

## **Women's Suffrage and Confederation**

Heidi MacDonald

Volume 46, numéro 1, winter/spring 2017

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad46\\_1pp03](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad46_1pp03)

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### Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

### ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

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### Citer ce document

MacDonald, H. (2017). Women's Suffrage and Confederation. *Acadiensis*, 46(1), 163–176.

## Women's Suffrage and Confederation

WOMEN'S RIGHTS' CAMPAIGNS IN ATLANTIC CANADA were already underway by the time of Confederation. Belying some earlier historians' conclusions to the contrary, the three Maritime provinces and Newfoundland all had steady campaigns for women's rights, beginning in the mid-19th century with dower laws and married women's property acts and culminating with suffrage legislation between 1918 and 1925.<sup>1</sup> By exploring the question of whether Atlantic Canada, like the Prairies and Quebec, had a regional suffrage movement, examining the nature of the connections between local, national, and international movements, and situating this analysis within a broader historiographical context, this article considers how and to what extent Confederation affected these suffrage campaigns.

A year after marking the 150th anniversary of Confederation, we will mark the 100th anniversary of the federal enfranchisement of women in 2018. Just as an earlier generation of women historians had to remind us that the "universal suffrage" of the 19th century, which excluded women, should be defined more precisely as "universal male suffrage," so, too, in celebrating this anniversary, we must recognize that the suffrage remained a privilege that was not accorded federally or provincially to all women and men of voting age. Shifting understandings of who had a "stake in society," as Gail Campbell has explained, led to much defining and redefining of voter eligibility in the last two centuries, initially favouring rate-paying landowners and later embracing those who made other contributions.<sup>2</sup> Arguments supporting women's suffrage invariably spoke to women's stake in society. Not surprisingly, apart from the late 18th- and early 19th-century legislation that ignored gender as a qualification and therefore allowed women who dared to vote to do so in New Brunswick until 1843, PEI until 1836, and Nova Scotia until 1851, unmarried, property-holding women were the first women to garner the vote in Atlantic Canada because of their stake in their municipalities as taxpayers and their not being politically represented by husbands.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the argument that middle-class

1 This approximately 70-year period was labelled "first wave feminism" once a "second wave" of feminism, which focused on reproductive rights, equal pay, and an end to domestic violence, became identifiable in the 1960s. I am avoiding the wave metaphor, however, because of Nancy Hewitt's convincing argument that it flattens out the past, forgets the activity between so-called waves, emphasizes middle-class white women's activism while deemphasizing campaigns led by minority women, exaggerates the significance of some campaigns (such as suffrage) over others, and assumes that suffrage was the natural cresting of the "first" wave. See Nancy Hewitt, "Feminist Frequencies: Regenerating the Wave Metaphor," *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 658-80. Many thanks to Gail Campbell for her thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this piece.

2 Gail Campbell, "Defining and Redefining Democracy: The History of Electoral Reform in New Brunswick," in *Democratic Reform in New Brunswick*, ed. William Cross (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2007), 274, 285, 296-7.

3 Unmarried property-holding women gained the municipal vote in Nova Scotia in 1887, in New Brunswick in 1888, in PEI in 1888/1892 (Charlottetown followed by Summerside), and in Newfoundland in 1925.

women's contributions were equivalent to if not greater than the contributions of working-class and immigrant men was used to rationalize more women voters' eligibility. As Liberal New Brunswick MLA William Roberts argued in the legislature in 1917: "A male foreigner, ignorant of our language, laws, customs, and national life, gets the vote after three years' residence because he is a 'man.' Would hon. Gentlemen class their mothers, wives and sisters with such men as these? Would they say that college graduates, school teachers, nurses, business and professional women were more ignorant than foreigners?"<sup>4</sup>

The 1918 federal Act to Confer the Electoral Franchise Upon Women stated: "Women who are British subjects, 21 years of age, and otherwise meet the qualifications entitling a man to vote, are entitled to vote in a Dominion election."<sup>5</sup> Because provincial, racial and other qualifications were carried into the federal legislation, British Columbian women and men of Japanese, Chinese, and Hindu heritage, and Saskatchewan women and men of Chinese ethnicity could not vote until 1948, while First Nations women and men living on-reserve in any province were not eligible to vote until 1960.<sup>6</sup> And when the Dominion of Newfoundland enacted suffrage in 1925, women voters had to be 25 or older, while men had to be just 21, promulgating an assumption that an older woman held a greater stake in society than a younger one perhaps because of motherhood.

This essay focuses specifically on provincial (and, in the case of Newfoundland, dominion) suffrage campaigns while recognizing their contexts in a series of women's rights campaigns, including calls for improvements in married women's property laws and for women's eligibility for school trusteeships along with broader social and moral reforms ranging from the establishment of urban playgrounds, through prohibition, to training for domestic servants. While these gender and social reforms did not pave a straight road to suffrage, there is no doubt of the cumulative impact of women's rights activism and the overlap of many reforms, including, for example, prohibition and suffrage.<sup>7</sup>

The historiography on suffrage in Atlantic Canada has had two phases, each about three decades long: the 1950s to 1980s and the 1980s to 2010s. In the first phase, Catherine Cleverdon, Carol Bacchi, and others stressed the conservatism and passivity of the suffrage movement in Atlantic Canada. In *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*, published in 1950 and still the only suffrage monograph that considers the entire country, Cleverdon's approach to Atlantic Canada is summarized in her chapter title: "The Maritimes: Stronghold of Conservatism," which is underscored in the chapter's first sentence – "Nowhere has the traditional conservatism of the Maritime Provinces been more apparent than in the securing of

4 *Synoptic Report of the Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick, 1917*, 6 June 1917, 83.

