

# A woman's story — the suffragettes build momentum

## HERITAGE BEAT

By Art Joyce



**J**uly 21, 1898. Baker Street is strung end to end in a blaze of white electric bulbs—dazzling harbingers of the new century so near. More than a thousand Chinese lanterns are hung from the CPR depot at the foot of Baker to Hall Street. It's the city's grand welcome to Governor-General Lord and Lady Aberdeen on their farewell tour of Canada. Hundreds of onlookers crowd the train station platform as the vice-regal cars pull in. Bagpipers and a brass band sound the welcome. A special carriage is prepared to take the Aberdeens to the luxurious Phair Hotel.

Once there, Mayor Houston and party provide a stirring welcome before everyone retires to the dining room for lunch. Then begins the customary round of toasts, the sparkling crystal glasses raised and emptied again and again. A health is drunk to the Victorian Order of Nurses founded by Lady Aberdeen.

"Although on such occasions it is the privilege of ladies to enjoy themselves and leave the 'hard work' of speech-making to the gentlemen," she winks, "I cannot resist the temptation to respond to such a toast. This order was founded in commemoration of the diamond jubilee, and Her Majesty Queen Victoria—who has taken a great interest in the society," she continues, "has granted it a royal charter. This is very rare outside of the United Kingdom. I thank you on behalf of the Queen, the sick who are profiting by the order, the relatives who have seen their dear ones ministered to, and on behalf of its principal Miss McLeod, and the nurses, who are doing good amid much hardship and difficulty." The VON now has nursing homes in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, and Halifax, Dawson City and Fort Selkirk.

The Reverend F. Frew responds to Lady Aberdeen's toast. "Women constitute the biggest moral, social, and political question of the day, and I would like to see them in all positions," and here he hesitates, "except the pulpit." Frew has put

his finger right on the mark—many are already calling the latter 19th century the Womens' Century.

But in fact, it's the 20th century that will see the complete fulfilment of womens' roles in all aspects of life. Nelson especially has had a strong tradition of female activism from its earliest days in the 1890s. In the Victorian era, it has been women who brought civilizing influences to bear on what would otherwise have remained rough and ragged mining and logging camps. Women like Mrs. J. R. Robertson and Dr. Isabel Arthur, who have been responsible for generating funds for the first public libraries, schools, and hospitals. Others such as Lucy Davys and Ella Croasdaile played (literally) strong roles in the development of theatre and the arts in Nelson's cultural life.

The first known usage of the term "womens' rights" is in the 1792 treatise 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman', by the author of the classic novel *Frankenstein*—Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. 'Vindication' is partly a response to the glaring omission of womens' rights under the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man', forged in the democratic afterburn of the French Revolution. In the U.S., the spark languishes for a half century until being rekindled in 1848 by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her 'Declaration of Sentiments'. Stanton had taken up the anti-slavery campaign, leading her quite naturally to the cause of womens' rights, which focuses first on the issue of 'suffrage', a term simply meaning the right or 'franchise' to vote. She joins forces with the legendary Susan B. Anthony in 1852 at a national womens' convention in Syracuse, New York.

Wyoming becomes the first and only state to grant women the vote in all elections in 1869. This hopeful sign leads to the formation of the National Woman Suffrage Association by Anthony and Stanton, whose goal is the establishment of an amendment to the American Constitution allowing women the right to vote.

The British suffrage movement also builds momentum in the 1850s. Prominent philosopher John Stuart Mill and his wife Harriet champion the cause, leading in 1865 to the formation of the first womens' suffrage committee in Manchester. Two years later, Mill presents to parliament a petition containing 1,550 signatures

for womens' right to vote—to no effect. Throughout the 1870s, suffrage societies spring up across Britain, presenting petition after petition—all of them ignored. Strangely,

domestic. Men aren't the only ones making the argument. Many women—uncomfortable with what seems a radical new movement undermining the social order—argue that women are "morally superior", and needed at home as the moral and spiritual educators of future generations.

It's ironic that the Industrial Revolution is at least partly responsible for freeing womens' energies to concentrate on the emerging consciousness of long-neglected rights. Writing in a special issue of the *Victoria Colonist* of May 28, 1895, the (unnamed) vice-president of the Victoria branch of the National Council for Women explains:

"It is true... that English-speaking women a hundred years ago were more entirely occupied with domestic affairs than they are at the present day. In country houses, not only was the beer brewed and the bread baked and medicines distilled, but the linen of the household was frequently spun and woven at home... The 19th century has been a century of invention, and countless are the mechanical contrivances by which the labor of the household has been lessened... The most exemplary housewife nowadays does not sit down to... neatly backstitch the necessary dozens of shirt fronts. Probably she takes up instead the daily newspaper and becomes interested in the government of her country..."

Tellingly — at this early stage of the suffrage movement — the writer adds, almost apologetically: "...even, perhaps, to the extent of forming an opinion..." Considering the fact that suffrage movements in the

U.S. and Britain have been gathering steam for some 45 years, it seems trifling progress indeed. No wonder the British suffragettes are getting fed up. The frustration is about to explode in ways that will shock polite Victorian society everywhere. (See Part Two next week)



Lady Aberdeen—Isabel Maria Gordon, born March 15, 1857—the founder of Canada's National Council of Women in 1893.

### Queen

Victoria staunchly opposes suffrage. In 1869, English women who pay taxes are granted the right to vote in municipal elections. Finally, the various British movements are united in 1897 as the National Union of Womens' Suffrage Societies. But by then, patience is growing short with the apparently fruitless political approach. The British suffragettes under the leadership of Emmaline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel—while continuing lobbying initiatives and public speaking engagements—are becoming understandably militant.

Canada — being a much younger country — gets off to a later start. Lady Aberdeen, not content to be a mere trophy wife or figurehead for Canada's Governor-General Lord Aberdeen, establishes the National Council of Women in 1893. Among its achievements are the founding of the Childrens' Aid Society and Lady Aberdeen's personal labour of love, the Victorian Order of Nurses. "The women of every country have always done a great work," she tells the welcoming committee. "In these days we cannot fulfill our own duties in our own homes unless we are in touch with all that is good in the world and all that is evil..."

She encourages Nelson women to form a branch of the National Council of Women. Its mandate is to represent to government issues of "concern to women, in accordance with their goal of bettering conditions pertaining to the family and the state." This rather meek sounding manifesto may be a reflection of the knee-jerk reaction to the fledgling womens' movement—the 'cult of true womanhood' which asserts the true woman should remain pious, pure, maternal, and

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