

WE SHALL  
PERSIST

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C O N T E N T S

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## INTRODUCTION

**THE CAMPAIGN FOR WOMEN'S** suffrage in the Maritimes and Newfoundland was long, contentious, and rife with personal insults. Politicians in Atlantic Canada (composed of three provinces and the Crown colony of Newfoundland, later a dominion) defeated more than two dozen suffrage bills over three decades. Finally, in 1918, most Nova Scotia women gained the vote provincially and federally. Similar legislation followed in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland (but not Labrador) in 1919, 1922, and 1925, respectively. Privilege and racism, however, remained well entrenched – perhaps most starkly for Indigenous women who were disenfranchised from band council elections due to their sex until 1951, barring them from voting on community issues that profoundly affected their lives. In other elections, they were disenfranchised based on their race. Nova Scotia and Newfoundland allowed them to vote when other women did, in 1918 and 1925, respectively. However, systemic racism was a strong deterrent, as were Nova Scotia's disqualifications for receiving government relief or not owning property between 1918 and 1920. In Labrador, where many residents were Innu, no one voted until the Confederation referendum in 1949, when the government finally provided the necessary infrastructure: ballot boxes. Federally, reserve-based Indigenous men and women gained the franchise only in 1960. New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island continued to exclude them from voting provincially until 1963. By then, Atlantic Canadian women had been toiling in the suffrage trenches for more than a century.

Female enfranchisement, as well as the long fight for it, was key to making Atlantic Canada what it is today. It legitimized the expansion of women's influence beyond the family into the public sphere. Although sexism thrived in many forms, suffrage curbed

the most blatant political misogyny and prepared the way for more citizens' rights, including women's election to public office, minimum wage legislation, improved social assistance, and access to birth control. *Not* getting the vote, or getting it later, would have been a disaster for democracy and community well-being. And yet the slow appearance of women – especially racialized women – as political candidates and victors demonstrated the persistence of the fierce opposition mounted by anti-suffragists.

The declaration “We Shall Persist” captures both the long suffrage campaign and the subsequent years of disillusionment. The fact that suffrage failed to achieve equality for women has been underscored by the regional Me Too Movement's exposure of horrendous examples of inequality and by broader recognition that cis-gendered women (those whose gender identity corresponds with their birth sex) are far from the only historical (or contemporary) victims of sexual inequality. Suffrage victories in Atlantic Canada are no more than steps in a still unfinished and contentious process toward gender, race, and class equality.

A conservative stereotype has often substituted for research when non-Atlantic Canadian historians write about the area. As a result, traditionalism haunts its economic, religious, political, and gender history. Although Atlantic Canadians see themselves as outward looking, particularly due to their kinship with and commercial links to New England and Great Britain, history of global shipping and shipbuilding, and ethnic ties to other places, a persistent characterization of isolation, traditionalism, and marginalization developed. Atlantic Canada has often been dismissed as less engaged in suffrage than elsewhere, particularly the West. Its enfranchisement campaign has also been portrayed as less interesting.

Catherine Cleverdon, the author of the first and, until recently, the only national history of suffrage, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (1950), highlighted Atlantic Canadian conservatism: “Nowhere has the traditional conservatism of the Maritime

Provinces been more apparent than in the securing of political rights for women ... It was *natural* that these provinces should exhibit varying shades of apathy." She dismissed each Maritime province and Newfoundland in turn, while praising the progressivism of the Prairie provinces. Numerous scholars repeated her claims over the next seven decades, exaggerating what was in fact a relatively short delay in enfranchisement: Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta women in 1916; British Columbia and Ontario in 1917; Nova Scotia in 1918; New Brunswick in 1919; Prince Edward Island in 1922; Newfoundland in 1925; and Quebec in 1940. In *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877–1918* (1989), Carol Lee Bacchi similarly gave Atlantic Canada short shrift, as did Sylvia Bashevkin, who lumped its suffragism with that of Quebec, referring to both as "slow to develop" in *Toeing the Lines: Women and Party Politics in English Canada* (1993). Unfortunately, only in 2018 did the *Canadian Encyclopedia* revise its claim that Maritimers lacked an interest in suffrage. As late as 2020, the *Famous 5 Centre of Canadian Women*, a display at Calgary's Heritage Park, dismissed Atlantic Canada. And so, erroneous claims persist in the face of inadequate research into suffrage in Atlantic Canada.

