Many scholars have studied the “Women’s West” since 1973, when I completed my dissertation entitled “Women in Frontier Literature” (Cornell University). Sarah Carter is particularly astute in her many books and articles on the subject, including Capturing Women (1997) and, more recently, The Importance of Being Monogamous (2008). Here Carter argues that both the United States and Canada invested much national identity in a distinctive “civilized” view of marriage that was particularly contested and defined by western settlement and was in contradistinction to both Indigenous marriage patterns and Mormon polygamy. “Claiming to have superior marriage laws that supposedly permitted women freedom and power was (and continues to be) a common boast of imperial powers,” writes Carter.1 “Civilized” white marriages thus boosted the righteousness of the Manifest Destiny of both the United States and Canada to occupy their respective Wests from “civilization” to sea. Marriage in the custom of the country was clearly deficient.
Contrasting “civilized” to “savage” also served to make so-called civilized women accept their dependent and subordinate status with the rationalization that things could be worse—even though flexible Indigenous systems of marriage and divorce, land and personal property holding, and social hierarchy often netted Indigenous women more autonomy and power than whitestream women. The various homestead provisions, especially in Canada, not only resulted in the commodification of land but in its property values being assigned to men who commanded domestic dependent labour in the persons of their wives and children. This sharp gender division (along with the existing race divisions) more than halved the potential propertied class, thus creating a privileged elite that led to the kind of social stability necessary to creating a material- and market-driven form of economic development. As Carter notes, “The policy of making it nearly impossible for women to homestead in Canada was not an oversight of policymakers; it was deliberate and in contrast to the United States, where single women were permitted to homestead, and did so in the thousands.” Canada’s more tenuous National Policy required, at least in the eyes of the policy makers, more social restriction if it were to develop successful continental nationhood.²

Before the separation of the Plains into two national hinterlands, the roles of women varied based on the economic pursuits of their people. The introduction of the horse led to economic dependence on the buffalo, which meant both competition with other mounted buffalo hunters and the leisure and mobility for pursuing war as an avocation. Both the hunt and the wars tended to reduce women’s prestige in relation to men’s. Horticultural women had different roles from those who lived primarily from the buffalo herds and from gathering plant foods, and women in the fur trade lived quite differently from the other two groups. But once the forty-ninth parallel was established as an actual boundary, it represented a much larger disjunction for women than for men.

Euro/Afro/North American men could homestead freely on either side of the border, whatever their nationality, notwithstanding racism against African North Americans. Asian and Indigenous North American people for the most part were denied any homesteads at all. South of the border, Euro/Afro/North American single women could homestead.
North of the border, they could not. South of the border, married women had dower rights to the homestead. North of the border, they did not. Voting rights for women—at least Euro–North American women—came to the continent first in Wyoming Territory in 1869. For Euro-Canadian women, they came first in the three Prairie Provinces in 1916. Canadian governments accepted Indian marriages but not Indian divorces, leading to populations of women who were not married or who were appropriately remarried under their own understandings, but who lacked official rights to such necessities as land and rations. In Canada, under the *Indian Act* of 1876 and its various revisions until 1982, Indigenous women who married non-Indian-status men lost their legal Indian status forever, no matter what happened to the marriage, while non-Indigenous women who married status Indians gained legal Indian status. The United States accepted Native marriages and divorces—but demanded that men be married to only one woman at a time, creating more anomalies. In the United States, women kept their ethnic status despite marriage. (And sometimes, as during the Osage Reign of Terror in Oklahoma, they were killed by their non-Native husbands for their land rights.) Asian women were systematically barred from both Wests, though Canada’s *Chinese Exclusion Act* did not become absolute until 1923, fifty years after that of the United States. In the States, the Indian service hired Indigenous and mixed-blood women as field matrons and teachers as early as the 1870s and accelerated the policy after 1934, allowing Indigenous women, especially those of what became a mixed-blood elite, to assume important bureaucratic roles in Indigenous communities. In Canada, the Indian service stayed almost completely white, while the *Indian Act* prohibited women from voting in band elections or filling band offices, thus effectively removing women from almost all bureaucratic and governance roles in Indigenous communities.

