

Nellie (Mooney) McClung (1873-1951)

Nellie Mooney was only seventeen when she got her first job teaching elementary school in Manitou, Manitoba in 1890. For several years she lived in the home of the Reverend James McClung and his wife Annie. Annie McClung had been working for a long time to improve the status of women in Canada and, in particular, to win the right of women to vote. Her passion for women's rights had an enormous effect on the young teacher.

During the next twenty years Nellie wrote a number of novels and autobiographical sketches that promoted the advantages of country life over city life. But these writings also gave a realistic portrayal of the hardships experienced by the women of the prairies, and her many thousands of readers across Canada could not miss the message that the typical female role of the prairie housewife was often a difficult and lonely one.

In 1911, after marrying Wes McClung, the son of her hosts in Manitou, she moved to Winnipeg where she became more directly active in a wide variety of social issues. She joined the Canadian Women's Press Club and used it to give a strong voice to women's concerns. Using her finely developed skills as a writer she wrote countless essays and newspaper columns detailing and defending the demands of Canadian women for a fuller and more just role in Canadian society. Within the national Methodist church community she championed the Social Gospel movement, which insisted that the Christian gospel was about addressing the needs of the poor and disadvantaged in society, and not just about personal comfort and salvation.

McClung's work in the suffrage (voter's rights) movement involved her in a number of conflicts with leaders in local and provincial governments. The premier of the province, Sir Rodmond Roblin, was strongly opposed to opening up the historically 'men-only' vote to women. Although McClung was not a natural orator she gradually developed her public speaking skills and, during a Mock Parliament of Women in 1914, she effectively used her brilliant wit to mock and ridicule the premier's position. At one point she was able to persuade the premier, under false pretences, to accompany her on a tour of the filthy working conditions under which women were forced to work in the very center of his provincial capital. He was not amused by the trick, but she had made her point and he could no longer deny the accuracy of her accounts of the plight of working women.

After moving to Alberta she continued her work and, in the 1920s, was elected to the provincial legislature. In 1929 she was one of five women who fought all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada to have women legally recognized as 'persons'. That women are persons appears self-evident to us 75 years later. But this legal and parliamentary battle, as absurd as it now seems to us, was a necessary step before Canadian women could obtain the right to vote in federal elections.

Throughout much of Nellie McClung's adult life there was rarely time for rest. She maintained an exhausting routine of cross-country speaking engagements, endless writing assignments and fierce political debate. At the same time she raised four children and managed a household. Her legacy to Canadian women is difficult to measure. But there can be no doubt that without her persistent efforts the struggle for women's equality would not have flourished as it did during her lifetime.

Philip Berrigan

Philip Berrigan became world famous during the 1960's for his dramatic protests against the Vietnam War. Together with his brother Daniel and a number of other 'radical pacifists' he forced his nation, the USA, to ask deep and troubling questions about its fundamental values and about its behaviour both at home and abroad.

Berrigan was a decorated soldier in World War II, but he was so disgusted with what he had seen and done in the army that he became a committed pacifist. During the 1960s his work as a Catholic priest in an African American community opened his eyes to the close relationship between poverty and racism. But what disturbed him even more was the way war and militarism had become a major part of the economy and of the American way of life. In order to challenge his country to stop the exploitation of the poor at home and to change its militaristic approach to international issues, Berrigan dedicated himself to a life of public protest.

When his church became concerned about his outspoken civil rights activity he was transferred from Newark, New Jersey to Baltimore, Maryland. Here he quickly formed a group called Peace Mission, which began its demonstrations against the Vietnam War by picketing the homes of the highest government officials, including the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State. In late 1967 Berrigan and a few other members of Peace Mission entered an office building in Baltimore and poured bottles of their own blood over military draft documents. Charged with damaging official government documents, Berrigan was sentenced to six years in prison.

But before the sentencing he and eight others, including his brother Daniel, stole hundreds of draft files from another building in Catonsville and set them on fire in the parking lot using artificial napalm, a mixture of soap and gasoline. This group went to trial under the nickname 'The Catonsville Nine'.