Writing history is inherently political. Even professional historians incorporate the biases of their society, era, training, and personal perspective, as they choose topics, gather evidence, and offer interpretation. Finishing up this book in 2021, during the Black Lives Matter movement and the discovery of the remains of 215 Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc children on the former Kamloops Indian Residential School property, I am reminded viscerally of how the legacies of slavery and colonialism shaped Atlantic Canada's citizenship rights and the suffrage movement's lack of inclusiveness. As a settler feminist historian, I assert the worthiness of examining suffrage as a step toward women's equality – a yet unfinished project – but I do not put suffragists or any other historical figures on pedestals. As a historian of Atlantic Canada, a

region long stereotyped by historians as conservative and less relevant to Canada than Ontario, I am frustrated by the lack of attention its suffragists have received. Suffragists such as Julia Salter Earle and Jessie Ohman of Newfoundland; Mary Chesley and Eliza Ritchie of Nova Scotia; Ella Hatheway and Emma Fiske of New Brunswick; and Catherine Anderson and Elsie Inman of Prince Edward Island are as much a part of the story as their better-known sisters. They are not lesser because they are unknown. In the same vein, the exclusion of racialized and poor women is sadly consistent across the country.

*We Shall Persist* is the region's first book-length study of the Great Cause. In contrast to Cleverdon and those who echoed her findings, it traces a longer, more contentious campaign. In my search for a fairer portrait, I benefitted significantly from suffrage studies by Margot Duley and Elspeth Tulloch for Newfoundland and New Brunswick, respectively, as well as numerous smaller local studies and suffragist biographies. I have also researched primary (original) documents at thirteen provincial, municipal, university, and national archives.

The chapters that follow are organized by province because female enfranchisement provincially and in the Dominion of Newfoundland required amendments to mid-nineteenth-century voting legislation. Amendments could be made only by majority approval on three occasions in each respective House of Assembly: first, a bill had to be introduced and further consideration requested; next, it had to be approved at a second reading, usually preceded by a fulsome debate; and, finally, there was the third reading, usually at a committee level outside of the regular legislative sitting. Because provincial enfranchisement rules were also used federally until 1920, suffrage campaigns targeted provincial legislation change that would extend to the federal level. Distinct campaigns emerged in each of the Maritime provinces and Newfoundland against a backdrop of a broad interrogation of power and privilege, both inside and outside the four Houses of Assembly.

Each jurisdiction receives attention in the chronological order that it achieved the vote: Nova Scotia in 1918, New Brunswick in 1919, Prince Edward Island in 1922, and Newfoundland in 1925. Chapters demonstrate how suffrage campaigns unfolded within local political contexts; their connections to other human rights and social reform campaigns; the range of the suffrage groups; the significance of property; ethnic, age, and other voting qualifications; the effect of school board and municipal elections on suffrage campaigns at higher levels; and the impact of the First World War. Advocates everywhere trudged with determination and courage along similar but nevertheless distinctive pathways.

The Maritime provinces and Newfoundland had long, vigorous, strategic, and hard-won suffrage battles. Stubborn advocates fought fierce opponents thousands of times in hundreds of skirmishes in the press, the legislature, universities, churches, clubs, societies, and theatres – but also in living rooms, kitchens, and job sites. Dogged resolve won the day. Although during its long campaign, Newfoundland was a separate Crown colony of Great Britain rather than a province of Canada, its distinctive trajectory is part of the Atlantic Canadian story.

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With due gratitude to [Attorney General of Nova Scotia] Mr. Longley for his chivalrous desire to save us from self-destruction, we will take the risk of the strain upon our delicate “moral fibre” of depositing a ballot once in four years ...