On the other hand, in many ways the border made no difference for women. On both sides, Indigenous women coped with enormous change in their lives as the Great Plains moved from heartland to hinterland. The various epidemics that swept through the Plains disproportionately killed children. Smallpox also lowered fertility drastically. Women who retained their fertility needed to give birth more often for the population to rebound and thus needed to nurse and nurture more children. The advent of the horse
made it easier to move camp but harder to find firewood after firing the prairies to create better pasture for the horses became more common. The pemmican trade and especially the buffalo robe trade increased women’s commercial rather than subsistence work and decreased their leisure. The hide trade among the Blackfoot/Blackfeet lowered women’s age at marriage and increased the likelihood that women would be in plural marriages, as one hunter could kill more buffalo than one woman could process.6

The advent of whiskey increased spouse abuse, and the advent of soldiers, traders, and mounted police posts increased or introduced prostitution. The starving years of the early treaty era made it increasingly difficult for Indigenous women to feed their families. Even though the advent of “civilization” changed men’s roles more than women’s, the move from tipis and earth lodges to log cabins and the introduction of stoves changed women’s everyday chores. The rise in warfare among Indigenous groups in response to overcrowding and overhunting rendered most Plains societies more patriarchal than they had been. The balance between men and women was skewed by the need for warriors. The resulting higher death rates for men left more women than men and fostered plural marriages—until those were outlawed by whites. Missionaries and schools imposed another form of patriarchalism, further undercutting women’s power: the forced enrollment of children in residential and boarding schools severely undercut the roles of mothers and grandmothers as caretakers and teachers. The advent of Euro–North American brides, especially in Hudson’s Bay Company country during the governorship of George Simpson, damaged both the social and economic position of mixed-blood women in the fur trade. The fact that Nancy Ward was the last of the historically important “Beloved Women” among the Cherokees indicates that the forced relocation of the southeastern US peoples to the Plains undercut the sacred relationship between women and the land, and probably the public significance of women in the society.7

The early days of the Euro–North American settlement frontier on the Plains were marked by a predominantly masculine society. Young men came out by themselves to stake claims, then returned east to pick up a wife or sweetheart. This created a profitable niche for prostitution, a relatively equal-opportunity profession for women, without strict regard for race or
ethnicity. In the early years, when women were working for themselves or for madams, they seem to have been relatively successful, often moving out of the trade to set themselves up as madams, marrying and blending into the general population, or perhaps setting themselves up in “respectable” trades. Like the mixed-blood wives of the fur trade, prostitutes and former prostitutes suffered a drop in social status when white wives began arriving from the East. Although this was usually stated in moral terms, its roots were also economic. As long as marriage remained the most secure career choice for most women, wives or intending wives could not afford to see their valuable sexual wares undercut by freelancers.8

Once the main bulk of Euro/Afro/North American settlement came onto the Great Plains, the majority of female people were either married or children themselves. Although Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and others have examined female friendships in the nineteenth century in some detail, very little research has been done on the woman homesteaders who often “batched” together. Given what we know of such women as Grace Hebard and Willa Cather in the small university communities of the Great Plains, we can certainly assume that female homesteaders found as much comfort and satisfaction in small same-sex communities as the more studied cow-boys and settlement house workers did.9 Teaching at all levels was also in some cases a haven for women’s same-sex relationships, though it is probable that colleges and universities were safer than small local schools, where a teacher’s life was the property of the community. My great aunt, Norah Power, does not seem to have had a companion during her short tenure as the first classics professor at Mount Royal College in Calgary, though after she left the Plains and eventually moved to Louisiana she did meet her life partner—possibly because the American South remained oblivious to the “discovery” of lesbianism longer than most urban areas of North America. Nor, of course, did marriage remove the possibility of same-sex relationships for women. An obliging husband would sleep in the barn when his wife’s best friend came to visit and to share a bed—for a month or more at a time. Visiting among friends, sisters, and cousins not only relieved the isolation of farmsteads and brightened the social life of small towns and cities, but also allowed same-sex relationships to be sustained despite distance and marriage.
Women’s work on homesteads was exhausting. Women typically rose before dawn to cook breakfast. They were also responsible for a midday dinner, sometimes carried to the fields, and an evening supper. Depending on the size of the family or whether custom threshers, neighbours trading work, itinerant harvesters, or others were expected, women baked enormous quantities of bread and pies every week. Women customarily milked one or more cows, separated the cream, and made butter. Frequently they tended hens and almost always, large kitchen gardens. Although spinning and weaving had moved out of the household by the mid-nineteenth century and men’s clothes were usually ready-made, women sewed clothes for themselves and their children, either by hand, or later, with pedal sewing machines. Most of the time, women were either pregnant or nursing and were tending several small children.\textsuperscript{10}

