

NELLIE McCLUNG CHANGES CANADA

Online Resource

CELEBRATE CANADA
through
READERS' THEATRE

NELLIE McCLUNG
CHANGES CANADA



BY MYRA JUNYK

By Myra Junyk

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By Myra Junyk
Editor: Sylvia Gunnery

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Curriculum Plus Publishing Company
100 Armstrong Avenue
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Toll free telephone 1-888-566-9730
Toll free fax 1-866-372-7371
E-mail info@fraserdirect.ca
www.curriculumplus.ca

A Summary of the Script

When Nellie Moody got her first teaching job at a school near Manitou, Manitoba in 1889, Canadian women still did not have many legal rights. After marrying Robert Wesley McClung, Nellie became a best-selling writer and social activist. She was instrumental in getting women the right to vote in Manitoba. Her 1914 play, *The Woman's Parliament*, poked fun at Premier Roblin's arguments against giving women the right to vote. She later became a Member of the Alberta legislature; and in 1928, she joined The Famous Five (Emily Murphy, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Louise McKinney, Nellie McClung and Irene Parlby) in their legal challenge to have women considered "persons" under the British North America Act of 1867. Their victory paved the way for women to participate fully in Canadian government and changed Canada forever!

History of Women's Rights in Canada

Before Canada became a country in 1867, voting was mostly done by rich men who owned property. In 1867, the British North America (BNA) Act was passed by the British Parliament creating a country made up of the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Women were not considered "persons" in this act and they could not vote. There was a federal government for national interests while the provincial governments took care of local interests. However, since the British House of Commons had passed the BNA Act, Canada still needed to obtain Britain's approval to amend or change its own constitution. The final court of appeal for legal cases in Canada was the Privy Council of the British Parliament.

In the 1870's, women started to actively campaign for suffrage (the right to vote). Women such as Nellie McClung, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Louise McKinney and Emily Murphy led the movement and were called suffragettes. Their demands for female suffrage were repeatedly denied by both provincial and federal governments. However, in 1914, Nellie McClung wrote a play called *The Woman's Parliament* which mocked the refusal of Conservative Manitoba Premier Sir Rodmond Roblin to support women's suffrage. He was defeated in the next election. In 1916, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta all granted women the right to vote in provincial elections. Other provinces soon followed: Ontario and British Columbia (1917), Nova Scotia (1918), New Brunswick (1919), Prince Edward Island (1922) and Newfoundland (1925). Quebec waited until 1940 to grant provincial suffrage to women.

Some women got the right to vote in federal elections as early as

1917 because of the Wartime Elections Act of 1917. This act granted suffrage to women over 21 years of age who were wives, widows, mothers, sisters or daughters of soldiers serving in the Canadian Armed Forces in World War I. This legislation was temporary, but The Women's Franchise Act of 1918 gave women the right to vote federally if they met the same requirements as men who could vote in provincial elections. The Dominion Elections Act of 1920 finally gave women the same federal voting rights as men. This act also eliminated the property ownership requirements for voting. However, Asians and Aboriginal Peoples were still excluded from voting.

Regardless of these new voting rights, women still faced discrimination in politics. In 1916, Emily Murphy was appointed as a judge in Alberta. On her very first day on the job, a lawyer challenged her right to be a judge because the BNA Act of 1867 did not consider her a "person." The Alberta Supreme Court overruled his objection, but Emily wanted the BNA Act changed to give women full legal rights. Women were still denied the right to join the Senate because of this law. In 1927, Emily invited Nellie McClung, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Louise McKinney and Irene Parlby to join her in an appeal to the Canadian Supreme Court. The appeal was denied; but the women, now known as The Famous Five, did not back down. They took their fight to the Privy Council of the British government which was then Canada's highest court of appeal. They won their appeal on October 18, 1929 when the word "persons" in the BNA Act of 1867 was declared to include both males and females. This decision paved the way for women to participate fully in all aspects of public life. Canada had been changed forever!

Today, the Famous Five have a bronze monument on Parliament Hill in Ottawa commemorating their role as activists for change in Canada. An image of The Famous Five can also be seen on Canada's \$50 bill.

Activities Before Reading

1. Discuss the questions: “*Why is it important to have the right to vote? At what age do Canadian citizens get the right to vote in the provinces and territories?*” Ask students to define the term “suffrage.” After the class has agreed on a common definition, have students work in groups to research the voting process in their municipality/town/city or province. Using the information groups have collected, hold a mock election campaign with volunteers representing various political parties. Have a voting day in the classroom. After results are tabulated, discuss what students learned about the election process. Note: If an election is being held at the time, invite a candidate into the class to discuss current issues. Or, invite your local MLA.
2. Using the website suggestions provided at the end of this resource, have students work in pairs or in groups to list ten new facts about Nellie McClung not provided in the readers’ theatre script. Write a paragraph or short essay incorporating all ten facts.
3. Read through the list of characters with your students. Which characters were members of the government? Discuss what these people might have been like as politicians.
4. Nellie McClung was instrumental in getting women the right to vote in Canada. When did women get the right to vote in other countries such as the United States, England, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, China, Japan, India and Egypt? Have students draw a timeline to illustrate their findings. Display these timelines.
5. One of Nellie’s jobs was as a Member of the Alberta Legislature. Across Canada, how many females have been elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly today? How many females have been elected as a Member of Parliament today? How many females hold positions as a Member of the Senate of Canada today? Have students create a chart to illustrate their findings. Discuss the results. What do these results tell us about women’s roles in today’s political process?