5 "An Act to confer the Electoral Franchise upon Women," *Statutes of Canada*, 1918, c. 20, <http://www.lop.parl.gc.ca/ParlInfo/compilations/ProvinceTerritory/ProvincialWomenRightToVote.aspx>.

6 In PEI, for example, qualifications for voting for assemblymen included being 21 years of age, a British subject, and resident in the province the 12 months before an election while excluding "an Indian normally resident on an Indian reservation." See *PEI Statutes*, 1922, cap 5, p. 53, #32.

7 See examples in Gail Cuthbert Brant et al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Nelson, 2011), 217-78.

political rights for women” – and elaborated upon in the following paragraph: “It was *natural* that these provinces should exhibit varying shades of apathy.”<sup>8</sup> While Cleverdon accepted the stereotype of Maritime conservatism,<sup>9</sup> she was groundbreaking for other reasons; this included her assumption that a regional suffrage movement existed – something that no Atlantic Canadian historian has confirmed or refuted. Carol Bacchi is the other significant historian belonging in this first phase, and she too accepted the regional stereotype of Atlantic Canadian apathy towards suffrage. There are also historians of Atlantic Canada or a particular province who stressed Atlantic Canada women’s lack of interest in suffrage and whom I place in this early phase, including political historian Frank MacKinnon; he wrote in 1951 that women’s enfranchisement in PEI in 1922 was “inevitable” because, by that time, all other provinces except Quebec had granted women the vote.<sup>10</sup> And Memorial honours students Gaynor Rowe and Terry Bishop each argued that Newfoundland outport women were too engrossed in the survival of their families to be interested in suffrage.<sup>11</sup>

In the second phase of Atlantic Canadian suffrage historiography, E.R. Forbes, Janet Guildford, Judith Fingard, Mary Ellen Clark, and others defended Atlantic Canada against allegations of conservatism by offering examples of women’s suffrage activism. Most notably, E.R. Forbes critiqued Bacchi – arguing that her “repetitive invocation of class often gives the impression of reductionism, the condemnation of past women leaders raises the question as to whether their motivation has been fully understood, and the sample analysis suggests a lack of sophistication in the interpretation of quantitative data. In another sense, Bacchi’s study is a historiographic regression, abandoning as it does Cleverdon’s panoramic regional approach for a narrow focus on Central Canada.”<sup>12</sup> The methodology of these second-generation scholars was either biographical or institutional, with the Halifax Local Council of Women (LCW) – an umbrella organization of a couple dozen social and moral reform societies – and the Saint John Women’s Enfranchisement Association – the Maritimes’ only long-term suffrage society – along with the leaders of these organizations receiving attention from multiple scholars.

Forbes’s main contribution to the second generation of suffrage historiography was to dispute Bacchi’s arguments, but he also examined the suffrage activities of

8 Catherine Lyle Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 156 (author’s emphasis).

9 I have viewed her research notes at the National Archives and can attest that she collected a good amount of research from newspapers and relevant provincial legislation that went against her own conclusions. Part of her evaluation may be presentist as she notes that no Maritime federal or provincial seats were ever held by women at the time of her writing in the late 1940s.

10 Frank MacKinnon, *The Government of Prince Edward Island* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), 218.

11 Gaynor Rowe, “The Woman Suffrage Movement in Newfoundland” (paper submitted to Professor Matthews, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1973), p. 3, JL 559/R6/1973, Centre for Newfoundland Studies (CNS), St. John’s, and Terry Bishop, “The Newfoundland Struggle for the Women’s Franchise” (paper submitted to James Hiller, HIST 3120, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 10 December 1981), p. 1, JF848.B58, CNS.

12 Ernest Forbes, “The Ideas of Carol Bacchi and the Suffragists of Halifax: A Review Essay on *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918*,” *Atlantis* 10, no. 2 (1985): 119-26.

the Halifax LCW and one of its most active and long-term reformers Edith Archibald.<sup>13</sup> A couple of decades after Forbes published the latter article, two additional prominent historians of Atlantic Canada, Janet Guildford and Judith Fingard, delved deeper into the Halifax LCW's extensive archives with important contextual biographies published in the 2008 and 2010 issues of the *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* on Edith Jessie Archibald (1854-1936) and the Ritchie sisters – Ella (1844-1928), Mary (1850-1917), and Eliza (1856-1933) – all of whom were suffragists with significant influence on Halifax social and political reform initiatives that were anchored in their membership on the LCW; Guildford also published a commissioned history of the Halifax LCW.<sup>14</sup> While the Halifax LCW, like its national counterpart, did not have an official pro-suffrage policy until 1910, the majority of their members were known to support it; their related long battle to obtain women's eligibility for school trusteeships, as well as their rallying of eligible women to exercise their municipal vote, affirmed their commitment to suffrage.