Both women and men expected women to be the keepers of the culture, responsible for establishing churches, schools, and other social institutions. While culture-keeping was certainly important for Indigenous women, too, they had less institutional infrastructure to re-establish, even when they underwent forced relocation, and they shared the cultural duties more evenly with the men. Although most school boards were made up of men, women’s earliest experiences with suffrage often came in elections for school boards, school inspectors, and so on, and the first women elected to public positions tended to be school inspectors. The fairly widespread belief in maternal feminism in even otherwise conservative areas often held that “the mothers of the race” ought to have a say in areas like the education of children. Similarly, although only men served as ministers and priests and members of church boards, Catholic sisters were crucial in providing schools and health care, particularly in the Canadian North West or in areas where there were large Métis, Irish, German, Polish, or Czech Catholic communities, as well as in the Hispanic communities in the southwestern Plains of the United States. And Protestant Ladies’ Aid societies frequently provided much of the funding for building, maintaining, and particularly furnishing churches.\textsuperscript{11} Middle-class women in small towns and cities on the Plains customarily employed some hired help for routine cooking, cleaning, and child care, freeing themselves for work with the Ladies’ Aid, the school, women’s institutes and clubs, and other cultural and service
obligations. Because cities offered single women more choices than the country—particularly in Canada, where they could not homestead—single women moved to urban areas to work in offices, as journalists, as seamstresses and milliners, as shop clerks, and in a range of other occupations, often supported by clubs. The Canadian Women’s Press Club in Winnipeg, for instance, fostered the careers of agricultural journalist E. Cora Hind, Nellie McClung, and the Beynon sisters, Lillian and Francis.

Mennonite and Hutterite communities on the Great Plains, especially in Canada, where block settlements were allowed, provided a communal experience for women but remained within the paradigm of a single patriarchal head and a dependent wife in each household. The much more radical and egalitarian Doukhobors were sometimes dispossessed of their land when they would not follow Canadian models. Lacking sufficient draft animals, Doukhobor women, working as a team, sometimes pulled ploughs to break ground. Although this was a sensible arrangement, since a group of women could pull a plough through tough sod, but the greater weight and upper body strength of the average man made it easier for him to hold the ploughshare down, a photograph of the practice was widely used to “prove” that Doukhobor women were abused and treated as cattle, again demonstrating the evils of anything but an Anglo-Canadian “civilized” marriage.12

Obviously, women’s roles changed with time as well as space—American women were more likely to homestead in their own right after 1900 for instance—but the differences I have noted between the two countries also seem to have induced women to seek to change laws. Although Wyoming was the first full-suffrage polity in North America, the organized women’s movement in the United States began in and always stayed in the East. The 1848 Seneca Falls meeting launched Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton as the leading women’s rights advocates. Most organizations on a national level stayed in the area from Ohio east. This does not mean there were no outliers of the movement: Clara Colby, a particularly strong and devoted feminist, published an important suffragist paper from Hebron, Nebraska.13

