Nationalism, Suffrage, and Maternal Feminism: Race, Gender, and Religion

By Michael Wielink

The late twentieth and early twenty-first century was a transformative period in the history of the young Dominion of Canada. Confederation had granted Canada a level of independence, but a majority of people remained committed to a future identity, which maintained continuity with an imperial British “civilizing force.” Canadian national identity and patriotism were dynamic forces inextricably linked to the evolution of the women’s suffragist movement. Many political men, such as John Dryden and James Hughes, and suffrage groups, like the National Council of Women (NCM) and Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WTCU), remained staunchly committed to the idea of a “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant” nation, which would only be enhanced by women’s ability to garner the vote. Primary documents derived from politicians, suffragist organizations, women’s organizations, and books reveal that the Canadian suffragist movement appealed to ideals of race, gender, and religion, which were permeated with fervent patriotic and nationalistic rhetoric in order to unite with Canada’s “imagined community.”¹ Canada’s suffragist movements, linked with ideas of nationalistic sentiments, became entwined with “maternal feminism” which emerged as a dominant force to not only enfranchise women, but served as a force to marginalize immigrants and minorities.

Nationalism is perhaps an ambiguous concept, even more so with such a young Dominion of Canada, which was only just creating its own identity, but yet remained strongly linked to the British motherland. Benedict Anderson’s book, *Imagined Communities*, written in 1983, provides significant clarity on the idea of nation and nationalism, specifically his concept of nations as “imagined communities,” both politically and culturally. National identities are imagined as both intrinsically limited and sovereign. The nation is imagined as limited because, no matter the size or scope, it is finite in its inclusion and there is always “others” beyond its borders. The nation is imagined as sovereign because it dismantled previous social constructs of hierarchy and dynastic power prior to the Enlightenment and French Revolution. Finally, it is imagined as a community because, even the inclusion of blatant discrimination and exploitation, the nation is a perceived camaraderie. Fundamentally, this fraternity is what drives people to die for their imagined communities or nations. Nation or nationalism is able to create allegiance by differentiating between those who “belong” and those who are “excluded.”² Anderson’s

“imagined communities” is vital to exploring and understanding *la Fin-de-siècle* Canada’s identity. Therefore, nationalism, as an ideology, is key to understanding its reciprocal effect on the Canadian suffragist movement. The suffragist movement was universally nationalistic yet not all nationalistic people envisioned women in their “imagined communities.”

Certainly, the best starting point is an “imagined community,” which does not include the enfranchisement of women, propagating the detrimental effects it will have on the nation and women. John Dryden, Minister of Agriculture, delivered a speech to the Ontario Legislature on May 10th 1893 regarding suffrage. It is immediately evident Dryden sees this as a much larger issue, one which involves gender roles, religion and race. Dryden’s Baptist-Protestant foundation keeps him firmly embedded in his interpretation of scripture, referring to God as the only standard of right and wrong. Dryden states “Man’s appearance indicates force, authority, self-assertion, while that of a woman show exactly the opposite, and indicates instead trust, dependence, grace, and beauty.”³ Dryden’s use of scripture to enforce clearly delineated gender roles is key to maintaining the structure of the family, which he views as the building block of the nation. He believes that without a strong family unit, you will not have a strong imperial British-Canadian civilizing force in the world. Ultimately, Dryden employs fear tactics, advocating the idea that the effects would take numerous years to be felt but clearly states “...in the end the result would be evil, and evil alone.”⁴ Here, Dryden encourages the Canadian public and his fellow politicians to believe suffrage would be an irreversible degenerating force upon the “White Anglo-Saxon” race. However, Dryden presents no real evidence other than opinion, religious interpretation, and social custom as support for his position. Dryden’s speech clearly illustrates the need for the suffragist movement to appeal to a strong sense of Canadian nationalism to be successful. However, the suffragist movement was not a divided movement between men and women, as many prominent men supported the suffragist movement.

James Laughlin Hughes wrote a tract entitled *Equal Rights* in 1895, espousing nationalism in his unequivocal support of women’s suffrage. The key to understanding his “imagined community” is to briefly understand Hughes and his background. Hughes was an ardent member of the Orange Order, a fraternal organization structured along the ethno-religious guidelines: “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.” Orangemen were fully integrated into the echelons of political power; with their political epicenter focused in Toronto. Hughes’ steadfast membership in the Orange Order of Canada and support for suffragists provided the ideal vision

of a great homogenous united Canada. For Hughes, women's suffrage in Britain and Canada indicated that "England had led the nations in Christian civilization, and she will live up to her glorious record if she is the first great nation to admit women to her Parliament."⁵ For Hughes, Canada's nationalism and patriotism is inextricably tied to the imperial destiny of the British Empire as the preeminent transmitter of "true" civilization. Hughes extensively utilizes Protestant and/or British sources to support the enfranchisement of women. For Hughes, the English White Protestant society must naturally continue to lead the world to a better future. Hughes states "Enlightened Christian civilizations attempts no reply, but recognizes that all injustice should be remedied, not defended."⁶ Juxtaposed to Dryden, Hughes envisions an improved society and enhanced "imagined community" for the future of Canada in which French Catholics and other minorities become assimilated into a "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant" Canada. While Hughes is an ardent supporter of female enfranchisement, he does not express an entirely egalitarian equality of the sexes. Hughes, like Dryden, believes the female gender has a unique social responsibility in building a strong nation.