The best exploration of women's suffrage in New Brunswick is Mary Ellen Clark's 1979 MA thesis on the Saint John Women's Enfranchisement Association (WEA), Atlantic Canada's only long-standing suffrage group. Clark argues that the 112 members of the WEA over its 25-year history (1894-1919) were a "ginger group" of the city's reform movement, whose members promoted women's suffrage based on an equal rights rather than maternalist argument.<sup>15</sup>

The second phase of Atlantic Canadian suffrage historiography has been well-covered in Newfoundland – a possession of Britain's until it became a province of Canada in 1949 – by Margot Duley, who took a combined biographical and institutional approach similar to Forbes, Guildford, Fingard, and Clark albeit in a monograph entitled *Where Once our Mothers Stood We Stand: Women's Suffrage in Newfoundland, 1890-1925*.<sup>16</sup> Duley focuses significantly on the WCTU, the Women's Patriotic Fund, the Women's Reading Room, and the Women's Franchise League, and also includes a long section with fourteen biographies of suffrage activists. Of the nine chapters in Linda Cullum and Marilyn Porter's 2015 collection,

13 Ernest R. Forbes, "Battles in Another War: Edith Archibald and the Halifax Feminist Movement," in *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1989), 67-90.

14 Janet Guildford, "Edith Jessie Archibald: Ardent Feminist and Conservative Reformer," *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 11 (2008): 110-33; Judith Fingard, "The Ritchie Sisters and Social Improvement in Early 20th Century Halifax," *Journal Of The Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 13 (2010): 1-22; Janet Guildford, *The Magnificent Services of Women: The Halifax Local Council of Women, 1894-2002* (Halifax: Halifax Local Council of Women, 2002).

15 Mary Eileen Clarke, "The Saint John Women's Enfranchisement Association, 1894-1919" (MA thesis, history, University of New Brunswick, 1979), 39, 73-4. Elspeth Tulloch was commissioned by the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women to write *We, the Undersigned: A Historical Overview of New Brunswick Women's Political and Legal Status, 1784-1984* (Moncton, NB: New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1985), which is the only overview of any Maritime province; but because it is highly dependent on Clark's thesis, I am highlighting Clark.

16 Margot I. Duley, *Where Once Our Mothers Stood We Stand: Woman's Suffrage in Newfoundland, 1890-1925* (Charlottetown: Genegry Books, 1993).

*Creating This Place: Women, Family, and Class in St. John's, 1900-1950*,<sup>17</sup> two are primarily biographies of Newfoundland suffragists Armine Gosling and Julia Salter Earle. PEI women activists, in contrast, are not represented in this second phase of suffrage historiography except in a three-page article by Beverly Mills Stetson, "Island Women and the Vote," which traces key legislative changes affecting women<sup>18</sup> as well as broader monographs, including those by Douglas Baldwin and Edward MacDonald. Notably, MacDonald maintains that in PEI indifference to suffrage is "hard to deny but easy to exaggerate."<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the two above-mentioned article-length biographies by Guildford and Fingard on prominent Halifax reformers, nine additional biographies have been published in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* on Atlantic Canadian suffragists. Interestingly, four subjects – Edna Sexton (1880-1923), Mary McNab (1854-1939), Anna Leonowens (1831-1915), and Eliza Ritchie (1856-1933) were prominent in the Halifax LCW.<sup>20</sup> Another four subjects were active members of the Saint John WEA: Louisa Thomson (1844-1915), Jennie MacMichael (d. 1902), Mabel Peters (1961-1914), and Emma Fiske (1952-1914).<sup>21</sup> The one Newfoundland subject, Fanny McNeil (1869-1928), about whom Duley also wrote, was a St. John's suffragist. No PEI women associated with suffrage have been included thus far in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (DCB). The five-volume *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland* contains entries on the Ladies' Branch of the Newfoundland Industrial Workers' Union, the Women's Patriotic Association, and the Current Events Club, which all promoted suffrage, as well as biographies on five women suffrage advocates.<sup>22</sup> This solid inclusion of Atlantic Canadian suffragists in the

17 Linda Cullen and Marilyn Porter, eds., *Creating This Place: Women, Family, and Class in St. John's, 1900-1950* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014).

18 Mari Basiletti, Donna Greenwood, and Beverly Mills Stetson, *Changing Times: Essays by Island Women* (Women's Legal Project of PEI, 1977).

19 Edward MacDonald, *If You're Stronghearted: Prince Edward Island in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottetown: Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, 2000), esp. 100.

20 Lois K. Yorke, "Best, Edna May Williston (Sexton)," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 15, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/best\\_edna\\_may\\_williston\\_15E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/best_edna_may_williston_15E.html); Barry Cahill, "Braden, Mary Ellen (Macnab)," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 16, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/braden\\_mary\\_ellen\\_16E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/braden_mary_ellen_16E.html); Lois K. Yorke, "Edwards, Anna Harriette," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/edwards\\_anna\\_harriette\\_14E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/edwards_anna_harriette_14E.html); Judith Fingard, "Ritchie, Eliza," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 16, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/ritchie\\_eliza\\_16E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/ritchie_eliza_16E.html).

21 Sharon Myers, "Donald, Louisa Anne," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/donald\\_louisa\\_anne\\_14E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/donald_louisa_anne_14E.html); Cheryl Krasnick Warsh, "Hutchinson, Jennie Phelan," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 13, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/hutchinson\\_jennie\\_phelan\\_13E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/hutchinson_jennie_phelan_13E.html); Susan E. Markham, "Peters, Mabel Phoebe," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/peters\\_mabel\\_phoebe\\_14E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/peters_mabel_phoebe_14E.html); Janice Cook, "Skinner, Emma Sophia," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/skinner\\_emma\\_sophia\\_14E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/skinner_emma_sophia_14E.html).