While Ontario had its suffrage leaders, the movement was not nearly as strong there or in the Maritimes as it was in the West, and Quebec’s ultramontane Catholicism meant that it lagged behind the rest of North America.
by at least twenty years. On the Great Plains, two somewhat contradictory rhetorics were advanced for women’s rights. One was the narrative of the self-reliant “rugged individual.” Although the West in both countries was a creation of the federal government and its railroad building and land distribution policies, and although co-operation and community were essential in a region of vast distances and extreme and unpredictable weather, the free market aesthetic and the need of governments to tie persons to plots of land for taxation and other bureaucratic conveniences firmly argued for the importance and independence of the individual. Women internalized this as well as men, especially if they were holding down claims in their own right, managing a homestead while a husband worked away, or simply riding astride or guiding a team alone under the big sky. On the other hand, since women were almost universally acknowledged as the guardians of civilization in a “wild” landscape, it was evident that they—or at least their Euro–North American strand—deserved a fair bit of public power to do their duty.14

Canada’s most successful suffragists came from the West. The Famous Five, who successfully pursued their court case to have women declared “persons” in the meaning of the *British North America Act* (specifically for eligibility for appointment to the Senate), were all westerners with long experience in women’s issues. Their careers show some of the possibilities and some of the pitfalls for women in the intellectual milieu that produced them. Of the five, Nellie McClung was the most outspoken. Ontario born, she was raised on a homestead in Manitoba, which her parents had taken to provide a better chance for their children. Like many middle-class girls, Nellie became a schoolteacher when she was still in her teens, and throughout her life, she continued to use the tactics that worked with her students—faith in a Protestant meliorism and lively stories tinged heavily with self-deprecating humour. One of the strange legacies of male Plains writers from Hamlin Garland, to Frederick Philip Grove, to Wallace Stegner, to Rudy Wiebe and on is the erasure of the humour that lubricated life on the Great Plains—particularly women’s humour. Luckily, Nellie McClung makes that impossible. Her novels and short stories combine sentimentality with an infectious undercutting of sentimentality and cant, and her suffrage essays unerringly puncture the rhetoric of male leaders.
like Manitoba Premier Rodman Roblin, whose insistence that “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world” was supposed to obviate the need for woman suffrage. Nellie was overtly political: she organized and starred in a parody “Women’s Parliament” in Manitoba in 1914 that helped unseat Roblin and win woman suffrage two years later, and in 1921, she won a seat in the Alberta legislature. The wife of a pharmacist turned insurance salesman and the mother of five sons, Nellie McClung was in many ways a typical urban prairie matron in her involvement with the Social Gospel, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and social betterment in general.\textsuperscript{15}

Emily Murphy, probably the most famous of the five after McClung, was also a wife, a mother, and under the pen name Janey Canuck, a bestselling author. Murphy made her influence felt as the first woman magistrate in the British Empire and wrote an influential, if stereotyping, book on illicit drugs. The arguments against her right, as a woman, to hold any position in the judicial system and her ambition to become the first Canadian woman senator eventually led to the launching of the Persons Case. Henrietta Muir Edwards, the oldest of the five (eighty years old by 1929), worked for women and children all her life. Her main intellectual capital was her extraordinary grasp of what little family law existed, and her main instrument was the National Council of Women. She was particularly concerned with dower rights and other laws concerning women and property. Because her husband had long been a physician on reserve communities, she had a deep understanding of the issues of Aboriginal women, though she does not seem to have worked particularly to advance them. Louise McKinney, an American immigrant and a temperance leader, was elected to the Alberta legislature in 1917. For her, women’s rights seem to have been primarily a stepping stone to prohibition. Irene Parlby, a well-connected Anglo-Indian immigrant, became the leader of the United Farm Women of Alberta and was elected to the Alberta legislature, where she served as Minister without Portfolio, but effectively supported women’s issues.\textsuperscript{16}