– M.R. CHESLEY, LETTER TO THE EDITOR,  
*HALIFAX HERALD*, 23 MARCH 1895

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# SUFFRAGE CONTEXTS AND CHALLENGES IN THE MARITIMES AND NEWFOUNDLAND

To the Government and Legislature of the Province  
of Nova Scotia *RG5 Series P Vol 22*

We whose names are hereto subscribed, being British subjects of the full age of twenty one years and upwards, and having lived in the province of Nova Scotia one year and upwards, hereby pray that you will introduce and pass at the next session of the Legislature an act granting the provincial franchise to women upon the same terms as those upon which it is granted to men, thus placing us upon a level with the women of Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia.

No.	NAME	ADDRESS	OCCUPATION
1	Mary R. Chesley	Lunenburg	Homemaker
2	Martha G. Osborn	Lunenburg	"
3	Bertie L. Wilcox	"	"
4	Garth Hubby	"	"
5	Frances Hubby	"	"
6	Bertha Komesell	"	"
7	Mrs. J. Komesell	"	"
8	Betty Komesell	"	"
9	Ada G. Comery	"	"
10	Amelia M. Selig	"	Milliner
11	Caroline Selig	"	Laundress
12	Anna B. Jeffrey	"	Homemaker
13	Frances G. Coose	"	Homemaker
14	Joy W. Knapp	"	"
15	Margaret Burns	"	"
16	Mrs. Lewis Thomas	"	"
17	Mrs. Winifred Sinclair	"	"
18	Mrs. Dorothy Coose	"	"
19	Mrs. Sarah A. Ireland	"	"
20	Mrs. Emma Whitford	"	"

Petition from residents of Lunenburg County  
in favour of female suffrage, 1917.

Note that Mary Russell Chesley is the first signatory.

**THE FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S** suffrage was a series of provincial movements rather than a national one because it occurred before standard federal franchise requirements were set. Until the passage of the Dominion Elections Act in 1920, federal elections used the voting requirements of the provinces. Advocates for suffrage therefore focused on provincial voting legislation, all of which excluded women. The same pattern occurred in Newfoundland, whose suffrage campaign and legislation were separate from Britain's.

Although there were four distinct campaigns in Atlantic Canada, they shared legal, religious, economic, demographic, and cultural contexts. These included significant connections to organized religion, class and ethnic hierarchies, and challenges that caught the attention of politicians, given suffrage's chronological overlap with numerous political and economic crises. These shared contexts affected the ways in which suffrage emerged.

Female enfranchisement numbered among the key North American and European human rights reforms that also included married women's property and custody rights. The Maritime provinces and Newfoundland were among the many jurisdictions that renegotiated British common law in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Prior to the reforms, wives were represented by their husbands in all legal matters. In effect, they experienced a legal death upon marriage. They could not own or sell property, sue or be sued, control their wages, or initiate divorce. The same principle extended to the vote: husbands spoke for their wives at the polls. The common law enshrined their physical, financial, and emotional vulnerability. Its precepts energized wealthy families

who feared that feckless husbands could potentially fritter away the fortunes of heiresses. These concerns, plus increasing recognition of the predicament of the growing mass of working women who were married to dissolute providers, incited some of the earliest reforms in Atlantic Canada, as elsewhere. Deserted wives' acts implemented between 1843 and 1860 denied claims on wives' wages or property to husbands who had abandoned their families. Over more than a century, amended laws allowed married women to control property with the same rights as men. That demand for equal marital rights fostered demands for suffrage.

In *One Hundred Years of Struggle*, the first volume in this series, historian Joan Sangster rightly characterizes the Canadian suffrage movement as a "circle of ideas and people that sits within two other social movement circles." In the inner sanctum, a select group of women (and men) championed the vote as the key recognition of full citizenship that would introduce a better world. Beyond them, a larger social reform circle distributed its energy across diverse causes, from public health and child welfare to criminal justice and religious equality, as well as politics. Farther beyond was a broad women's movement constituency encompassing a plethora of suffrage, reform, and religious groups, with causes ranging from the conservative to the truly radical.