22 *Encyclopaedia of Newfoundland*, 5 vols., ed. Joseph Smallwood and Robert D.W. Pitt (St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1981-1994), [http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/compoundobject/collection/cns\\_enl/id/2677/rec/1](http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/compoundobject/collection/cns_enl/id/2677/rec/1). See entries on "Ayer, Agnes Marion (Miller)" (1890-1940); "Earle, Julia Salter" (1878-1945); "Gosling, Armine Nutting" (c.1863-1942); "McNeil, Frances Knowling" (1869-1928); and "Squires, Helena" (1879-1959). Squires was not a suffragist, but was the first woman elected to the colonial government.



*DCB* and *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland*, compared to other sources, suggests historians' preferred approach to Atlantic Canadian suffragism: scour feminist organizations for subjects and build biographies of them or, alternately, become fascinated with a suffrage activist, search for information about her, and end up delving deeply into any organization with good archival records, usually the Halifax LCW, the Saint John WEA, or the St. John's Women's Patriotic Association.

The biographical approach is essential, of course, for reconstructing how individuals make up a collective movement and, more specifically, in underscoring how individual women (and men) in Atlantic Canada, as elsewhere, embarked on unique pathways to suffrage advocacy, just as human rights activists do today. As the published biographies show, some 19th- and early 20th-century suffrage advocates were motivated by their faith, some by social injustice, and some by wishing to prohibit alcohol. One cannot explain the suffrage movement in Atlantic Canada without considering the varied motivations of the individuals involved, the milieus in which they operated, and the degree of opposition they met. We are fortunate to have so many good biographies. The same is true of the histories of such organizations as the Halifax LCW, the Saint John WEA, and the St. John's Women's Patriotic Association: I have read the rich and extensive minute books of the first two groups, and the publication of the WPA – the *Distaff* – and fully agree they are worthy of so much attention.

The historiography of suffrage in Atlantic Canada as well as relevant primary sources show that women's rights activists in Atlantic Canada were much more focused on local than on regional or national reforms, although they were often informed by principles that crossed innumerable geographic boundaries.<sup>23</sup> These women wanted reform in their own communities that would improve their own and their families' daily lives. It was natural to them to focus on municipal and provincial reform and legislation. While women's rights advocates in each Atlantic Canadian province had founded such branches of national or international organizations as the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC), the Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association (DWEA), Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), and Women's Institute (WI), any formal regional, national, or international ties were secondary to local interests according both to the archival records and secondary literature. Certainly this was the case with the Halifax LCW, the Saint John WEA, and the PEI Women's Institute, which gave the final crucial push for suffrage in PEI. In Newfoundland, where "national" ties were to Britain, the building of the Women's Franchise League on the leftover infrastructure of the Women's Patriotic Association requires more nuance in determining the motivations for suffrage advocacy, but was still decidedly local in strategy. That three of these groups – the Halifax LCW, the Saint John WEA, and the PEI Women's Institute – were branches of national organizations might suggest on the surface that Confederation had provided an important structure for women's rights and reform

23 Nancy Forestell, with Maureen Moynagh, make this point, describing suffragists in Canada as "informed" by what feminists were doing elsewhere. See Nancy Forestell, with Maureen Moynagh, eds., *Documenting First Wave Feminisms, Volume II: Canada – National and Transnational Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), xviii.

campaigns, but this does not seem to have been the case. Like the Maritime WCTU, which disbanded in 1895 in favour of three provincial organizations, these suffrage-supporting municipal and provincial branches of national organizations recognized that reforming the provincial franchise required changes to provincial legislation and would therefore be best fought provincially rather than regionally or nationally.<sup>24</sup>

The remainder of this essay will consider briefly the extent to which one women's advocacy group in each Atlantic Canadian province (Halifax LCW, Saint John WEA, PEI Women's Institute, and the Newfoundland Women's Franchise League) was influenced by national and regional structures in their strategies for gaining suffrage. I will argue that, in the Maritimes, alliances and strategies for gaining suffrage were fundamentally local and more likely to be supplemented by informal transnational ties, such as those gained by thousands of Atlantic Canadian women who lived in the United States (or to a lesser extent England or Western Canada) for a time rather than with support and advice from national or even regional organizations. As a British dominion, and with a suffrage campaign that was most intense a few years after those of the Maritimes, Newfoundland was connected to Britain's suffrage campaign and not to those of the Maritimes.<sup>25</sup>

Halifax women founded one of the first local councils of women in 1894 at the invitation of the national and international president, Lady Ishbel Hamilton-Gordon (Aberdeen), who presided at the founding meeting while on an official visit to Halifax with her husband, Sir John Campbell Hamilton-Gordon, the Governor General of Canada from 1893 to 1898. It is likely that the attraction of forming a local council affiliated with the national council was based more on its imperial British ties (through the charismatic and prestigious Aberdeen) than on any desire to join a national, Toronto-based organization. Certainly that is where the allegiances of long-term Halifax LCW president Edith Archibald (whom Aberdeen personally requested serve as founding president) lay.<sup>26</sup> In the late 19th century, Halifax had dozens of denominational and non-denominational men's, women's, and mixed-gender social and moral societies; within three months of that first organizational meeting, 21 societies representing over 600 Halifax women confirmed their formal affiliation with the LCW.<sup>27</sup>

From its earliest days the Halifax LCW was infinitely more interested in local issues than national ones, including women's eligibility as school trustees, the Nova Scotia provincial vote for women, and the Halifax municipal vote. The Halifax council seemed more progressive than the national group, implying its support for suffrage long before the national council did, with their inaugural presidential

24 Joanne Veer, "Feminist Forebears: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in Canada's Maritime Provinces, 1875-1900" (PhD diss., history, University of New Brunswick, 1979), 6-8.