It is tempting to read these women only in a purely celebratory way—foremothers of whom we may be unashamedly proud. Unfortunately, the meliorist rhetoric that they and many others used was coercively assimilationist and easily congruent with a eugenics movement that rapidly became
ugly; however, Patricia Roome argues persuasively that there were distinctions among the five, and Nellie McClung and Henrietta Muir Edwards were less likely than the others to see non-Anglo-Saxon people as lesser, though they certainly saw them as different but able to change.\(^{17}\) The Social Gospel movement, the United Farmers of Alberta, the ccf, and the whole intellectual context in which the feminists moved welcomed a benevolent social Darwinism in which society would peacefully evolve into a co-operative commonwealth, the kind of utopia envisioned by American Edward Bellamy in *Looking Backward*, a tremendously influential book. Birth control, in some form or other, was definitely part of the feminist movement, just as eugenics was part of Margaret Sanger’s plan. Although eugenics was sometimes directed against visible minorities, its main goal was to breed “mental defectives” out of the gene pool. Indeed, Emily Murphy and Alice Jamieson as magistrates and Nellie McClung in her varied reform activities were correct in noting the pain and suffering that fear of coerced pregnancies and the pregnancies themselves could cause developmentally delayed girls and their families. The belief that science could cure anything—from surveying a railway across the Shield and over the Rockies and Selkirks, to scientific farming and dams and irrigation ditches for drylands agriculture, to the plant genetics that developed prairie-perfect Marquis wheat out of Eastern European strains—was an integral part of the intellectual baggage of Great Plains settlement and of colonization in general. That science could cure social problems seemed to be a given. But people are not plants, and eugenics was as false a science as the theory that rain follows the plough. Alberta’s infamous eugenics law resulted in the forcible sterilization of young women for no other reason than that someone else thought of them as “defective.” It had its seed in the same intellectual currents that produced the early feminists, but it long outlived them. Although the law was repealed in 1972, it was not until Leilani Muir won her case against the province in 1996 that any reparations or apologies were offered for forcible sterilization.\(^{18}\)

On the American Great Plains, the conjunction of feminism and agrarian discontent peaked in the 1890s, before North Americans in general were willing to accept woman suffrage. In Canada, however, feminism and agrarian discontent peaked together, around the time of the First World
War, so suffrage, agrarian discontent, and provincial and regional third-party strength all coincided. After the Civil War and the Civil War amendments enfranchising blacks but not women—and, indeed, in the Fourteenth Amendment introducing the word “male” to the US Constitution for the first time—the coalition of feminists and abolitionists that had worked extremely well together before and during the Civil War was shattered. The coffin was nailed shut in Kansas in 1867, when George Francis Train, an articulate and determined feminist with a strong white-supremacist tinge, sponsored a speaking tour featuring himself and Susan B. Anthony advocating for suffrage for women but not for blacks. Suffrage thus became a conservative, rather than a radical cause. Wyoming suffrage was likewise conservative. In a territory overwhelmingly populated by young unmarried men seeking their fortunes as miners or adventurers, only one set of women was to be entitled to vote—married white women and their adult daughters. Native women were, as Indigenous people, disfranchised. The Chinese who had come to Wyoming for the building of the Union Pacific Railroad were overwhelmingly male and were disfranchised, men and women alike, as “Orientals.” Prostitutes, since they frequently moved from town to town and had no fixed address, were also disfranchised, and public opinion forced even the most stable of madams to stay home from the polls. Married men as a class were wealthier and far more stable than unmarried men. Because their wives for the most part accepted Victorian ideals of social control, woman suffrage in Wyoming was an essentially conservative movement, as shown by the lionizing of Esther Morris, the first woman Justice of the Peace in the world.

Agrarian feminism was also conservative in its acceptance of maternal feminism, but far less conservative than the earlier models. For one thing, as we have seen, Great Plains farming was economically dependent on women’s work of both subsistence and reproduction. Butter, eggs, and gardens kept farm families alive, and women ran the farm and homestead when men worked off the farm to make money. Daughters who worked as schoolteachers or as hired girls off the farm were also likely to send some of their pay back to their families, perhaps more likely than boys who were off working. While neither the law, the more patriarchal farmers, or even economic historians have fully understood and recognized farm women’s
roles, many of the agrarian reformers, trying hard to understand exactly what farms needed to succeed within North American society and a world economy, recognized the need for women in agriculture and the need for those women to represent themselves. As early as the 1840s and 1850s, the Ohio Cultivator published women’s columns that spoke vividly for women’s rights and honed the talents of two important abolitionist feminists, Hanna Maria Tracy Cutler and Frances Dana Gage, who is now best remembered as the amanuensis for Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman” speech. The Winnipeg Grain Grower’s Guide followed in the tradition, publishing the columns of Francis Marion Beynon, in many ways the most original thinker among the prairie feminists; unfortunately, she moved to New York and disappeared as a writer after World War I.21