## RELIGION

Organized religion was vital to the suffrage movement in Atlantic Canada and the broader social reform movement. It motivated women, justified their new public roles, and provided organizational and leadership experience from which to draw. The vast majority of late-nineteenth-century Maritimers and Newfoundlanders identified as Christian, with Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist the main denominations. All shared assumptions about the distinctive roles of the sexes, particularly women's maternalism. Many, in what has been termed the "Protestant Social Gospel" and "Social Catholicism," were also

committed to improving the world. Though atheists and agnostics were instrumental in the suffrage movement, many suffragists were driven by religious faith, a justification that made their views generally more palatable. Church allegiances affirmed them, not as threats to social relations, but as advocates of essential religious principles. Respectable groups such as the Anglican Church Women, Catholic Women's League, Baptist Women's Missionary Society, and the African United Baptist Association took up issues, such as temperance and child welfare, that set women on the path to a larger role in public life.

Not all challenges to the status quo were obvious. Catholic women found leadership and fulfillment in nearby or faraway religious orders, with hundreds of Maritime and Newfoundland women choosing vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience over families. Convents were rarely self-determining, but nuns elected their own leaders and had considerable economic independence. Such options may have reduced Catholic women's enthusiasm for secular reforms, including suffrage, which was condemned by the pope. In some Protestant evangelical churches, such as the Methodist and Baptist Churches, women gained opportunities to preach, despite Saint Paul's admonition that they remain silent in church. Maritime and Newfoundland women of faith such as May Coy (1771–1859), Mary MacKinnon Fletcher (1773–?), Mary Narraway Bond (1779–1854), Anna Towle (1796–1876), Susannah Lynds McCurdy (1776–1862), and Martha Jago (1807–75) expanded opportunities for their sex by speaking in churches, gospel tents, community halls, taverns, and other public spaces. Like nuns in large orders, Protestant overseas missionary societies, in sites as far afield as India and China, disproved myths of female weakness and passivity. Indeed, some women in missionary support groups were directly linked to the suffrage cause. Many members also worked on temperance campaigns and mustered for the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, which endorsed suffrage nationally in 1888.

**POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY**

The suffrage movement in Atlantic Canada was further affected by economic and political vulnerability. In the 1880s, the critical decade that laid the foundation of the movement, the futures of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island remained uncertain after their recent confederation with Canada. Newfoundland, which had rejected Confederation, remained a British dominion until 1949. With a combined population of just over 1 million, the four jurisdictions suffered an extended worldwide recession, which was compounded in the Maritimes by Ottawa's preoccupation with settling the Prairies and strengthening manufacturing industries in the central provinces to the detriment of those in the east. People and investments jumped ship from Atlantic Canada at unprecedented rates during the late nineteenth century. Although per capita income in the more prosperous jurisdictions of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick initially clung to the national average, it soon faltered.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Atlantic region was caricatured as out-of-date, nearly moribund. Calls by Maritime business leaders and politicians for improving their integration into Confederation were ignored by Ottawa. At the same time, Newfoundland's relationship with Britain soured when London failed to deal with the controversial arrangement on the French Shore that gave France fishing rights to the western perimeter of the colony. Nostalgia festered for past glory days, with vibrant shipping and shipbuilding industries that had linked dozens of rural communities and urban manufacturing centres with global ambitions until the 1880s.

As primary industries employed most wage earners in the late nineteenth century, the economic downturn negatively affected per capita incomes. Agriculture was less lucrative than in other regions, timber sales fell sharply, and the fishery swung between feast and famine. In Saint John, Marysville, Halifax, Sydney, and Truro, factories of various sizes continued to refine sugar and to

produce cotton, leather, and rope, but profits had dropped by the late nineteenth century. Coal mining surged in Cape Breton and western Nova Scotia, but gains were undercut by dangerous working conditions, diminishing wages, and labour unrest. Between 1871 and 1901, the lack of satisfactory local employment pushed nearly a quarter of a million Maritimers, especially women, youth, and anglophones, to factory and domestic work in the Boston States, which had the domino effect of further weakening the economy and the potential of a Maritime metropolis. All of these economic concerns distracted local governments from new causes, including women's rights and suffrage.