The extreme nature of these actions had mixed results. Thousands of people across the nation were encouraged to register their own protests against the Vietnam War, even if they were not willing to make quite the same personal sacrifices as Philip. Increasing numbers of students rallied against the war on university campuses. Potential draftees decided they would not go to Vietnam and opted instead to go to jail, or else they fled to Canada.

But some of Berrigan's supporters felt that he had gone too far, that his extreme methods would make it too easy for the government to dismiss all protesters as 'crazies' or North Vietnamese sympathizers.

After he was paroled in 1972 he continued to speak out against nuclear weapons development and against America's huge financial and scientific commitment to militarism in general. 'War is our government's number one business,' he said, echoing the words of Martin Luther King Jr. Throughout the 80s and 90s Philip Berrigan was often in trouble with the law. He led a number of raids on corporations that played important roles in the development of military technology. In these raids he and his associates attempted to damage the equipment used in manufacturing weapons.

In 2001 a film was released which documented the Catonsville Nine protest and trials. But Berrigan, now 77 years old, was unable to attend the premiere: He was in prison on another charge of 'interfering with a weapons system.'

SuAnne Big Crow

Although she was only 14, SuAnne Big Crow was already a starter in the fall of 1989 when the Pine Ridge Lady Thorpes bussed out to play a rival basketball team in a nearby town. The players had been warned that they could expect to face severe heckling and that some of it might be racist in nature. So none of the girls was very surprised to hear the rhythmic chanting and imitation war-whoops even before the game had begun.

As game time approached the chanting became louder and louder until it became difficult to hear the coach's final instructions. Some of the girls glanced nervously at the locker room door. It was obvious that they felt intimidated and fearful of going out on the floor for the pre-game warm-up.

The Lady Thorpes always entered in order from tallest to shortest. But, as the team gathered in the hallway just outside the gym and felt the full impact of the unruly crowd, the team's leader, a senior named Doni, became completely unnerved. Peeking through the partially open locker room door, she and the other girls could see fans mockingly waving Federal Government food vouchers and bobbing up and down in the bleachers in imitation of traditional powwow dancing. Even the school band had joined in, reinforcing the chanting of the stomping fans. Some of the fans were yelling for 'the squaws' to show up and get the game going. Doni's face was white with anger and fear. 'I can't handle this. I can't go out there.'

SuAnne was angry too. But somehow she managed to keep her cool, and after a minute or so while the coach tried to persuade Doni to move out onto the court SuAnne suddenly stepped forward to the front of the line. She seemed strangely self-confident and eager to go out onto the court. 'What are you doing?' Doni asked. 'Don't go do something stupid. You'll make complete fools of all of us.' SuAnne answered, 'Don't worry. I won't embarrass you. Just be sure you all follow me in.'

She took the ball from Doni and with a final glance to make sure the rest of the team was behind her she sprinted onto the court dribbling the basketball. Without any hesitation she ran from one end of the gym to the other and turned. The other girls expected her to run laps so they nearly piled into her when she abruptly stopped at centre court. Tossing the ball to Doni she removed her warm-up jacket, draped it gracefully around her neck, and slowly raised her head to face the unruly fans. Then she began to perform the Lakota shawl dance. From her throat came the accompanying song in the Lakota language.

Within seconds the crowd was utterly silent. Her team-mates were stunned. Later one of them recalled, 'All that stuff the fans were yelling it was like she reversed it all somehow.' All that could be heard in the gym was SuAnne's strong unwavering voice. When the song was over she removed the jacket from her shoulders. Grabbing the basketball again she ran a fast lap, dribbling all the way, and sent a perfect lay-up through the hoop.

Pine Ridge won that game and went on to capture the first state championship ever won by a Native American team. But the real achievement of that night is best expressed in Doni's words. 'It was funny, but after that game the relationship between us and (the other school) was tremendous. Later, when we went to a tournament and they were there we were hanging out and eating pizza with them. We got to know some of their parents too. What SuAnne did made a lasting impression and changed the whole situation.'

Before she died in a car accident in 1992 at the age of 17 SuAnne had set a number of track and field records. After her death numerous awards and scholarships were established in her name. She continues to be remembered as a champion of inter-racial healing.