25 My argument is not meant to detract from national or transnational bonds, such as those illuminated by the impressive work of Nancy Forestell and Maureen Moynagh, but to highlight the uniquely local circumstances – especially the opposition – on which Atlantic Canadian suffragists were forced to focus.

26 Thanks to Janet Guildford for making this comment in a conversation in Halifax in March 2016.

27 Halifax LCW, Minute Books, 1894-1933, 30 August 1894, MG20, vol. 535, Nova Scotia Archives (NSA), Halifax.



address affirming women's role in public life: "It is one of the convincing glories of the beneficial reign of her most gracious majesty the queen whom we all love, that largely owing to her influence and example, women have not only proved their capacity for governing great nations, but have shown wonderful capacity for affairs and proved herself to be a true helpmate and co-worker, instead of a servant and plaything of man."<sup>28</sup> Such feminist views were buoyed, of course, by the near implementation of suffrage in Nova Scotia in 1893, when a bill to give Nova Scotia women the vote passed second reading. Although the bill was turned back by the attorney general in committee, many members of the Halifax council as well as the broader population thought the provincial vote for women was imminent.<sup>29</sup>

In the long years it promoted suffrage explicitly or implicitly, the Halifax LCW was dutiful but not enthusiastic in its relationship with the national council. The Halifax council often sent representatives to the annual national council meeting and at least one of their members chaired a national council subcommittee<sup>30</sup>; and the Halifax LCW occasionally used the national organization to add weight to their cause, including by hosting the national meeting in Halifax in 1897 and by asking the national organization in 1896 to join them in sending a petition to amend the dominion law allowing court spectators during a woman's public examination by a judge or lawyer.<sup>31</sup> The LCW, however, did not hesitate to ignore suggestions from the national council, as they did in 1910, for example, when they chose not to accept the national council's recommendation that all local councils put reports of their meetings in the local paper. In that particular case, the Halifax council preferred a more nuanced strategy of reporting select events to the press.<sup>32</sup> Overall, the Halifax council preferred to go about their business without interference or help from the national group.

While the Halifax council did not often seek advice from their national council, it often exploited informal alliances and advice from its members' individual networks. Eliza Ritchie, for example, who had studied and then taught at women's universities in the United States from 1889 to 1899, and Anna Leonowens, who had been the governess to the children of the King of Siam (Thailand) before settling in New York in 1868 and then moving to Halifax in the late 1870s, both made reform recommendations to the Halifax council based on what they had learned while living in New England.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in 1911 the council decided to hold a mock parliament

28 Halifax LCW, Minute Books, 1894-1933, 13 December 1894, MG20, vol. 535, NSA.

29 Forbes, "Battles in Another War," 94. The council also showed their support for suffrage by inviting the local enfranchisement association to affiliate with them in 1895, which they did; see Halifax Local Council, Minute Books, 1894-1933, 28 February 1895, MG20, vol. 535, NSA. As an umbrella groups with between 20 and 40 affiliated members at any given time before the First War the council sought to build the power of collective action, including in mixed Protestant-Catholic membership – unusual for Halifax – to achieve their goals; that negotiation combined with a careful strategy for obtaining local reforms meant that their campaigns were not necessarily very public.

30 Eliza Ritchie was elected as chair of the National Council's subcommittee on Public Health in 1905; see Halifax LCW, Minute Books, 1894-1933, 14 November 1905, MG20, vol. 535, NSA.

31 Halifax LCW, Minute Books, 1894-1933, 13 October 1896, MG20, vol. 535, NSA.

32 Halifax LCW, Minute Books, 1894-1933, 17 November 1910, MG20, vol. 535, NSA.

33 Halifax LCW, Minute Books, 1894-1933, 21 November 1907 (comment from Ritchie) and 27 June 1895 (comment by Leonowens), MG20, vol. 535, NSA.

based on literature offered by a member's friend in British Columbia. Interestingly, after booking the hall and arranging for coaching from a local judge, the LCW decided against holding the mock parliament because a prominent member convinced them that the time was not right – a decision that demonstrated their careful management of the local situation.<sup>34</sup> The Halifax LCW worked tirelessly on reforms both directly and indirectly connected to suffrage and women's rights. While a late-formed suffrage association, the Nova Scotia Equal Franchise League, can be connected to the achievement of suffrage in Nova Scotia in 1917, most of the league's members were longer-term members of the LCW, and it is to the LCW that the sustained, long-term campaign for women's rights is most tied.

