

Highlights of Nellie McClung's Career

By Bette Mueller

Who was Nellie McClung?

In 2008, Nellie McClung was chosen as the fifth greatest Manitoban. Although her name is well known, many people are unsure about her contributions and accomplishments.

Who was Nellie McClung? Why is she remembered?

Nellie McClung, born in 1873 in Grey County, Ontario, was the sixth child and third daughter of John and Leticia Mooney. Like so many families in Ontario during the last part of the 19th century, the Mooney family moved to Manitoba. In 1880, they settled near Wawanesa and cleared the land to begin farming. Nellie did not attend school until she was 10 years old; however, by the time she was 16, she was teaching in a country school near Manitou.

Soon she met the Methodist Minister's wife, Mrs. Annie McClung, who would become her mother-in-law. Nellie was most impressed by Mrs. McClung. She seemed to have modern ideas and she worked to bring them about. For instance, as early as 1893, Nellie had seen her collecting signatures for a petition to demand that women receive the vote.

She also met Mrs. McClung's son, Wesley. They were married in 1896 and lived in Manitou where four children were born. In 1911, they moved to Winnipeg and then, in 1914, to Alberta; in 1932, they moved to Victoria to retire.

So far, Nellie McClung's story sounds like the story of many, many pioneers who settled on the Prairies and then moved west. It does not explain, however, why Nellie McClung is so well remembered more than 50 years after her death. It does not explain why her picture was on a Canadian stamp or why schools are named after her and statues built to commemorate her. Who was Nellie McClung? Why is she remembered?

She was Nellie McClung, Best-Selling Author:

Nellie's first book, *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, was published in 1908 while she still lived in Manitou; it became a Canadian bestseller. In all, she wrote 16 books. She also wrote numerous articles and monthly columns for newspapers as well as

articles for such magazines as *Maclean's* and the *Canadian Home Journal*. She continued to write well after her retirement. In fact, when she was 74 years old she said, "Because I've got a bad heart my doctor has told me not to write. I assume he meant books so I keep busy on letters, editorials and messages." (Savage, Candace. *Our Nell: A Scrapbook Biography of Nellie L. McClung*. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1979, p.199. Also, see the complete list of Nellie McClung's books).

She was Nellie McClung, the intelligent, humorous international speaker:

From Nellie's fame as an author sprang another aspect of her career. She became Nellie McClung: The Outstanding Speaker. As the popularity of *Sowing Seeds in Danny* spread, Nellie was increasingly in demand as an entertainer, a recitalist, and a lecturer. At first, she took engagements in Manitoba, then in Ontario and finally throughout Canada and in the United States. In the beginning, she spoke about her writing but was soon speaking about the poor economic conditions women faced. She had joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which believed that the increasing consumption of alcohol by men was leading to the increasing poverty of women and children.

Her reputation as a witty, entertaining speaker spread and she continued to be in demand, touring and speaking well into her late 60's. Of course, public speaking was of prime importance as she became more of a political activist.

She was Nellie McClung the political activist:

Nellie became an activist for the enfranchisement (the vote) for women believing that only through having the vote could women have better lives. In Winnipeg, in 1912, she and other like-minded women, including E. Cora Hind, Lillian Beynon Thomas, Frances Beynon, and Dr. Mary Crawford founded the Political Equality League to fight for the vote for women. Before the election in 1915, the leader of the Opposition, T.C. Norris, promised that if he were elected, women would receive the vote. He added that they would need to gather 17,000 names on a petition asking for the vote for women. Premier Roblin stated that he was absolutely opposed to women voting.

The women campaigned for Norris throughout the Province. The highlight of the campaign was the now famous satirical Mock Parliament held in the Walker Theatre in Winnipeg. Nellie and her colleagues captivated the audience as Nellie took the part of Roblin and mimicked him as "men" asked for their rights. Despite their efforts, Roblin won the election.

