# NELLIE WAS NOT ALONE...

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Centennial celebrations are important reminders of the events that changed our history. As we celebrate we read and talk about the heroes who made it happen – or at least those heroes we know from school or the daily news. Too often that means that we only know a few people who had "star power" or those who have been the subject of books or videos. Surely an anniversary should also be a time to learn about those others who also worked to make history. This is an invitation to consider some of the less well known women and men in the Manitoba campaign for votes for women.

There is no question that Nellie McClung is the most famous figure in the woman suffrage campaign in Manitoba. She was a long-time advocate for the cause, using her fame and popularity as a writer to get a hearing, and using her talent as an orator to keep people listening. It was Nellie who suggested that she could capitalize on the popularity of her readings of her books by adding the woman suffrage topic to her performances, and most importantly, charging 25 cents a head to cover her expenses. The Political Equality League had little money in the early days and Nellie could be counted on to make many appearances, as indicated by the more than 100 performances she did in 1911. She was also very popular, even in Conservative territory. People flocked to hear her in the Roblin stronghold of Carman and she could get as many as 3 000 out in Brandon. In fact, the more that she and Premier Roblin sparred, the more popular she became as a suffrage speaker.

Nellie was a talented stage performer who was energised by the kind of heckling common in this period. Her witty and speedy replies to the hecklers were legendary and her ability to put her arguments into understandable, everyday language made her an important leader of the suffrage movement. All

of this explains why Nellie was such a prominent figure in the suffrage campaign. Nellie deserves the attention, but the unfortunate consequence of her fame is that so many other people, some who came before her and others who came after her, have been forgotten.

Do most people know that the Icelandic women of Manitoba had the earliest suffrage organization, not just in Manitoba, but in western Canada? We might have heard of Margret Benedictsson, publisher of Freya, Canada's only suffrage newspaper, but we probably can't identify Thorbjorg Sigurdson or Kristjana Thordarson, organizers of *Sigurvon*.[1] The Icelandic women were active in Manitoba for more than twenty-five years without a break, campaigning and circulating petitions in the 1890s such as the one begun by Steina Stefanson in 1910.[2] They often worked alone but at times they participated in the petitions of the English speaking groups, they worked with the Political Equality League for the final 1915 petition and they were represented on the important occasions when suffragists met with Premier Roblin.

Who recognizes the names of Kenneth McKenzie and James Huston, two hardy MLAs who had the courage to argue for and put forward a motion that women should have a vote on the Prohibition issue as early as 1892? Who remembers that George Malcolmson, an Opposition MLA, moved a motion for woman suffrage in 1914 — a motion that obviously worried Premier Roblin because he declared it a confidence motion?[3] These three men are a reminder that suffragist groups in Manitoba always had strong male support. The Political Equality Leagues of Winnipeg and Roaring River were open to men as well as women, but with the understanding that women would be the spokespeople. Delegations to the Legislature always included men such as religious and political leaders Rev. Charles Gordon, J.S. Woodsworth, and Salem Bland.

Manitobans may have heard of the formidable Dr. Amelia Yeomans who was part of the 1890s Manitoba WCTU and the Equal Suffrage Society, but the name of Arminda Blakeley is likely to be met with a blank stare, despite the fact that she was introduced in Chicago at an International Women's Congress by the great American suffragist Susan B. Antony as the originator of the first woman's parliament, the 1893 Mock Parliament in Winnipeg.[4] Some historical records have credited her husband with the achievement! Today, the most famous "Mrs. McClung" is Nellie but, in the 1890s, it was her mother-in-law, Annie McClung, who was campaigning for the vote when Nellie was a young beginning teacher. Annie and Cora Hind, another early Manitoba suffragist of the 1890s, were

1 Interviews with Miss Stefania Sigurdson in May,1975. (*Sigurvon* means "Hope of Victory" and was the Gimli suffrage group.)

2 *Petition of Steina Stefanson et al., praying for the passing of an Act to enfranchise all women, whether married, widowed or spinster on the same terms as men* (No. 51) Sessional Papers, 1910. Archives of Manitoba.

3 Catherine Cleverdon. *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*. 2nd edition. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974, pp. 52 and 60.

4 *The Winnipeg Tribune*, June 6, 1893.