The Saint John Women's Enfranchisement Association (WEA) was, like the Halifax LCW, founded in 1894 through an invitation from the national group; in this case it was the Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association's (DWEA) invitation to Saint John reformer Emma Fiske. The Saint John group modelled their constitution on the DWEA's and became a branch of the national group in 1896. Mary Ellen Clark argued that the motivation for founding the WEA was in the specific context of the late 19th-century urban and industrial issues negatively affecting Saint John and the concern that the expanding population "threatened to aggravate the existing problems of public health, clashes between labour and capital, the exploitation of women workers, and provision for those who found penury unavoidable."<sup>35</sup> As an equal rights organization, the WEA engaged in reform campaigns to assist marginal citizens in such areas as improved public sanitation and protection for children.

While the Saint John WEA belonged to the DWEA (and subsequently the Canadian Suffrage Association when the DWEA reconstituted itself in 1906), they never sent a representative to a national meeting of either group. In fact, their minutes reported that the national group "begged" the Saint John branch to send a delegate to their national meeting in Ottawa in 1917, a situation in which the group may have revelled. Clark noted that the group always gave the same excuse for their absence – that it was too expensive to send a delegate – which was odd given that many of the members were quite well to do and that certain leaders of the group, including Emma Fiske and Ella Hathaway, travelled to Europe and the United States "on several occasions."<sup>36</sup> Clark also noted that the Saint John group seemed unaware of the Nova Scotia suffrage movement but relished news of New England suffrage activities, including that received from their member, Frances Dieuade, while she was away in New York, and from Ella Hathaway's daughter, Grace, who met Charlotte Perkins Gillman while studying at Oberlin College. This interest in news from across the border reinforces Joan Sangster's recent argument that many Canadian suffragists acted regionally in preferring transnational affiliations. Sangster used the example of Nellie McClung's speaking tour in the American Midwest and Newfoundland suffragists' ties to Britain.<sup>37</sup> In short, although a branch

34 Halifax LCW, Minute Books, 1894-1933, 16 February 1911, MG20, vol. 535, NSA.

35 Clarke, "Saint John Women's Enfranchisement Association," 10.

36 Clarke, "Saint John Women's Enfranchisement Association," 97-8.

37 Joan Sangster, "Canadian Suffrage at the Crossroads of International Suffrage Movement" (paper presented at History of Women's Social & Political Activism in the Canadian West conference, Edmonton, AB, 26 October 2016).

of a national organization, the Saint John WEA was firmly tied to Saint John reform issues and members believed they had more to learn from suffragists in the United States and Britain than in Canada or even in neighboring provinces.<sup>38</sup>

A combination of stereotypes and lack of preserved documentation has led to a poor understanding of the suffrage campaign and of feminism in PEI more generally; but given that improvements in women's rights legislation were achieved within the same timeline as the majority of other provinces in the late 19th century – including obtaining the municipal vote, for example – and that suffrage was achieved within a decade of the earliest Canadian province, we can determine that PEI women did engage in suffrage activism over a significant period of time. John Howard Bell, the premier under whom suffrage was finally attained, had advocated for it since the 1890s and made it a promise of his 1919 election campaign. Once Bell was elected, however, legislation was slow to be implemented. While the Women's Liberal Association is usually given the most credit for successful suffrage advocacy on PEI, I would argue that they were in an awkward position to publicly criticize the government once the Liberals were in power in 1919 with their supposedly pro-suffrage premier. Rather, it was the Women's Institute on the Island that gave the most effective and timely push for suffrage.

In 1922, three years into Premier Bell's term and with no sign of the implementation of suffrage, a report from the provincial WI convention recounted that a suffrage petition had been circulated among the province's 61 active institutes' 1,300 members. The president of the WI justified this political advocacy as tied to their motto: "Our motto – 'For Home and Country' allows us a large field and a great scope for our work and I am sure [the work] upon which we have entered will be productive with great results and far-reaching benefits in our Province."<sup>39</sup> The endorsement of a primarily rural organization committed to the "motherhood" issues of agricultural and school improvement, with branches spread through every electoral district on the Island, required the government to respond to the request for suffrage. The dozens of Women's Institute branches each held monthly meetings and most of the reports of their various contributions to improving local schools were published in the Charlottetown *Guardian*. In fact, a 1921 *Guardian* editorial endorsed the institutes: "Wherever a women's institute has been organized, its influence for good is to be seen in the school, in the social life, and in the farm home. Through their efforts, many schools have been made brighter, healthier, and in every way more helpful; social conditions have been improved and the standard of living for both men and women have been perceptibly elevated."<sup>40</sup>

Advocacy for suffrage in PEI must have been brewing a long time locally in ways that are yet to be understood for there to have been such a response to the WI's 1921 and 1922 petitions. It seems safe to conclude that, in the case of PEI, Confederation did have a significant impact on the province's suffrage advocacy because it was

38 The Saint John LCW, on the other hand, seemed more connected to their central organization, with one of their members, Mrs. Robert Thompson, serving as president of the National Council of Women from 1899 to 1902. The Saint John LCW was so uninterested in the suffrage campaign that the Saint John WEA temporarily withdrew their affiliation with them in 1902.