The Grange was an early supporter of women’s rights, and under its auspices, Iowa struggled unsuccessfully for years to pass woman suffrage. Although Carrie Chapman Catt did not herself come from an agricultural background, she did graduate from an agricultural college that is now Iowa State University, and her rise to leadership of the National American Woman Suffrage Association to lead it to eventual triumph was partially enabled by the agrarian feminist tradition of her adopted state.22 (Like the Alberta feminists, she was also a eugenicist.) Populism was an even more important forum for another woman of the Plains, Mary Elizabeth Lease—though her colourful and oft-cited (but perhaps apochryphal) admonition to farmers to raise less corn and more hell sets her a bit outside the domain of maternal feminists. She was a powerful speaker for the Populists, sharing the platform with Hamlin Garland in Omaha in 1892, the last convention of the Populists before they fused with the Democrats and nominated the socially conservative (but pro–woman suffrage) William Jennings Bryan. Lease did not need to argue for suffrage—her leadership position attested to the importance and power of women. Annie Diggs, more conventional and less colourful than Lease, worked more in the maternal feminist mode and advocated woman suffrage to clean up the “dirty pool” of politics, which she envisioned as something like a cesspool rather than a backroom game of cues and balls.23

An anomalous Great Plains feminist was Clara Bewick Colby, who for many years published the Woman’s Journal, first from Hebron and
then from Beatrice, Nebraska, a relatively small agricultural and industrial centre on the Little Blue River, and ironically the same town where Daniel Freeman had homesteaded. Colby’s husband, an alcoholic and probably abusive Army officer, brought his wife to the West and then went off to duty, leaving her to her own devices, probably to her great relief. One of his commands involved the massacre at Wounded Knee, where he kidnapped an unharmed Lakota baby found among the wounded and slain, and brought her home to his wife, more, it would seem, as a souvenir or pet than as a child. (One is eerily reminded of the girl Laura Ingalls’s imperial whining for a “papoose” in *Little House on the Prairie.*) The ordeal of Lost Bird, as the little girl from Wounded Knee was called, undoubtedly complicated Colby’s life and her ideas on society and women’s roles, but she had folded up her journal by this time and thus did not publish on this era of her life. Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, whose journal eventually absorbed Colby’s, were easterners in the mainstream of the American feminist movement. Colby, by contrast, was marginalized in space, by her marriage, and by her increasing identification with Lost Bird, who herself was marginalized as an Indigenous girl and woman, by the massacre of her family, and finally by her abduction from the remainder of her people. She was perhaps sexually assaulted by white relatives as a teenager, another effect of marginalization that she shared with many Indigenous girls and young women who were taken from their own families and culture to be “civilized.” Given Lost Bird’s anguish, the disfranchisement of middle-class white women must have seemed trivial—except as it increased Clara Colby’s impotence to free herself or to help her daughter.

The relatively sunny meliorism that Canadian feminists like Nellie McClung and Emily Murphy espoused may well have been an antidote to the despair that Clara Colby could not ignore. Certainly, McClung would suffer later when her son Jack committed suicide, an after-effect, she came to believe, of the horrors he had been forced to witness and participate in overseas during World War I. The barriers of class and ethnicity undoubtedly kept Murphy and McClung from looking too closely into the darkness, despite their experiences. Henrietta Muir Edwards, the oldest and most silent of Alberta’s Famous Five, may have had a different sense of the tragedy of Indigenous women of the Plains that was playing itself out during
her lifetime. Her husband was the government doctor on several reserves and was frequently removed from his posts when he complained that the government was starving the Assiniboines and Blackfoot to whom it had made treaty promises, letting them die from the diseases of hunger and poor housing that no doctor could cure. Henrietta Edwards—who visited with many Indigenous families and who, with her husband, commissioned art and artifacts from Indigenous friends, introducing a meagre bit of cash into reserve economies—must have known, as Clara Colby did, of the despair and displacement, and may have tried, at least on a personal level, to assuage it. Yet if this deepened and complicated her feminism, she seems, unfortunately, to have kept it to herself.27

