

# Toronto Women's Literary Club: 1876



Dr. Emily Howard Stowe, founder of the Toronto Women's Literary Club  
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<http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/women/h12-207-c.htm>

In 1876, a group of women encouraged by Canada's first medical doctor, Dr. Emily Howard Stowe, gathered together as the Toronto Women's Literary Club to discuss issues important to women and families. The Literary Club quickly decided that women needed political status if they were to create a more just and humane society. At its first meeting the group discussed gaining women's right to vote and, as such, became the first Canadian women's suffrage society. While the organization lobbied for important changes to education and social policy, particularly those effecting women, it took more than forty years for women to gain the right to vote. The patient and persistent work of these women did not create rapid and revolutionary change. It did, however, help to keep women's issues before the public, paving the way for future reforms.

## *Overview of the decade: 1875-1884*

### **Economic developments**

The decade between 1875-1884 was marked by expansion of manufacturing, transportation, population and urbanization. Although another international recession limited the growth in these areas, in 1879 the Canadian government added tariff protection to help Canadian manufacturers (the government added a tax to all manufactured goods coming into Canada, so that prices would not compete with local goods). During the 1880s urban populations increased because of growing manufacturing jobs and immigration. Montreal gradually gained back its Francophone population as poor and landless habitants poured into the cities in search of employment. Cities in Ontario, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia saw a similar increase in their urban populations. During this decade, the Maritimes moved away from shipbuilding, and expanded manufacturing to include cotton mills, glass, steel and coal. By the 1890s, competition from Ontario had already shut some of these down.

Farmers continued to be an important part of the Canadian economy. While the government tried to convince Canadians that the National Policy (establishing protective trade tariffs, encouraging immigration and building a national railroad) would benefit everyone, farmers had their doubts. New settlers taking up lands in the west were frustrated by the tariffs placed on lower priced goods produced in the United States or Britain since this increased the amount farmers had to pay for farm machinery, tools and household furnishings. Yet, the wheat and other farm goods they created had to be sold in free international markets, at whatever price they could obtain.

The beginning of the transcontinental railroad (completed in 1886) greatly stimulated Canadian industry and technological changes expanded beyond the steam technologies. Experiments were already being conducted with electricity by mid-century, and electricity was available in cities like Vancouver and Toronto by the 1880s. In 1874, Alexander Graham Bell invented the first telephone in his Nova Scotia workshop. Telegraph lines were laid along with railway lines in the 1880s, making instant communication possible across the country. With faster transportation and communication, time differences between regions of the country and, indeed the world, became a matter of concern. A Canadian, Stanford Fleming, invented a global system of telling time that involved time zones, and his system (which we still use today) was first put forward at an international conference in Washington in 1884.

### **Social developments**

Although living conditions in Canadian cities had been improving since the introduction of sewers, street lighting and running water in the late 1840s, poverty, disease and crime also grew with urban populations during these years. By the 1880s, government and reform organizations were actively fighting these problems through schools, hospitals and prisons. Long before government agencies concerned themselves with poverty, disease and sanitation, women were working together to help less fortunate members within their communities. Women volunteers were attacking the problems created by urban and industrial growth and also working for pay as nurses and, in a few cases, doctors and lawyers. The same years witnessed a growth in professional careers for men as doctors, lawyers, engineers and professional accountants. Work was becoming more specialized, and the modern expert was beginning to appear.

### **Political developments**

The National Policy adopted by the Macdonald government involved three elements: a tariff on foreign goods to protect Canadian manufacturers and stimulate business; a program to bring hundreds of thousands of immigrants to settle the Canadian west, and the building of a transcontinental railroad. By 1885, this policy was beginning to change the face of Canada. Manufacturing increased, cities expanded, and new settlers began to flow into the west from Eastern Europe as well as from Britain, travelling to the Prairie provinces and as far west as British Columbia once the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1886.

Most landowning Canadian male citizens had the right to vote in federal, provincial and municipal elections by the 1880s, but the system was far from democratic. Aboriginal peoples and people of Asian origin were unable to vote. The largest disenfranchised group (unable to vote), however, was women. The 1870s brought the first awareness of the Woman Question as a movement for political, social and moral change. Some argued that women should have the vote because they were free individuals just like men. A more vocal group argued that women should have the vote because they were *not* like men. Instead, they argued, women had a special responsibility to be 'mothers of the race', working outside their homes to guide and educate a nation just as they worked inside their homes to educate and guide their families. The vote, these reformers argued, should be given to women to extend their influence from the immediate family to the larger world. Although the federal vote for women was not gained until the second decade of the 20th century, the call for this reform began in the 1870s, and it was the Toronto Women's Literary Society that first voiced the need for women to have the vote.