Tips for Voice and Expression

Character	Reading Level	Description
Narrator	Challenging	The narrator provides background information about the history surrounding the events in the script.
Nellie McClung	Challenging	As a writer and crusader for the rights of women in Canada, she worked to get women the right to vote and hold political office. She was a Member of the Alberta legislature, a director of the CBC and a delegate to the League of Nations.
Mr. Smith	Easy	A parent of one of the students in Nellie’s classroom, he is concerned about the fact that Nellie played football with her students at recess.
Mrs. Jones	Easy	A parent of one of the students in Nellie’s classroom, she is concerned about the fact that Nellie played football with her students at recess.
Robert Wesley McClung	Moderate	Working as a pharmacist, Robert provided moral support for his wife Nellie McClung in her work as a writer and social activist.
Sir Rodmond Roblin	Moderate	Premier of Manitoba, Roblin was taken by Nellie McClung on a tour in 1911 of sweatshops where women worked. He refused to consider granting women the right to vote in Manitoba in 1914 and became the subject of Nellie’s play <i>The Woman’s Parliament</i> . He lost the provincial election in 1915.
Group of Men	Easy	These men are characters in Nellie’s play <i>The Woman’s Parliament</i> which poked fun at Premier Roblin’s arguments against granting women the right to vote in Manitoba.

Character	Reading Level	Description
Henrietta Muir Edwards	Easy	The oldest member of The Famous Five, she crusaded for women's rights throughout her life. She helped to found the National Council of Women of Canada.
Emily Murphy	Moderate	She was appointed as a judge in Alberta in 1916. A lawyer challenged her right to be a judge because she was not considered a person by the British North America Act of 1867. The Famous Five appealed to England's Privy Council to change the interpretation of the word "person" to include women.
Louise McKinney	Moderate	In 1917, she became the first woman elected to a political office in Canada. She later became involved with The Famous Five crusade for women's rights.
Irene Parlby	Easy	Elected to the Alberta legislature in 1921, Irene Parlby became the first female cabinet minister in Alberta history. She represented Canada at the League of Nations and joined The Famous Five in their crusade for women's rights.
William Lyon Mackenzie King	Easy	As Prime Minister of Canada, he recognized the work of The Famous Five in changing Canadian politics. He later appointed Nellie McClung to be a director of the CBC and a delegate to the League of Nations.

Extending the Experience

- Nellie McClung was a best-selling Canadian author, and Charles Dickens was an important influence on her writing. His books are still popular today and can be found in bookstores throughout the world. In fact, two of his books, *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, were selected for *Oprah's Book Club*. With the help of your students, create a complete list of Charles Dickens' books. Which ones are familiar to your students? Watch a movie version of one of the novels of Charles Dickens. Discuss why Nellie might have admired Dickens. Have students write journal entries about writers they admire, including facts and explanations about why they admire these writers.
- Create a photo essay on one of the historical characters or events in this script. Make sure that each image has a caption. The illustrations can be drawn, or students could use copies of photographs of the events.
- Have students watch one of the CBC Digital Archives videos about Nellie McClung (<http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/elections/topics/1450/> or http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/rights_freedoms/clips/1801/) In small groups or with your class, discuss or debate the following statement "Nellie McClung's battle for women's rights in Canada is still not over today."
- Have students create a personal dictionary of unusual descriptive

phrases used in this play (e.g. "pale negative," "a sculptor who can bring an angel out of stone," or "a hyena in petticoats.") For each phrase, require that students include an explanation in their own words.

- Nellie McClung stated that, "People must know the past to understand the present and to face the future." Have students research a current issue in their community to illustrate how Nellie's statement is still true today. Examples of current issues could include pollution, political changes, transportation, homelessness etc. Their findings can be presented to the class in the form of an interview, podcast, website, blog or PowerPoint presentation.

Books of Interest

Courage and Compassion – Ten Canadians Who Made a Difference by Rona Arato (Maple Tree Press 2008)

Nellie McClung by Mary Lile Benham (Fitzhenry & Whiteside 2000)

Nellie McClung by Charlotte Gray (Penguin 2008)

Nellie McClung – Voice for the Voiceless by Margaret Macpherson (XYZ Publishing 2003)

The Stream Runs Fast – My Own Story by Nellie McClung (Thomas Allen Publishers 2007 edition)

Women Changing Canada by Jan Coomber and Rosemary Evans (Oxford University Press 1997)

Websites of Interest

CBC Digital Archives – Politics – Elections - Voting in Canada – How a Privilege Became a Right
<http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/elections/topics/1450/>

CBC Digital Archives – Politics – Rights and Freedoms – Women Become Persons
http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/rights_freedoms/clips/1801/

Elections Canada—the impartial, non-partisan agency responsible for conducting federal elections and referendums.
<http://www.elections.ca/home.aspx>

Heritage Community Foundation – Alberta Online Encyclopedia - The Famous Five – Heroes for Today
<http://www.abheritage.ca/famous5/index.html>

Historica Minutes – Women – Nellie McClung
<http://www.historica.ca/minutes/minute.do?id=10643>

Library and Archives Canada – Celebrating Women’s Achievements – Nellie McClung
<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/women/030001-1110-e.html>

Parks Canada – Women in History – Walker Theatre
http://www.pc.gc.ca/dci/src/3d_eng.asp?what=more&sitename=wt&theme=wh&btn_state=HTML&more_lnk=no