Hughes envisions an enhanced role for women in the social and political arena, yet not so liberal in which men and women are perceived as absolutely equal. Hughes would agree with Dryden in that motherhood remained a key role and of primary importance for women. Hughes' glaring omission of key resources, like the French philosophe Condorcet, who wrote *On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship* during the French Revolution in 1790, indicates his predisposition to a shared maintenance of traditional gender constructs of female motherhood. Hughes states that "Voting will ennoble womanhood, and qualify women for truer motherhood."⁷ While espousing egalitarian motivations for suffrage, perhaps Hughes has a more practical rationale to meet his future vision for Canada. Female suffrage would cause an immediate "doubling" electoral base, which would support a homogeneous vision for Canada. The evidence points to the fulfillment of Hughes' ideal "imagined community" in which French Catholics and other ethnic and religious minorities would get assimilated into a "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant" Canada. Dryden and Hughes, albeit on extreme ends of the spectrum of support for suffrage, not only illustrate the importance of the suffragist movement to display a "maternal feminism," but also one that would build a glorious Canadian "imagined community." "Maternal feminism" is a form of first-wave feminism infused with the language of domesticity,

which called upon women to define a public role for themselves as women, sisters and mothers to improve society, and particularly to alleviate the suffering of women and children.

Underpinning much of the Canadian suffrage movement was women's conviction that their inability to influence alcohol laws was a crucial demonstration of the need for enfranchisement and some level of political equality, hence "maternal feminism." Mrs. Letitia Youmans embodies this understanding, as a woman who understood the need to evolve and move beyond just pushing for temperance, along with the need to vote as being absolutely necessary. Youmans was a teacher, of Methodist background, who participated in a meeting of Christian educationalists at Chautauqua, New York in 1874, which initiated a chain of events that catapulted her into public prominence. Inspired by what she experienced and learned, she returned to Ontario and founded the second Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) organization in Canada in 1874. In *Campaign Echoes: The Autobiography of Mrs. Letitia Youmans*, written in 1893, Youmans shows her perceptiveness of being conscious about socially accepted gender roles and the need to garner the vote in order to achieve temperance. She astutely states "I saw, in this respect, the necessity of being as wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove. I was firm in the conviction it was my duty to appeal to the men, the natural protectors of the home to use the power that was in their hand to protect those homes, and this could only be done at the ballot box."⁸ Youmans fosters and promotes the idea of "maternal feminism" by being perceived as "harmless as a dove" and not challenging prevailing social norms of masculinity, with men being the "protectors of the home." Youmans' autobiography was written by the request of the WCTU and served as a source of inspiration, with Youmans personifying the "maternal feminist," which tirelessly worked towards an improved "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant" nation. Youmans' leadership, by not challenging gender roles, was instrumental in the WCTU becoming a major force in the suffrage movement and providing a regenerated British-Canadian "imagined community."

Youmans was cognizant of her social and political reality. With men like Dryden and Hughes in political power, she needed to appeal to a strong sense of nationalist and imperial British-Canadian civilizing force in the world, intertwined with a Protestant religious social redeeming quality. Youmans, after gaining the municipal vote, declares "This circumstance impressed me more forcibly than anything else of the injustice of excluding women from the ballot box, and now that women of Ontario have the municipal vote, the duty is imperative to use

that vote for the country's good. It is, in my mind, as much of a duty to vote as to pray. While the one is done, the other should not be left undone.”⁹ Youmans' goal, along with the Canadian WCTU, was social reform to ensure the “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant” society would continue to be a beacon of light and model civilization to “others” who were still outside the Canadian “imagined community.”