If we go back to the mainstream of Great Plains women’s movements, we see them continuing to focus on Euro–North American women. Perhaps because Canadian women faced more legal restrictions and fewer economic opportunities than their sisters across the line, Canadian Prairie feminists were more visible than American Plains feminists during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The exceptionally able journalists Lillian Beynon Thomas, Francis Marion Beynon, and E. Cora Hind, along with Nellie McClung, formed a powerful activist nucleus in Winnipeg before World War I. Their enormously popular “Women’s Parliament” of 1914, starring Nellie McClung as a parodic version of Premier Rodman Roblin, benignly denying the vote to men, both popularized the cause and helped weaken Roblin’s government. The efficient backstage management of the Beynon sisters guaranteed that after Roblin had been defeated, the Liberal government under T.C. Norris provided women with full provincial suffrage in 1916.28

Saskatchewan feminists were not as showy as those in Manitoba and Alberta, but they persuaded Premier Walter Scott to enact woman suffrage if they could demonstrate widespread support for it among women. The resultant petition drive, with thousands of signatures collected from mostly rural women all over the province, more than fulfilled Scott’s requirement, making Saskatchewan the only polity to enact woman suffrage in direct response to women’s own petitions. Alberta, like the other two Prairie Provinces, enacted woman suffrage in 1916, but its major feminist claims to fame came both earlier and later. Emily Murphy in Edmonton and
Alice Jamieson in Calgary were the first female magistrates in the British Empire. Irene Parlby, elected in the ufa sweep of 1921, became the second (by only months!) female cabinet minister in the British Empire, and she and Nellie McClung, elected by the Liberals, were the first two women to serve together as MLAs.29

Alberta’s Famous Five, however, are remembered best for the Person’s Case, in which the English Privy Council in 1929 reversed English common law and declared that Canadian women—and indeed all women in the British Empire—were “persons” in the meaning of the British North America Act that had founded Canada in 1867. It is hard to discuss the impact of what seems to be such a self-evident ruling, but it overthrew centuries of common law (plus a specific 1876 ruling) and would be part of the basis for recognizing women’s individual claim to status as citizens and, under Bill C-31, as status Indians under the Indian Act. Unlike the arguments of maternal feminism that largely won woman suffrage, the Persons Case was argued and won under the aegis of equal rights for women as individual human beings—as, quite specifically, persons. Although it is very unlikely that the Alberta women knew anything about it, they were recapitulating another important Great Plains civil rights case, that of Standing Bear v. Crook in Omaha in 1879. The Ponca leader, arguing his right to return to his original home from relocation in Oklahoma, was denied habeas corpus, and he sued to have that common law staple recognized for Indians by the United States. He won. Indians became “persons” under the meaning of the US Constitution, though the practical aspects of the win were denied to most other American Indians and Standing Bear’s “personhood” depended upon his explicit assimilation and renunciation of his Indian status.30 In this sense, his victory resembled the forced “enfranchisement” of the Indian Act. Finally, in 1955, in Brown v. Board of Education, a third set of Great Plains residents, in this case African American, carried what was essentially a third “persons” case to the US Supreme Court, which struck down the 1896 “separate but equal” doctrine and proclaimed the equal rights of all Americans, including those of African descent.

It is not surprising that Standing Bear’s case was brought on the Great Plains. By the late nineteenth century, most people whom the federal government officially recognized as American Indians were from either the
Southwest or the Great Plains, or had been relocated to the Plains. Nor is it surprising that the Persons Case came from the Prairies. Women’s political power had been institutionalized in the West before anywhere else. Even though Agnes MacPhail, the first Canadian woman MP, was elected from Ontario, she represented the United Farmers of Ontario and later the ccf. “Rural” and “western” are not unusually stand-ins for each other. As Walter Stewart points out, the ccf received a large bulk of its votes, if not its seats, from Ontario. The strength of women in agriculture translated into political power.31 While Brown v. Board of Education seems at first more anomalous, the Great Plains has always represented—and sometimes delivered—a greater equality to North Americans of African descent than have other parts of the continent. The Exodusters to Kansas, blacks in Indian and Oklahoma territories, blacks on the railways, and black homestead settlements from Nicodemus, Kansas, to Amber Valley, Alberta, all provided outlets from strict segregation even if they did not deliver equality. Despite the claims of North Carolina, the lunch counter sit-ins that marked the beginning of the 1960s civil rights movement started in Kansas and Oklahoma.32 Living with unfulfilled promises is more conducive to revolution than is living with constant and unwavering denial and suppression.