#### **CLASS AND ETHNIC HIERARCHIES**

Most suffrage leaders in Atlantic Canada were drawn from the dominant class and ethnicity, and were largely indifferent to the rights of those outside their circle. The area was well established by the late nineteenth century, with 80 percent of its approximately 1-million-strong population native-born and most arable land settled. This long history of predominantly European settlement contrasted with that of the vast area west of Ontario, where only 100,000 Euro-Canadian settlers and 60,000 Indigenous people lived at the time of Confederation in 1867. Between 1881 and 1911, however, some 1.5 million immigrants settled in the West, increasing the Euro-Canadian Prairie population from 3.2 to 22.2 percent of the national population and decreasing that of the Maritimes from 18.2 to 11.4 percent. Whereas western immigration peaked in the early 1910s, it occurred in the Maritimes during the 1830s and 1840s, when skilled and unskilled immigrants, mostly from the British Isles, had been attracted to the traditional resource industries as well as the shipbuilding and shipping industries of the Maritimes. In Newfoundland, the Irish and English arrived to engage in the cod – and to a lesser degree, seal and whale – fishery, 85 percent of them living in outport communities in the late nineteenth century.

The older settler society of the Maritimes may have encouraged religious, ethnic, and class fissures. British residents outnumbered the two main ethnic minority populations, the Acadians and Indigenous peoples, by almost nine to one. Smaller minority groups of Jewish, African, German, Lebanese, and Chinese descent residing in scattered enclaves faced overt discrimination, with higher rates of poverty and illiteracy, restricted social mobility, and exclusion from the governing and business elite. As in Europe and elsewhere in Canada, disputes between Catholics and Protestants could result in violence. These rifts made inclusivity in the suffrage movement improbable. Furthermore, the region lacked any boost of recent immigration from countries that supported enfranchisement, such as Iceland, whose female migrants to the Prairies in the 1870s and 1880s encouraged its suffrage movement.

Anti-French, anti-Catholic discrimination against the Acadians, the largest minority, led them to establish their own franco-phone newspapers, universities, and inter-provincial conventions during the late nineteenth century. These accomplishments, along with a high birth rate, made them a force to be reckoned with, including in provincial elections. This sometimes worked against the suffrage movement. When Catholic laymen (including not only the majority of Acadians but also large numbers of Irish and Scottish men) were elected to government, they upheld their church's official stance against enfranchisement until well into the 1910s. Catholic women rarely participated in mainstream social reform movements, including the campaign for the vote. Catholic charitable and social improvement efforts, such as the League of the Cross, a temperance group, were tied to the church.

Whereas Acadian women were rarely invited into the mainstream movement, Indigenous women were even more invisible to most suffrage advocates. In the mid-nineteenth century, Indigenous people made up approximately 2 to 3 percent of Atlantic

Canada's population. They included the Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik in the Maritimes and the Mi'kmaq and Innu in Newfoundland. Greater prejudice, including exclusion from the franchise, meant that they did not possess the cultural traction of the Acadians. Not yet united with Canada, Newfoundland did not adhere to the Indian Act of 1876 or have any land treaties. Newfoundland Mi'kmaq tended to live on the western shores of the island, and the Innu populated Labrador. Although the region's only residential school, Shubenacadie (near Truro, Nova Scotia), was not established until 1929, several day schools opened 140 years earlier as part of church-based assimilation projects. Unlike in Australia and New Zealand, there is no evidence that late-nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century Atlantic Canadian suffragists had any interest in winning the franchise for Indigenous women. Furthermore, many Indigenous women were ambivalent about the provincial vote, the main focus of the suffrage movement, because of their stronger ties to the federal government and the Queen through treaties and the federally controlled Indian Act.