Another election was called almost immediately. By this time, Nellie had moved to Alberta. She returned to Manitoba and was welcomed by large crowds of people as she campaigned. One of her biographers writes, "There can be no doubt that in the Manitoba election campaigns, Nellie McClung reached the pinnacle of her public career." (Hallett, Mary E. & Marilyn Davis. *Firing the Heather: The Life and Times of Nellie McClung*. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1994, p.137)

Norris won the election, and the Political Equality League submitted two petitions. The first was a petition with 39,584 signatures. The second was a petition with 4,250 signatures, all collected by 94-year-old Amelia Burdett of Sturgeon Creek (<http://manitobia.ca/cocoon/launch/en/themes/www/6>). On January 28, 1916, women in Manitoba became the first in Canada to gain the right to vote in a provincial election and to hold political office.

In Alberta, it did not take Nellie long to become involved with the suffragist movement. Soon, women there gained the vote as well. In 1921, Nellie was elected to the Alberta Legislature where she served as a Liberal MLA until 1926.

She was Nellie McClung - a member of the Famous Five:

By 1919, Nellie had joined Emily Murphy, the first woman magistrate in the British Empire, in the quest to have women appointed to the Canadian Senate. This eventually became the campaign that would be the Persons Case. As it was, women could not be appointed to the Senate because they were not considered persons under the Canadian Constitution. During the next few years, Nellie wrote to several Prime Ministers about the subject with little response. Finally, in 1927, Emily Murphy invited Nellie and three other well-known women to meet to discuss the issue. They decided to ask the Federal Government to rule on the question, "Did the word persons include women?" After a delay, they received the ruling from the Supreme Court of Canada; women were not persons under the law. The women decided to appeal to the Judicial Committee of the British Privy Council (Canada's highest court of appeals at the time.) On October 18, 1929, the decision was made. The Privy Council declared that women were indeed persons.

The ruling made women eligible to sit in the Canadian Senate. On hearing the news, Nellie said, "---the finding of the Privy Council that we are "persons" once and for all, will do so much to merge us into the human family." (Savage, Candace. *Our Nell: A Scrapbook Biography of Nellie L. McClung*. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1979. p.178)

In 1938, The Business and Professional Women of Canada placed a plaque in the lobby of the Senate commemorating the Persons Case. Nellie was the only member of the Famous Five to attend. In fact, Irene Parlby was the only other woman from the group still living. Nellie stood beside Prime Minister Mackenzie King and proudly addressed the audience on behalf of the Famous Five; then, she warned the Prime Minister that he had not heard the end of them yet.

She was Nellie McClung, a Trail Blazer:

Nellie McClung was heard where women were seldom heard. For instance:

- In 1921, Nellie was appointed the lone female delegate from Canada to the Methodist Conference in Britain.
- In 1936 at 63, she was the sole woman appointed (1936-1942) to the first Board of Governors of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. She had to ride by train from Victoria to Ottawa for the Board meetings. She often combined the trip with speaking engagements.
- In 1938, she was appointed a Canadian delegate to a session of the League of Nations in Geneva making her one of a handful of women to represent Canada at Geneva.

She was Nellie McClung the voice for the voiceless and the activist who didn't stop addressing problems and issues:

- In British Columbia, in the 1930's and 40's, Nellie supported the right of Japanese Canadians to vote even though she was booed by her audience. She also asked the government of BC to provide education for Japanese children in Canadian internment camps.
- In the 1930's, she urged the Canadian government to open its doors to the Jewish refugees trying to flee from Europe or to at least allow Jewish children into Canada.
- She was concerned that women who entered the workplace during World War 11 would be forced to leave their jobs after the war.
- She spoke and wrote about the need for equal pay for women in the workplace.
- As early as 1920, she spoke in favour of the ordination of women in the Methodist Church and later, the United Church.

Who was Nellie McClung?

She was an orator and an entertainer; she was an author and an activist; she was a teacher and a reformer who never stopped being concerned about and demanding support for others – for people who were unable to demand support for themselves.

Charlotte Grey writes, “Nellie, herself was unfailingly modest about her achievements – she was too busy trying to get things done to spend her energy on claiming credit. As she would be the first to point out, any success was the result of the collective efforts of colleagues and allies.” (v Gray, Charlotte. *Nellie McClung*. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2008, p.189)

Nellie McClung said, “I want to leave something behind when I go; some small legacy of truth, some word that will shine in a dark place.” (McClung, Nellie L.. *The Stream runs fast: my own story*. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1945, p.212)