

Nellie McClung and the Quest for Women Empowerment



Author's rendition of Nellie McClung

Who are we, the women? They said women could not do what the men could, that we were neither as smart nor as strong as men. They even denied us the “person” status. The roots of gender discrimination date back to time ab initio – the Aristotelean portrayal of women as inferiors in his book *Politics* is a case in point. Nellie McClung stood up against this prejudiced view. She acted based on the principles of equality that she believed in and helped redefine the role of women in the world. As an author, teacher, thespian, orator, reformer, legislator and suffragist extraordinaire, Nellie McClung’s work continues to shape our lives to this day.

Nellie Letitia Mooney was born in Chatsworth, Ontario on October 20, 1873. Offspring of an Irish father and a Scottish mother in a household of six children, she moved to Manitoba in 1880. She started teaching at the Hazel School near Manitou at the tender age of sixteen. Those were the formative years of Nellie the author and the activist. The socio-political canvas of Manitoba, and Canada in general, was in flux. This provided fertile ground for change and Nellie was drawn to a number of burgeoning social ideals. Marriage and child rearing were considered the primary functions of women during her time. Nellie did not shy away from these responsibilities. She married Wesley McClung at the age of 23 and went on to raise five children. Her family moved to Winnipeg in 1911 where Nellie joined the Women’s Christian Temperance Union to help counter the problems stemming from alcohol abuse. This was a glimpse of the feats to follow.

Her social and political engagement continued unabated as she became an ardent advocate of the women’s suffrage movement. Nellie was a founding member of the Political Equality League, a group eulogized for its contributions to women gaining the vote. Nellie’s charisma made her the perfect torchbearer of the League. On January 27, 1914, the Manitoba Legislature denied

the League's appeal for equal political rights for women. The day after would go down in history books. Nellie and other members of the League staged a play in the Walker Theatre in Winnipeg, featuring a hypothetical women-only parliament to ridicule the chauvinistic arguments made against women's voting rights. In the play, Nellie caricatured the Premier of Manitoba with aplomb. The play's success marked a paradigm shift in the suffrage debate. Resultantly, on 28th January 1916, Manitoba became the first Canadian province to grant the vote to women. This triggered a chain reaction with Saskatchewan and Alberta following suit shortly.

Nellie had moved to Edmonton, Alberta, by then, her penchant for securing basic liberties and social justice as unquenched as ever. The First World War, though a grave tragedy, afforded an opportunity for women to play an enhanced role in Alberta politics and economy. Nellie wanted women to capitalize on it. She lobbied for mothers' allowance, women's property rights and divorce law reforms. In 1921, Nellie was elected to Alberta's Legislative Assembly. She moved to Calgary in 1923 and focussed more on her writing career. She was already an accomplished novelist with her first, *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, becoming a bestseller in 1908. She went on to write eight more works of fiction and seven works of non-fiction. In addition, she wrote for many newspapers and magazines such as *Chatelaine*, *Canadian Home Journal* and *Maclean's*. Her writings drew heavily on her life experiences with topics such as marriage, rural life, suffrage, temperance and women's rights taking centre stage. At the same time, her activism did not wane until her passing on September 1, 1951. She campaigned for aboriginal and Asian women's rights, the Japanese Canadians' right to vote, to open immigration from Europe during World War II and equal wages for women. Most of these were sensitive issues that people used to avoid at the time.

Perhaps, the biggest feather in Nellie's cap is winning the famous "Persons Case" as part of the fabled Famous Five. Section 24 of the British North America Act of 1867 stated that only "properly qualified persons" could hold office at the Senate. Until 1927, this had been used as a pretext to keep women out of Canadian politics. Nellie together with four other Albertan women of vision, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Louise McKinney, Emily Murphy and Irene Parlby, petitioned the Supreme Court of Canada to interpret the phrase "qualified persons". Eventually, in 1929, the Privy Council, who had the final authority on the matter, ruled in favour of including women in the definition of "persons". Being considered a person is taken for granted nowadays. I find it hard to imagine how it would feel if we had to fight for it like a privilege today!

The quest for women empowerment has come a long way since the time of Nellie McClung. Yet, the journey is far from over. In the present day, women still frequently encounter adversity, sexism and exploitation. The Me Too Movement as a contemporary retaliation against sexual harassment. Conceived and first used by the feminist Tarana Burke in 2006, the #MeToo hashtag was brought back to the fore by Alyssa Milano and went viral on social media in October 2017. The movement has encouraged victims of sexual harassment to break the silence and bring the perpetrators to justice. This shows that the world, more than ever, needs the likes of Nellie McClung to break the taboos that continue to haunt women.

It is equally important to challenge the prevalent gender stereotypes, and Nellie McClung has inspired me to take the lead on this. Clichés like women not being good at mathematics and science have resulted in underrepresentation of women in STEM. Time and again, I have proven these notions to be misplaced. In 2017, I was part of a girls-only team that won the best concept prize in the Southern Alberta First Lego League robotics competition. I even wrote about this success and won an essay competition. Last month, I turned heads by excelling in a chess tournament at school and will write the Gauss Exam, an international math contest, next month. Currently, I am preparing to compete in a blockchain and artificial intelligence hackathon. Just as Nellie broke ground for women in areas they were “not supposed to be in”, I aim to pave the way for women in new age technologies like robotics, blockchain and AI.

But tech is not what I am all about. Nellie wore many different hats in life, and I aspire to be just as multifaceted. I am passionate about art, literature and journalism as media for the betterment of society. Last year, I floated the idea of launching the school newsletter in the leadership option class. A student-run publication was a new concept at our school. But I organized a group of like-minded students and we published the inaugural newsletter issue featuring school news, student contributions and illustrations. Presently, I am co-editing the school yearbook and designing fundraiser cards for the next academic year. This provides ample evidence of my leadership potential and fills me with the hope of treading the footsteps of Alberta champions like Nellie McClung.

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