Descendants of African Canadians have resided in the Maritimes as long as Europeans, including enslaved Black people who toiled in the French fortress of Louisbourg during the early eighteenth century and more than three thousand free and enslaved Blacks who were part of Planter and Loyalist migrations of the late eighteenth century. Repeatedly, Maritime governments broke promises of providing arable land, education, and infrastructure to force free Black citizens into cheap labour. In the face of such overt, sanctioned racism, many moved on. The population grew back slowly, recovering to three thousand in the late nineteenth century, the largest concentration in Nova Scotia where it composed nearly 4 percent of the population. With the British Empire outlawing slavery only in 1833, elite Maritimers in the early colonial period kept enslaved people as domestic servants and labourers, courts upheld slavery, and the law supported returning escaped slaves to their American owners.



When slavery ended, racism and segregation continued. Despite early successful alliances from the 1830s to the 1850s, including with the Conservative Party in Nova Scotia and Liberal reformer Joseph Howe, African Maritimers and Newfoundlanders were again forced to find support outside the mainstream, primarily in Baptist churches. The African United Baptist Association, created in 1854, linked more than forty Black communities, provided needed leadership, and sought out practical ways around anti-Black strictures. In the 1890s, its conventions began to include female delegates, such as regular participant Louisa Ann Johnson (?–1911), a Halifax shopkeeper who was also a keen temperance advocate. As with Acadians, Black Atlantic Canadians saw the power of their own press. The *Atlantic Advocate*, a monthly journal “devoted to the interests of coloured people in the Dominion,” began publication in 1915. Among its founding editors was Miriam A. DeCosta, a feminist forerunner to another Nova Scotia Black woman journalist, Carrie Best (1903–2001), who founded the *Clarion* in 1946. Although prohibited from training either as teachers or nurses, some Black women taught in local schools through special permission licences. A handful also ran small businesses in the late nineteenth century, including Halifax grocer and artist Edith Macdonald-Brown (1880–1956). As one historian summarized, from the end of slavery until the 1960s, “Black women in North America, and more specifically in Nova Scotia, suffered the overt effects of individual, institutional and cultural racism. The results were widespread illiteracy, underemployment, unemployment, economic deprivation, political powerlessness, social rejection, spiritual exclusion and other negative elements imposed on the Black community by white Nova Scotian society.” Although a few Black women beat remarkable odds to achieve formal education, none are known to have participated in the suffrage movement.

#### **DEFINING THE WORTHINESS OF VOTERS**

In the nineteenth century, participation in elections was treated

as a privilege that was properly extended only to those who were seen as having a stake in society, most often landowning male taxpayers, rather than to everyone based on innate humanity or dignity. This long-standing ideology was most famously articulated by seventeenth-century political economist John Locke (1632–1704), who claimed that male landowners were instinctively committed to responsible government and could be trusted to vote in the best interests of the community. Governments rarely saw Acadian, Indigenous, Black, or poor Maritimers as deserving of the privilege. However, when it came to the franchise, ethnic and racial minority men had priority over all women because they were potential heads of households, breadwinners, and soldiers. Except for Indigenous men, they were included in late-nineteenth-century demands for universal male suffrage, which dropped property owning as a requirement. In contrast, women, like children, were identified as meaningfully represented by male family members. That their interests might differ from those of male kin was ignored. Indeed, suffrage was all the more feared because it might sharpen family disagreements, in effect exposing a reality of conflicting interests.

The tie between property and the franchise remained in place for women long after it faded for men. Before reforms in married women's property laws in the nineteenth century, only single women (never married or widowed) could hold property. As taxpayers without a male representative, they were seen to merit the vote more than married women (who were "represented" by their husbands) or unpropertied single women (who did not pay taxes). At the same time, single female adults were suspect for insufficiently investing in the patriarchal domestic order; their right to vote was based solely on the principle of no taxation without representation. A particularly strong commitment to a property franchise often allowed Atlantic Canadian municipalities, like those elsewhere in Canada, to become the first level of government to enfranchise qualified women. It also meant that municipal

franchises were among the last to be fully democratized, since female and male tenants who could not afford the poll tax – a fee charged to non-property-holders for the privilege to vote – were not eligible to participate in some municipal elections. Halifax, for example, abolished its poll tax requirement only in 1949 and did not give married women the full municipal franchise until 1963.

