not the only ones responsible for continuing to defend the franchise as a privilege. But in order to fully appreciate the agency and influence of prairie advocates of women's suffrage, it is necessary to consider both their power to effect legislative change and to defend the status quo.

## Notes

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- 2 “Twelve Reasons for Supporting Women’s Suffrage,” *Grain Growers’ Guide*, 9 November 1910, 36.
- 3 Cecily Devereux, *Growing a Race: Nellie L. McClung and the Fiction of Eugenic Feminism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 4.
- 4 Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919–1939* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1993), 189.
- 5 Ian McKay, “The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History,” *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (November 2000): 623–25.
- 6 Catherine L. Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 105.
- 7 George Landerkin, quoted in *Official Report of the Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada*, 21 April 1885, 18 (Ottawa: MacLean Roger, 1886), 1356.
- 8 J.M. Platt, quoted in *House of Commons Debates*, *ibid.*, 1 May 1885, 1526.
- 9 Malcolm Cameron, quoted in *House of Commons Debates*, *ibid.*, 16 April 1885, 1142.
- 10 Veronica Strong-Boag, “‘The Citizenship Debates’: The 1885 Franchise Act,” in *Contesting Canadian Citizenship: Historical Readings*, ed. Robert Adamoski, Dorothy Chunn, and Robert Menzies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 88.
- 11 Peter Mitchell, quoted in *House of Commons Debates*, 18 May 1885, 19 (Ottawa: MacLean Roger, 1886), 1945.
- 12 Richard Gwyn, *Nation Maker – Sir John A. Macdonald: His Life, Our Times, Volume 2: 1867–1891* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2011), 520.
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- 14 John A. Macdonald, quoted in *House of Commons Debates*, 16 April 1885, 18 (Ottawa: MacLean Roger, 1886), 1134; Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*, 107–8.
- 15 Arthur H. Gillmor, quoted in *House of Commons Debates*, 4 May 1885, 19 (Ottawa: MacLean Roger, 1886).
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- 19 Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*, 46–69.
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- 21 Minnie F. Kieler, “A Poem to Motherhood,” *Grain Growers’ Guide*, 11 June 1913, 9.
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- 30 McClung, *In Times Like These*, 54.
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- 39 Martin Banton and Gurnam Singh, “‘Race,’ Disability and Oppression,” in *Disabling Barriers, Enabling Environments*, 2nd ed., ed. John Swain, Sally French, Colin Barnes, and Carol Thomas (London: Sage, 2000), 113.
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- 42 “The War Election Franchise,” *Grain Growers’ Guide*, 19 September 1917, 5.
- 43 Devereux, *Growing a Race*, 25.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 11–12.
- 45 All of these examples were, in fact, effected in Alberta after women’s enfranchisement in that province: Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*, 73.
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- 47 See, for example, Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*; Charlotte Gray, *Nellie McClung* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2008); Elections Canada, *A History of the Vote in Canada*; Canadian Human Rights Commission, “Women’s Rights,” *Human Rights in Canada: A Historical Perspective*, <http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca/historical-perspective/en/browseSubjects/womenRights.asp> (accessed 26 September 2016).
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