Nellie's role models and mentors in the suffrage movement.[5]

The 1890s campaign lost momentum in the early years of the twentieth century and didn't regain it until the formation of the Political Equality League in Winnipeg in 1912. Much of Nellie's fame as a suffragist is tied to this group of talented and determined people, many of whom are now forgotten or appear only as names on a list. Where are the photographs of Martha Jane Hample, Winnipeg's first businesswoman and the person who financed the Political Equality League in the beginning? What books have been written about Dr. Mary Crawford, Agnes Munro or Alice Holling? The general impression is often that the campaign for the vote was easily won by a group of wealthy Winnipeg women. There were some women who had time to campaign because other women cleaned their houses and cared for their children but there were also career women such as the journalists Kennethe Haig, Anne Anderson Perry, Isobel Graham or Genevieve Lipsett-Skinner, later to be the first woman in the Parliamentary Press Gallery.

Lillian Beynon Thomas and her sister, Francis Marion Beynon, are rightly recognized for their leadership in the Political Equality League. Lillian was known as a major organizer and speaker in the movement and she was also one who resisted Mrs. Pankhurst's advice on suffragette tactics. Francis Marion Beynon made an important contribution through the Women's Page in the *Grain Growers' Guide*. The Grain Growers' Association had supported votes for women since 1911 and George Chipman, the editor of the *Guide* made an important decision when he hired Miss Beynon. She is known for her work on the Women's Page but perhaps not so well known for the role she played in January of 1916 when Mrs. Thomas found that Premier Norris had included votes for women in the legislation but had not included the right to run for office. The Government said that it was too late to change the bill. Francis Beynon was at a Grain Growers' convention in Brandon and apparently let it be known that, unless the bill was changed, she would move a motion of censure against the Government at the convention. Suddenly, it was not too late! Manitoba women got the right to run for office.[6]

We may know of the Beynon sisters, Lillian and Francis, but do we know of the Flett sisters, members of the PEL, who were also part of the Women's Labor League? Winona and Lynn Flett were stenographers, Winona owning a stenographic bureau and Lynn working as a court stenographer. Winona chaired the Literature Committee of the Political Equality League and any reading of the PEL Minutes indicates that this was an extremely active group.[7] The Flett sisters, Fred Dixon, John Queen, and Arthur and Gertrude Puttee were a connection between the Winnipeg Labor organizations and the

5 These relationships are mentioned in a number of sources, including the following: Nellie McClung. *Clearing in the West*. Toronto: Thomas Allen Limited, 1964. pp.268-269; Kennethe Haig. *Brave* Harvest*: The Life Story of E. Cora Hind, LL.D.* Toronto: Thomas Allen Limited, 1945. pp.128-130; Mary Hallett & Marilyn Davis. *Firing the Heather: The Life and Times of Nellie McClung*. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1993, pp.56-58; 84-88 etc.

6 Cleverdon, p.63 (Information in a letter from Mrs. A.V. Thomas, April 21, 1944)

7 *Political Equality League minute* book (file 1), Archives of Manitoba

Political Equality League, an important connection that has often been forgotten or downplayed.

There were also branches of the Political Equality League outside of Winnipeg. They were formed in small communities like Carberry and were a useful network for organizing petitions or election support. One of the most interesting was the small group at Roaring River (near Swan River), begun by another pair of sisters, Gertrude and Fanny Twilley, from Leicester, England. They came to stay with a brother who had homesteaded there and married men from the community. Their group was small but their activities lively and often reported in suffrage news.[8] Gertrude Twilley Richardson wrote of their activities in newspapers in Britain as well as in Canada.

The most famous and most successful event of the suffrage movement in Manitoba was the Women's Parliament of 1914. Nellie's performance as the Premier was the highlight of the evening but the idea came from Mrs. Thomas and the play was the work of the entire group, with considerable help from Harriet Walker of Walker's Theatre. This Parliament made enough money to fund most of the rest of their activities but it was most important because it made woman suffrage a respectable cause that everyone wanted to join.

All of these people mentioned and many more who are not named here, deserve recognition and our thanks for the work they did to give the women of Manitoba the right to vote and to run for provincial office. Nellie would have agreed.

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8 Barbara Roberts. *A Reconstructed World: A Feminist Biography of Gertrude Richardson*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens, 1996.pp. 90-100.

The newspapers of the day, *The Manitoba Free Press*, *The Winnipeg Tribune* and *The Telegram*, provide very detailed accounts of the debates of the Manitoba Legislature and of other Winnipeg political and social events connected to the suffrage campaign.

There were many more rural newspapers then than there are now. Newspapers such as *The Brandon Sun*, *The Hamiota Echo*, *The Virden Empire-Advance*, et al provide the ads for temperance and suffrage events and some lively reports of the activities.