Distinctive houses of assembly and political environments required Atlantic Canadian suffrage advocates to employ a number of strategies tailored to convince those who held power in each particular jurisdiction. At the same time, local orientation was offset by important transnational influences fostered in activist networks ranging into the United States and Britain, and to a lesser degree, the rest of Canada. Some links were created by immigrants as they shared correspondence, read newspapers, and joined national and international church, temperance, professional, and suffrage organizations. When suffragists in Saint John applauded the visiting American suffragist Julia Ward Howe in 1896, and the British suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst in 1912, they joined a global sisterhood. During extended family stays in Halifax in the late nineteenth century, Anna Leonowens, the Anglo-Indian author of *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870), challenged provincial activists to join an international crusade.

#### **OPPOSITION**

The virulent opposition to votes for women provoked a long and exhausting struggle. Anti-suffragists – both male and female – commonly employed four arguments: women were already represented and protected by men; they lacked sufficient intellect; they would be drawn away from their primary domestic duties; and only a small, unrepresentative group wanted the vote. None were unique to the region, but local partisans made them personal, and therefore local. Opposition was never tied to evidence, making it all the harder to fight. For example, even when governments

received suffrage petitions with thousands of women's signatures, the old argument that women had not demonstrated interest was inevitably trotted out by sanctimonious opponents. Atlantic Canada's suffragists never accepted the calumnies that were directed at them. As they insisted, women had aptitudes (such as for protecting children) that justified their involvement in issues that men knew less well; their successes in universities and the professions proved their intellectual capacity; the brief time needed to cast a ballot would not threaten domestic duties; and enough women wanted the vote to warrant it, whereas the disinterested would not be forced to vote. More broadly, suffragists fought deep-rooted assumptions about gender roles, particularly the stereotypes of the stalwart male breadwinner and the passive female homemaker. In fact, most households depended upon female labour, indoor and outdoor, stretching around the clock and involving significant mental and physical demands. Nor could many men guarantee the kind of secure incomes that would support the romantic visions of conservatives. Most Atlantic Canadian families, as elsewhere, were working or lower middle class. Entire households toiled to survive. From a twenty-first-century perspective, the assumption that only men were deserving citizens seems ludicrous.

Atlantic Canada's suffrage movement varied in membership, fields of action, choice of strategies, and opponents. No single suffragist embodies its rich history. Although the leadership tended to be female, white, urban, middle class, Protestant, English speaking, and educated, the tens of thousands of supporters, including those who signed petitions from the 1890s through the 1920s, represented a wider range of Maritimers and Newfoundlanders. Personal or observed experiences of social injustice, or a core faith in common humanity, could be a powerful motivation. Activist engagement in particular causes, such as Julia Salter Earle's fury at the appalling factory conditions in Newfoundland, or Edith Archibald's loyalty to British imperialism in Nova Scotia, often

generated distinctive interests in the vote. Whatever their differences, suffrage champions met a common hostility. Women were routinely discouraged from entering public debates, and their capacity for rational discourse was ridiculed. Not surprisingly, their strategies commonly began with efforts to demonstrate their merits and contributions to a host of “good” causes, from child protection to public health.

Despite some early advances in higher education and the law, as well as the enfranchisement of certain propertied and often single women in some municipalities during the 1880s, Canadian women could not vote federally until the 1917 Wartime Elections Act. Even then, it was limited to military nurses or those who had close male relatives serving overseas in the armed forces. In 1918, federal enfranchisement was extended to all qualified women at twenty-one years of age. Newfoundland women waited until 1925 to vote for members of their House of Assembly. Exclusions remained significant: Newfoundland residents had to be twenty-five; property requirements persisted for decades; and Asian and First Nations women lacked the federal franchise until 1949 and 1960, respectively. Provincially, most women gained the franchise in Nova Scotia in 1918, New Brunswick in 1919, and Prince Edward Island in 1922.



All women are not heroines, neither are all men  
heroes, but the ordinary woman is not so stupid  
as some men would affect to believe.

– MARY FLETCHER,  
NOVA SCOTIA STENOGRAPHER AND ACTIVIST, 1917



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