39 Charlottetown *Guardian*, 5 July 1922.

40 Charlottetown *Guardian*, 19 July 1921.

with \$3,000 from a \$26,000 federal grant related to the House of Commons Agricultural Instruction Act that the WI was established in PEI. While other provinces allotted similar funding to their WIs, it seems that in PEI the WIs were more crucial to suffrage, perhaps because of the small size of the province, the overwhelmingly rural population, and the lack of a Local Council of Women.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the timing of the rising popularity of the WI in the 1920s, after all provinces but Quebec and PEI had achieved suffrage by 1919, meant suffrage was far less of an issue within other provincial WIs. The federal agricultural grant paid a PEI coordinator to recruit for the WIs and soon the province gave each WI branch \$5 annually from provincial coffers as well. The institutes flourished and grew from 43 branches in 1917 to more than 60 branches with 4,000 members by the 1930s, which seems to have exceeded the neighbouring provinces on a per capita basis.<sup>42</sup>

By the early 1920s the WIs had earned a great deal of respect for doing reform work that local councils and other reform groups did in other provinces, including in education and public health – the latter sorely needed with PEI's rates of tuberculosis higher than in any other province at the time and with little government commitment to the issue.<sup>43</sup> Finally, in May 1922, the Island legislature addressed women's suffrage. The short debate at the end of the session and at the end of the Liberals' third year in power stressed the dual arguments of rewarding women for their war work with the vote and "keeping up with the progressive spirit of the age."<sup>44</sup> The bill easily passed its first reading 28 to 2. While the WI has not been acknowledged as instrumental in the suffrage movement, the timely endorsement of this woman's agricultural and school improvement group representing every corner of the small province in 1921-1922 had to have been influential to the almost concurrent granting in May 1922 of the vote to non-Indigenous PEI women who were 21 years of age or older.

After the WCTU's success appealing to Newfoundland legislators with suffrage petitions in the early 1890s, two failed suffrage debates in 1893 and 1894 (13-10 and 17-14) in the House of Assembly were devastating to the suffrage movement. One of the few bright spots was the founding of the Ladies Reading Room in 1909 by Armine Gosling and nine other St. John's women. The founding of the club, which attracted 125 memberships in its first few months, also corresponded with increased suffrage agitation in England. The pro-suffrage speeches given at the Ladies Reading Room by Gosling and others depended on arguments for suffrage made in England rather than locally, and garnered significant press according to Margot Duley.<sup>45</sup> The suffrage movement struggled to gain traction in St. John's or in the rest of Newfoundland, however, until the First World War. And even after the war, when

41 Charlottetown did have a Local Council of Women at the turn of the century, but it did not last long. See Naomi Griffiths, *The Splendid Vision: Centennial History of the National Council of Women of Canada, 1893-1993* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993), 101.

42 George Doughart, *Recognizing, Reflecting, Responding: A History of the Federation of Women's Institutes of PEI, 1913-2013* (Charlottetown: Federated Women's Institutes of Prince Edward Island, 2013), xiv.

43 Douglas Baldwin, "Amy Macmahon and the Struggle for Public Health," *Island Magazine* 34 (September 1993): 20-7.

44 Charlottetown *Guardian*, 3 May 1922.

45 Duley, *Where Once Our Mothers Stood We Stand*, 55.

the suffrage campaign was in full swing and had built a good base of support around the dominion, a rabidly anti-suffrage prime minister, Richard Squires, who owned the *Daily Star*, proved an unsurmountable obstacle while in office from 1919 to 1923.<sup>46</sup> Squires threatened to take government appointments away from men whose wives participated in the suffrage movement, alleging “a man who cannot keep order in his own home is unlikely to be fit to hold a position of public trust.”<sup>47</sup>

Margot Duley highlights Newfoundland women’s awareness that the war could help them achieve the vote. Newfoundland women made an extraordinary contribution to the First World War, most of it through the 208 branches of the Women’s Patriotic Association (WPA); the association collectively raised half a million dollars and provided “comforts” such as socks and shirts, which were chronicled in newspapers (including the *Distaff*, the official publication of the WPA) and even inspired art and poetry during the war. At the conclusion of the war, numerous women from both urban and outport communities were recognized with civilian imperial honours.<sup>48</sup>

The scope of the WPA’s activities in virtually every Newfoundland community provided, according to Duley, “a ready-made network” for the reinvigorated Newfoundland women’s suffrage movement in 1920. The synergy of this vast network, and support from the British Dominion Women Suffrage Union (which merged with the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance [IWSA] in 1921), seemed to put the Newfoundland suffrage movement on a track to inevitable, although not immediate, success. The IWSA not only sent speakers to Newfoundland, including Kate Trounson, who addressed six meetings in 1922, but also sent financial support and even lobbied Newfoundland Prime Minister Squires when he resided at a London hotel. A petition to the legislature in 1921 ultimately had 20,000 signatures. By 1924, Newfoundland and South Africa remained the only British dominions where women still did not have the vote.<sup>49</sup> The new government, led by W.S. Monroe, responded to this strong call for suffrage with a bill nine months after their 1924 election, although, in keeping with British legislation, only women aged 25 and over could vote in contrast to the required age of 21 for men.<sup>50</sup>

Of the four Atlantic provinces, opposition to suffrage was the strongest, most sustained, and most acknowledged in Newfoundland. A play written by Lillian Bouzane for the 10th anniversary of the Newfoundland Status of Women Council in 1982, “The Triumphs and Tribulations of the Early Suffragettes and others, or Go Home and Bake Bread,” reanimated, among other incidents, the 1893 criticism in the *Evening Telegram*: “We have no word of sympathy or encouragement for those ladies who would voluntarily unsex themselves, and, for the sake of obtaining a little

46 Margot I. Duley, “Armine Nutting Gosling: A Full and Useful Life,” in Cullen and Porter, *Creating This Place*, 124-8.