Although the American Great Plains was not as significant in the suffrage fight as were the Prairie Provinces, there were many local woman leaders who, for whatever reason, attained a place and a voice in the Great Plains. For instance, Jeannette Rankin of Montana, both a suffragist and a pacifist, was the only member of Congress to oppose US entry into both world wars. She supported the militant suffragettes, but she herself campaigned behind the scenes with her fellow members of the House of Representatives.33 As we have seen, women’s subsistence activities carried Great Plains homestead agriculture until the family was able either to sell out or to acquire enough land for a successful commercial operation, and women’s willingness and ability to have children supplied the labour for the farms. Yet in both Canada and the United States, property rights rested in the husband, not the wife, until the 1970s. An Alberta divorce case (Murdoch v. Murdoch) reached the Supreme Court in 1973 and resulted in the ruling that despite all her work on the family ranch during twenty-five years of marriage, Iris Murdoch was entitled to nothing when she had to
leave her husband. The ensuing outcry led to changing the law in all provinces, with Alberta’s *Matrimonial Property Act* specifically declaring, in gender-neutral terms, that “the contribution, whether financial or in some other form, made by a spouse directly or indirectly to . . . a business, farm,” or any other enterprise, as well as contributions as a homemaker or parent had to be taken into consideration when splitting the enterprise upon divorce. Meanwhile, in the United States, a group called Women Involved in Farm Economics (WIFE) finally succeeded in changing American inheritance laws so that a surviving husband or wife inherited a farm on exactly the same terms. Previously, the law had provided that when a wife died, her husband automatically inherited the whole farm with no inheritance taxes, but when the husband died, the wife was liable for all estate taxes and frequently ended up losing or selling the farm to pay the taxes, especially as the capital-intensive days following World War II meant that farms were often worth millions of dollars.34

Historians have paid a great deal of attention to Prairie women suffragists—with good reason. Nellie McClung’s wit and verve alone make her remarkable in feminist annals, while Francis Marion Beynon’s sentimental but incisive *Aleta Dey* and her columns in the *Grain Growers Guide* are both rhetorically and intellectually complex. Jeannette Rankin, University of Wyoming professor Grace Hebard, and Clara Colby all represent original strains of argument that do not show elsewhere in the United States. Prairie writers from Nellie McClung and Emily Murphy themselves, to Willa Cather and Meridel LeSueur (who could not be more different from each other), to Margaret Laurence and Jane Smiley and Sharon Butala both show and create important aspects of the intellectual history of the Great Plains and have attracted considerable study. Deb Fink has shown how the ideal of the family farm has required great sacrifices from women. Sylvia Van Kirk and others have demonstrated how completely the fur trade depended on women’s work. The whole tradition of agriculture on the Great Plains has relied on women. The Hidatsa and Mandan women, with their shoulder blade hoes, were the horticulturalists of their day, and homesteading women kept the gardens going before land speculation or wheat could pay off. Even today’s “farming the mailbox” has primarily and invisibly depended on the off-farm work of women as well as their efforts
in the work of both field and management. The only economic exception is that of ranching (though one could point out that the cows do a good deal of reproductive work), and that, too, began to depend on the labour elasticity of women and children when fences and careful herd management replaced free grass. When Euro/Afro/North American women began to settle on the Great Plains in the nineteenth century, they replaced the “deficiency” of Native and mixed-blood women, but they were still deficient compared to men, with an inferior capacity to hold property and thus a diminished personhood. In general, recognition of women’s rights has certainly improved, though Native women on the Great Plains, as elsewhere in North America, still suffer from gendered racism that negatively affects everything from life expectancy to professional advancement, despite the successes of many individual women.