

Women Activists



Ishbel Maria Gordon, Lady Aberdeen (1857 – 1939)

Ishbel Maria Gordon was born in London, England in 1857. She moved to Scotland when she married the Earl of Aberdeen in 1877 and became Lady Aberdeen. Lady Aberdeen was an aristocrat with a strong social conscience. She became a powerful advocate for the occupational, social, and political rights of women.

While in Scotland, she initiated and supported numerous societies and organisations to benefit women. In 1883, she started the **Aberdeen Ladies' Union**. This group helped working girls by providing educational and recreational facilities.

Lady Aberdeen moved with her husband to Canada where he served as governor general from 1893 – 1898. Shortly after arriving in Canada, she discovered how badly women were treated in the factories and wanted to do something about it. She was not someone who would let women's limited role in society limit her actions. She believed that women could help civilize the untamed country of Canada if they were allowed to play a larger role.

Lady Aberdeen used her position as the governor general's wife to be a positive force for change. She was a poised, well-spoken woman with boundless energy. In 1893, she helped to form the **NCWC** and served as its first president. Even though there was strong opposition from the medical establishment, she helped to establish the **Victorian Order of Nurses (VON)** in 1897. VON was a group of public health nurses who went out into the community to assist people in their homes. She also supported universal suffrage and was president for some years of the **International Council of Women**.

Lord and Lady Aberdeen retired to Scotland where she continued to work on behalf of social injustices. Her determination and lifelong commitment to women's issues were very instrumental in making life better for women.

FAST FACT

Queen's University recognized Lady Aberdeen's accomplishments by giving her the first honorary degree ever granted to a woman in Canada.

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Emily Murphy (1868 – 1933)

Emily Ferguson Murphy was born into a prominent family in Ontario. Her father was a wealthy businessman and landowner who believed his children should be well educated. Murphy went to a private school in Ontario and was raised to have a liberal outlook on life.

After she got married in 1887, she moved with her husband, an Anglican priest, to Manitoba. They later moved to the Edmonton area. Murphy was a mother who combined raising her family with fighting for the rights of women and children. She was an activist, reformer, and author of several popular books using the pen name Janey Canuck.

Murphy taught herself the law and became a legal expert. She was very interested in changing the laws to benefit women. In 1911, Murphy organized a campaign to put pressure on the Alberta legislature to pass the **Dower Act**. This Act protected a wife's right to a one-third share in her husband's property.

Murphy was an important member of the women's suffrage movement. She also played an active role in many professional and volunteer organizations, including the **Canadian Women's Press Club**, the **NCWC**, and the **Federated Women's Institutes of Canada**.

In 1916, she became the first female magistrate in Canada and the British Empire. While in office, she helped to repeal discriminatory legislation against women. Her first day on the bench, a lawyer challenged her saying she could not be a magistrate since a woman was not considered a legal "person" in the eyes of the law. But she refused to step down from her position.

Murphy started a long-term campaign with four other Alberta women: **Henrietta Edwards**, **Louise McKinney**, **Nellie McClung** and **Irene Parlby**. They campaigned to have women declared "legal persons" eligible to serve in the government. These women were known as "**The Famous Five**." In 1927, the women introduced the "**Persons Case**", stating that women could be "qualified persons" able to sit in the Senate. The Supreme Court of Canada rejected the case. In 1929, the British Privy Council finally ruled that women were "persons" and could serve in public office.



Statues of the Famous Five

Although Murphy never had a chance to serve in the Senate, she helped make it a possibility for future generations of women.

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Adelaide Hoodless (1857 – 1910)

Adelaide Hunter Hoodless was born on an isolated farm in Canada West (now Ontario). She was the youngest of 13 children. Her father died shortly after she was born, leaving her mother to care for the children and run the farm on her own. While attending “Ladies College”, she met John Hoodless, a wealthy furniture manufacturer who became her husband. She went from being a hard-working farm girl to being a Victorian lady with servants to help her tend to her beautiful home.

Hoodless was propelled into public life when her fourth child died from drinking non-pasteurized milk. She was devastated and blamed her lack of knowledge for his death. She launched a campaign to better educate girls with classes in domestic science (home economics). She wanted new mothers to be better able to safeguard their families.

As president of the **Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA)** in Hamilton Ontario, Hoodless promoted her passion for domestic science education and taught classes. She worked with Lady Aberdeen to establish the **NCWC** and **VON**. She founded the **Women’s Institute (WI)** and opened its first chapter in Stoney Creek, Ontario in 1897. She died in 1910 having received national recognition for her contributions to improving public health.

Nellie McClung (1868 – 1951)

Nellie McClung was a women’s rights activist, author, lecturer, and politician as well as being a wife and mother of five children. She was born in Ontario and had only had six years of formal education. She didn’t learn to read until she was ten. McClung and her husband moved to Winnipeg to raise their family. She played an active leading role in the social and moral reform movements happening in Western Canada in the early 1900s.



McClung was a strong supporter of the **Woman’s Christian Temperance Union**. As a dynamic and witty public speaker, she lectured frequently on temperance and women’s suffrage. She was also one of the “**Famous Five**” who initiated the **Persons Case**.

McClung helped organize the **Winnipeg Political Equality League**, a group devoted to helping working women. She served as a member of the Alberta Legislature from 1921 to 1926. She is remembered as a key figure in the movement to gain fair treatment for women. Until her death in 1951, McClung continued to be a passionate crusader for women’s rights.