47 Lillian Bouzane et al., “The Triumphs and Tribulations of the Early Suffragettes and others, or Go Home and Bake Bread,” 1982, HQ1459.N4.T65, CNS.

48 Duley, *Where Once Our Mothers Stood*, 30, 62, 74.

49 Duley, *Where Once Our Mothers Stood*, 58, 55, 77, 94.

50 Newfoundland House of Assembly Amendment Act, c. 3, Consolidated Statutes of Newfoundland, Section 1, 1925, quoted in Janice O’Brien, “Women’s Suffrage in Newfoundland” (paper submitted to Linda Kealy, HIST 3813, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 7 April 1982), JF848 .O23 1982, CNS.



temporary notoriety, plunge into the troubled waters of party politics.”<sup>51</sup> The Women's Franchise Association's ultimately successful strategy of building on WPA networks and leveraging public appreciation of the value of the women's support for Newfoundland soldiers proved unassailable, at least once Squires was out of office. In some ways comparable to the endorsement of the Women's Institute in PEI, another group whose founding values were dear to a wide swath of Islanders, the war work of Newfoundland women provided a demonstration of women's commitment to the betterment of society that justified their participation in public life through the franchise. While Newfoundland women's commitment was focussed on local soldiers, by marking their solidarity with what was considered at the time a “just war” their work had even greater value.

From these few highlights of the Maritime and Newfoundland suffrage movements, it should be obvious that, as we approach the anniversaries of suffrage in Nova Scotia (26 April 1918), New Brunswick (17 April 1919), Prince Edward Island (3 May 1922), and Newfoundland (13 April 1925), publications on early women's activism remain fragmented and many questions remain. Excluding the largely discredited analyses of Cleverdon and Bacchi, and with the exception of Margot Duley's book on suffrage in Newfoundland, the study of suffrage in Atlantic Canada has been largely limited to biographies of the leaders and studies of well-known groups such as the Halifax LCW, the Saint John Women's Enfranchisement Association, and the Women's Institute provincially. And this is not a coincidence.

The most effective strategies for obtaining women's suffrage in Atlantic Canada focussed on persuading provincial politicians, the male constituents who voted for them, and the friends and family who held influence over those male voters. We see from the examples of the Halifax LCW, the Saint John WEA, the PEI WI, and the St. John's Women's Franchise Association that their strategies were local, rarely crossing provincial boundaries. Therefore, Confederation seems to have had little impact on the Maritimes' early women's rights' campaigns and none on Newfoundland. In fact, one wonders if the Newfoundland suffrage movement, which faced the most opposition, might have achieved suffrage earlier by avoiding assistance from the British Suffrage Association and presenting an entirely locally focused campaign.

The question of how Confederation affected the women's movements in Atlantic Canada is addressed here quite literally. I have separated the strategy of Atlantic Canada suffragists from the broader national and transnational influences that informed and motivated them individually as they travelled and studied (especially in the US and Britain), corresponded with family and friends in other parts of Canada and further afield, or read the national and international press. My conclusions to some extent accentuate what Forestell and Moynagh refer to as the “distinctiveness of feminist social movements within different . . . sub-national spheres.”<sup>52</sup> While many Atlantic Canada suffragists show evidence of transnational women's suffrage campaigns and theories,<sup>53</sup> they strategized locally. Even within

51 Bouzane et al., “Triumphs and Tribulations of the Early Suffragettes.”

52 Forestell and Moynagh, *Documenting First Wave Feminisms*, xvii.

53 There is much research that could be done on this and is starting to be done, again, though biographies such as Gretchen Wilson's *With All Her Might: The Life of Gertrude Harding*,



branches of national organizations such as the National Council of Women and the Dominion Women Enfranchisement Association, Maritime suffragists did not hesitate to ignore the advice of their national counterparts in favour of local nuances and needs. When they did take advice – as we learn from published biographies and the extant minutes of suffrage and suffrage-related societies – they preferred to turn to suffragists and suffragettes in countries with established and larger-scale suffrage campaigns, particularly the United States and Britain, whose headlines they were also more likely to read in their local papers than reports on Canadian suffrage activities.

There is no doubt that Atlantic Canada had a long, hard-fought suffrage campaign, but it does not seem that Confederation had any significant influence on it. Moreover, regional ties are no more visible. The best example of a regional women's reform organization, the Maritime WCTU, is also the best example of why a regional organization did not work. The Maritime WCTU disbanded in 1895, after 12 years in existence, and at the insistence of Edith Archibald, who argued that it would be easier to recruit women to a more local and accessible group than a regional one.<sup>54</sup> With their goal to change provincial voting legislation, Maritime women never bothered to form a regional suffrage association or even to keep in formal contact with neighbouring provincial suffrage groups; instead, they focussed on overcoming the local opposition that separated them from the provincial franchise.

HEIDI MACDONALD

*Militant Suffragette* (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 2015), which chronicles the life of the rural New Brunswick woman who became Cristabel Pankhurst's personal secretary.

54 Veer, "Feminist Forebears," 6-8.