## 1876: Toronto Women's Literary Society

### Background

Women's political activism had its roots in increased participation in a series of voluntary organizations, both religious and non-religious. Women's religious organizations found, however, that their objectives were not always accepted by the male leadership of the church. In 1870 in Canso, Nova Scotia, for example, Baptist women formed a separate missionary society for women, as women were denied overseas missionary work within the regular male missionary society. This group started their own association, and raised money to send 32 female missionaries in Burma. As they had in church-based Women's Auxiliaries, women raised considerable amounts of money, used to fund their activities all over the world. Their educational and medical work benefited thousands. Their international activities provided health care services to the poor and medical training to doctors. The work of these women was invaluable particularly where religious customs did not allow male doctors to examine female patients.



Women at a Conference of Lutheran Churches of Western Icelanders, Winnipeg, 1891  
(Western Canada Pictorial Index, 96-2978)

While women's inspiration might have come from religious sources, the leadership and skills they developed encouraged women of the middle classes to create large and influential organizations independent of men. A steady stream of women's groups emerged in the 1880s and 1890s. The Women's Christian Temperance Union, whose first Canadian branch was founded in Ontario in 1874, was another influential and large scale women's organization. It was directed at saving souls but also in improving the social conditions to raise their families. According to this group both goals—spiritual and economic—were to be accomplished by drastically reducing the amount of alcohol that was consumed. Excessive drinking, they argued, was responsible for much violence, poverty, illness and premature death, and these effects were felt most directly by the wives and children of drinkers. By 1891, there were 9,000 members of WCTU locals in Canada. By the 1890s, WCTU members were coming to believe that the root of women's powerlessness could be found not just in alcohol, but in their lack of political power to make social changes. In the 1890s, the WCTU became actively involved in the women's suffrage movement (the movement to gain the right to vote).

Other women, however, were less concerned to improve the conditions of other peoples than they were with the absence of women's own civil rights. Women lobbied governments for the right to own property and run businesses in their own name. These efforts led to passage of Women's Property Acts across Canada in the 1850s. These laws gave women some property rights. They could hold legal title to their property, and while they did not gain the right to sell their property, at least they could stop their husbands from doing so. By the end of the century, women were also granted legal rights to their own earnings. Other women, including a number of Black women activists like Mary Ann Shadd, were involved in Canadian branches of the abolitionist movement (the movement to abolish or do away with slavery). Since the mid-19th century, they had begun to see the inconsistency in fighting for rights on the basis of race and not on the basis of gender.

## The Toronto Women's Literary Club

In 1876, the first organization explicitly devoted to women's rights was formed with The Toronto Women's Literary Club first meeting. The group's leader, Dr. Emily Howard Stowe, had fought hard to get into medical school, and to practice as a doctor, and was sensitive to the problems that women encountered in universities and the professions. The Toronto Women's Literary Club, who chose the unassuming name for their organization in order to avoid public or personal controversy about their activities, discussed many issues related to women's educational, political, economic and social status. They quickly decided that these issues could not be properly addressed until women gained political voice, and so they focused on women's suffrage as their first goal. In 1883, the organization was cheered by the fact that Ontario women—provided they were not married and owned enough property—were granted the right to vote in municipal elections. The group changed its name to Canadian Women's Suffrage Association after declaring that its purpose was to foster support for women's suffrage. It was to be a long and difficult fight, not completed for more than forty years, but marked by a very gradual recognition of women's rights as individuals.

The public education role taken on by the Canadian Women's Suffrage Association resulted in a number of changes. Women were admitted to the University of Toronto in 1884, and medical colleges for women were set up in both Toronto and Kingston in 1883. In 1892, the first woman was admitted to law school. These changes did not give women an equal education, however, and women continued to be educated apart from men, following a separate curriculum based on what many saw as women's more delicate nature and limited intellectual powers. Women who tried to gain a university education or to enter professions like medicine or law were treated with hostility. In the 1890s, the Canadian Women's Suffrage Association changed its name once again, this time to The Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association. They sponsored a suffrage bill in 1890, and lost. The most direct and successful accomplishment of the organization, under its various names, was increased acceptance of women in universities and professional organizations.