When Canada entered the First World War, there was an immense effect on the Canadian suffrage movement. The war was a catalyst for women to advocate ideas of “maternal feminism” and the positive effects it would have on the Canadian “imagined community.” Nellie McClung wrote *In Times Like These*, in 1915, which is an articulate expression of “maternal feminism” just prior to women receiving the vote. Nellie McClung, with Methodist roots, moved to Winnipeg at the age of sixteen and received an education to become a teacher. She relocated to Manitou to teach in 1890, where she boarded with the family of the Rev James and Annie McClung. Annie McClung, who was an ardent champion of women's rights, suffrage, and president of the Manitou chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, profoundly influenced Nellie. Nellie McClung, in her book, conveys her sentiments on war: “War is not of God's making. War is a crime committed by men and, therefore, when people say it shall not be, it cannot be. This will not happen until women are allowed to say what they think of war. Up to the present time women have had nothing to say about war, except pay the price of war – this privilege has been theirs always.”¹⁰ Nellie McClung views war as an unnecessary evil, which results in the death of healthy “White Anglo-Saxon” young men, therefore weakening the nation. She champions the idea that “women are naturally guardians of the race...”¹¹ and feminine qualities would positively impact the political realm thus creating a great nation, protecting the “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant” foundation. McClung clearly appeals to concepts of race, gender, and religion to appeal to the wider public to advocate a Canadian “imagined community” of trust, patience, and ultimately peace. McClung envisioned the enfranchised “maternal feminist” creating a bright future for the nation of Canada.

For women of “maternal feminism,” there was no contradiction between the traditional role of women at home and participation in public life. These women projected their maternal role beyond the confines of their own family life; they felt that as wives, sisters and mothers, they could introduce into politics, via the ballot, a unique perspective that emanated from the realities of women's lives, including the hardships wrought by poverty, abuse and alcoholism.

The National Council of Women of Canada (NCW) was founded in 1893, in Ottawa with a focus on women's suffrage, immigration, and health care. The NCW published *The Year Book of The National Council of Women of Canada: 1917-1918*, in which the President's address clearly illustrates a merging of "maternal feminism" with nationalism, race and religion for their ideal "imagined community" now that the vote was achieved:

The future of Canada lies in the home. The victory won on the battlefield must be followed by a realization of the power of consecrated motherhood... Upon woman rests the responsibility, in a great measure, of the development of higher civilization... I am convinced that the solving of many of the social problem, which we are facing will come through the spiritual touch-our being in touch with the Infinite.¹²

The NCW, now enfranchised, could concentrate on social and moral reform issues in Canada like poverty and crime, much of which was often attributed to the low character, alcoholism and poor parenting of the immigrant and other minorities. Suffrage organization, needing to refocus with the vote in hand, turned towards solving the "racial" problems in order to ensure a vision of a homogenous Canada, and ultimately, a "higher civilization." However, organizations like the NCW saw poverty and crime more as a racial problem than an economic problem. The NCW published their yearbooks for anyone to purchase, but it was predominately middle and upper class audience, which would have had the time and acumen to buy and read this type of literature.

The National Council of Women of Canada was a "national organization," yet when the membership of 1917 is analyzed it reveals vital information regarding its composition. There were only four delegates, out of a total of one hundred and twenty-one, from the province of Quebec. From the Quebec four, only one was from Quebec City and three from Montreal, of which only two indicate francophone names: Dandurand and Leblanc. There is no record of any representation from other minority or marginalized groups. This information can lead us to deduce two realities with certainty: that a mere 1.6% of the membership in the NCM was from French Canada; and the remaining vast majority of women were of "White Anglo-Saxon" middle and upper class origin. Yet this quote is taken directly from their annual yearbook:

The War has emphasized our greater need of uniting in "Prevention of Waste" effort. Our Councils may be centres of work to this end by bringing together women of different

classes, races and creeds, urban and rural, and impressing them with the need of instilling this lesson in the minds of the rising generation. Thus, by uniting in effort towards high ideals and in community of spirit, our faces are turned towards a better Canadian citizenship and a Canada where right shall be might.”¹³

The quote, at first glance, would seem to suggest that the NCW is an egalitarian association, which invites all “classes, races, and creeds” together to be a more efficient society by continuing the lessons learned through the First World War. However, the evidence of membership indicates a much different intent and meaning to the quote, suggesting that the emphasis be placed on the racist phrase “turned toward a better Canadian citizenship,” where immigrants of different races be assimilated into the “advanced” civilization of the Imperial British Empire.

Suffrage supporters, even before women were enfranchised, had no issue with denigrating race in order to further the female suffrage cause. For many, the ideal of a united “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant” race took a much higher precedent than the inclusion of any race or immigrant. James Hughes, who, as explained previously, was a huge proponent of female suffrage, states “The injustice of refusing the suffrage to a sex is much greater than refusing it to a race or class.”¹⁴ Hughes does not leave much room for interpretation; his “imagined community” would most certainly enfranchise and share political power with women of the same race rather than someone from another race. He would sacrifice any racial or minority enfranchisement to ensure female suffrage. Women emphasized assimilation, but yet this very group, who were marginalized and denied the vote, would use their voting power to marginalize or denigrate different races to ensure their “imagined community” of Canada.