## Effects and influences of the Club

The Toronto Women's Literary Society brought the issue of women's rights and social responsibilities into the limelight, but stimulated few immediate changes for women throughout Canada. Despite their hard work, admirable goals, and attempts to build support across the country, the organization remained narrowly based geographically for more than fifteen years. The geographical focus expanded when, in 1893, the organization became the National Council of Women. By developing Local Councils of women in communities across the country, the fight for women's suffrage finally became a national issue. The Local Councils of Women supported the fight for women's vote, but also focused on such diverse issues as safe water, pasteurized milk and the rescue of prostitutes, adequate sewage facilities, education for mothers, public hygiene, daycare and medical inspection of school children.

Although some women were granted the municipal vote in the late 19th century, provided they owned property and were not married, it was not until 1916 that the original goals of the 1876 Toronto Women's Literary Club were finally obtained after a long and vigorous campaign. Prairie women were granted the vote in 1916, British Columbia and Ontario women in 1917, Nova Scotia women in 1918, New Brunswick women in 1919, Prince Edward Island women in 1922, and Newfoundland women in 1925. Quebec women did not get the vote until the early 1940s. On the national scene, the Federal Military Voters Act of 1917 gave the vote to women who had worked as nurses. Later in the year, the Wartime Elections Act gave the vote to wives, widows, mothers, sisters and daughters of those who had served in the military or naval forces of the war. Only in 1918 did the Women's Franchise Act give the federal vote to women over 21 who were British subjects.

The Toronto Women's Literary Club eventually merged into The National Council of Women, an organization that was firmly behind the belief that women should get the vote in order to make their role as mothers of the race more effective. Not equality with men, but the right to fulfill their motherly role to the world was the rallying cry that encouraged many women to support the campaign. The valuable work, in areas of social reform and public health that these middle class volunteer women performed should not be trivialized. Indeed, the work of this organization set the standard for social work and social reform that lasted well into the 20th century, when social work became a legitimate—and paid—profession. There is evidence, however, that the ideal of gender equality—women's right to compete with men in any profession or occupation—was overlooked in the course of the long battle. Middle class women, particularly those of British origin gained a new respect and a new role in society, but women of different races, particularly recent immigrants and poor women, were often excluded from discussions of increased rights for women.

The increasingly conservative nature of the organization can be seen in the racist policies of supporters of the women's movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It shared with mainstream Canadian society a number of racist goals and values. Many advocates of women's suffrage, including popular journalist Emily Murphy, used the supposed inferiority of other races to argue for the superiority of their Anglo-Saxon female vote. Aboriginal women and Asian women, in particular, were never mentioned as those for whom the fight for suffrage would apply. Although there is no official record of Native women ever voting, they officially lost their right to vote in 1869, when their fathers and husbands did. Both Aboriginal and Asian men had lost the right to vote by the end of the 19th century. Many middle class and white women believed that it was precisely their race and class that made them worthy of the vote, a belief that has been painful for feminists who championed the rights of all women to have the vote, regardless of race or class. Quebec women had been able to vote until the early 19th century, when they were taken away by law. An association of legal rights with Anglo forms of government, and an increasingly conservative political environment made Quebec women the last in Canada to obtain the vote in 1942.



National Council of Women, with Lady Aberdeen  
(National Archives of Canada, PA-28033)

<http://www.nelson.com/nelson/school/discovery/images/evenimag/18671900/national.gif>

Despite the moves towards democracy and equality, 19th century Canada remained a hierarchical society where certain groups were assumed inferior to others. The view that women were subordinate to men seemed the normal and natural basis of a functioning society. At a time when urbanization and industrialization led to unrest and crime, many Canadians wanted to maintain order. The home seemed to provide a secure defence and women's subordinate role provided stability in a rapidly changing world. Women's increasingly active role in addressing the problems of poverty, disease and unemployment, slowly convinced opponents that greater political power for women would help maintain the social order, not disrupt it. It was women's wholehearted support for the war effort that broke the stalemate finally convincing the Canadian people that women could be safely relied on to support the conservative goals of the majority.