“Maternal feminism” was an ideology ready to ensure a homogenous “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant” Canada, which did not have room or toleration of other cultures or races. *The Year Book of The National Council of Women of Canada: 1921* paints a vivid picture of their position in regards to immigration and different races. Canada had passed new immigration legislation in 1919 after the First World War to significantly limit immigration. The NCW provides some very clear insight as to their stance on the new legislations: “The Act was amended in 1919 to again further guard and protect both Canada and her role as citizen. In the long list of prohibited classes we aim to keep out as far as humanly possible those persons who presumable may become undesirable citizens by reason of mental, moral, physical, social,

educational, or industrial disability.”¹⁵ The NCM shows its unconditional support for this legislation when they state: “we aim.” This includes women, now active citizens with the right to vote and voice their opinion on issues of the Dominion of Canada. Immigrants were stereotyped to be poor, illiterate, diseased, morally lax, politically corrupt and religiously deficient. The alleged tendency of central and southern Europeans to turn to drink, violence and crime made them less than ideal for a “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant” Canada.

“Maternal feminism” would at times “mother” different marginalized and minority groups in order to aid or assimilate them. Many immigrants and natives were seen as “problems,” which the state had to find solutions for. They were viewed as “others” outside of the Canadian “imagined community,” yet they lived within the borders of the Dominion of Canada. The NCW consistently discussed the immigrant “situation” stating in *The Year Book of The National Council of Women of Canada: 1917-1918*: “Discussion followed on the difficulty of bringing immigrant women into assimilation with Canadian life.”¹⁶ The solutions range from community centers to literature so they know “what to do and where to go.”¹⁷ The WTCU made attempts to deal with the “Indian Problem” because they were seen as diseased and racially inferior compared to the “White Anglo-Saxon” race. Tuberculosis and other diseases combined with severely inadequate healthcare led the WCTU to arrange training for a few “Indian” girls to become nurses. However, the “WTCU emphasized that Indian women should train as nurses primarily for the betterment of their own community.”¹⁸ “Indian” girls did not receive training under the auspices of egalitarian equality, but as solutions to send back to sick “Indian” reserves. “Maternal feminists” made attempts to deal with social problems, which were often boiled down to oversimplified “racial problems” of “others.”

Overall, Canada’s *la Fin-de-siècle* identity was being transformed and molded; yet there remained a majority of people who remained committed to a future identity, which maintained continuity with an imperial British “civilizing force.” The social construct of a “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant” character contained inherently racist ideals of race, gender, and religion. The women’s suffragist movement and “maternal feminism,” intertwined with nationalism, created a reciprocal effect, which established an “imagined community” that included those who belonged and “others” who clearly did not. Men like Hughes, and women like Youmans and McClung, with broader support from organizations like the WCTU and the NCM ultimately garnered the vote for women. However, they used this newfound political power to enforce assimilation, find

“motherly” social solutions, or support outright restrictive legislation that would keep Canada from accepting people of “degenerating” races or religions. The question remains: aside from nationalism and “imagined community,” what other factors affected the suffrage movement, and consequent “maternal feminism,” which caused women to marginalize “others” once they received political power, even though they themselves had been “others” for centuries?

NOTES

- ¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.
- ² *Ibid.*, 6.
- ³ John Dryden, “Womanhood Suffrage” *A Speech delivered in the Ontario Legislature, May 10th, 1893: On the Motion of Mr. Waters to Read a Second Time Bill No 82, “An Act to Establish Womanhood Suffrage for the Legislative Assembly* (Toronto: Warwick & Sons, 1893), 5.
- ⁴ Dryden, “Womanhood Suffrage,” 12.
- ⁵ John L. Hughes, *Equal Suffrage* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1895), 4.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ⁸ Mrs. Letitia Youmans, *Campaign Echoes. The Autobiography of Mrs. Letitia Youmans: The Pioneer of the White Ribbon Movement in Canada* (William Briggs, Toronto, 1893), 208.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.
- ¹⁰ Nellie McClung, *In Times Like These* (Toronto: McLeod & Allen, 1915), 14.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ¹² *The Year Book of The National Council of Women of Canada, 1917* (Toronto: Bryant Press, 1917), 16.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 36.
- ¹⁴ Hughes, *Equal Suffrage*, 24.
- ¹⁵ *The Year Book of The National Council of Women of Canada, 1921* (Toronto: Bryant Press, 1922), 165.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.
- ¹⁸ Cynthia Toman, “‘My Chance Has Come at Last!’: The Weston Hospital, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and Indian Nurses in Canada, 1917-1929,” *Native Studies Review* 19.2 (2010): 105.