First Ones In, Last Ones Out

Sharon Janzen is a 28-year-old nurse from British Columbia. She spent six months last year in Somalia working with one of the world's most respected Non-Governmental Organizations: *Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF)*, or *Doctors without Borders*. "In Somalia) there are no hospitals, no universities, no law and no police," says Janzen. "There are just warlords and clan fighting. And the medical personnel have all left." This is exactly the type of place you expect to find MSF. The organization looks after the health of people in areas of conflict or disaster where there is little or no medical infrastructure. It prides itself on being the first NGO in and the last one out.

Janzen was one of five international volunteers on a mission to set up a clinic in Somalia's south-central Dinsor province. Two of her co-workers were Kenyan, one was Swiss and the project coordinator was Canadian. Together they worked round the clock to tend to the health needs of a population of 100,000 - some of whom traveled on foot for days to receive medical attention.

"In trauma, we would see two or three gunshot wounds a week," says Janzen. "We also saw a number of children who had limbs blasted off by grenades. Altogether, we had about 35 patients in intensive care, and between 50 to 100 people a day as outpatients."

Malaria, dehydration and diarrhea, she says, are particularly common in the rural heartland. The little team did its best to heal the sick and fortify the healthy, in conditions that would test the steeliest of stomachs. "We had to get someone to fan off the flies when we were doing sterile procedures [like stitching wounds]," Janzen recalls. To forestall epidemics, the team carried out mass immunizations and doled out advice on how to avoid the spread of diseases.

"We had a big focus on basic hygiene," she says. "If nothing else, we wanted everyone to know how to wash their hands and prepare food properly." Not everyone could be saved however. Janzen tells the story of one of the ones who got away - a tetanus patient who required a tracheotomy to survive. The know-how was there - the group's Kenyan doctor had surgical experience - but the oxygen necessary to ventilate the patient during the operation was not. The clinic, she explains, relied on airlifted supplies, but you can't transport oxygen by plane. All they could do was sit by and watch him die.

"You just do what you can," says the Victoria native, who decided as far back as 1994 that she wanted to volunteer with MSF after reading a report on their work during the Rwandan genocide. What attracted her was the possibility of making a hands-on change in situations where others just wring their hands. "It's an extraordinary feeling," she says, "and it eventually becomes addictive. Instead of watching the crisis on TV, I can actually go and help. If I did nothing but immunize all day long in Somalia, I'd be saving lives. It's so intense."

Her family is worried. They're just getting over her decision to go to Somalia. But Janzen assures them MSF is very mindful of the security of its volunteers, especially after five MSF workers were killed in a terrorist attack in Afghanistan. They're told, "even if you have to leave everything behind, all the equipment, the supplies, even the whole mission - if you're in danger, get out. Your security is more important."

J S Woodsworth

When he died in 1942 James Shaver Woodsworth had been Member of Parliament for Winnipeg North Centre for 21 years. But he will be remembered, not for the length of time he spent in Ottawa, but for his life-long commitment to the creation of a climate of social justice in Canada and peace around the world.

J S Woodsworth was born in Ontario in 1874 and was ordained as a protestant minister at the age of 22 after theological training in Winnipeg. Much of his work was in the poorest neighbourhoods of Winnipeg and Toronto where he became convinced that the industrial society which was rapidly developing in urban Canada was victimizing its workers, particularly the thousands of immigrants streaming in from Europe who were paid much less than the basic necessities of life would require.

Woodsworth's writings about these matters became a rallying cry for social reform right across Canada and in 1913 he was invited to serve as secretary of the Canadian Welfare League. Woodsworth, a staunch pacifist, used this position to denounce the federal government for its participation in World War I and for its policy of conscripting soldiers to fight overseas. The government shut down the league when it became clear that Woodsworth would not stop his criticisms.

Woodsworth had never been completely comfortable in his role as a Methodist minister. He had always preached that the church must be willing to speak out against the current system in which the rich were in complete control of the economy and the poor were left victimized and powerless. Eventually Woodsworth left the church altogether, feeling that it's response to social issues was ineffective and not likely to improve.

In 1919, after earning a living in the shipyards of Vancouver for a few years, he began traveling across Canada writing and lecturing for a complete reform of the political and economic system. Also in 1919, Woodsworth spoke out on behalf of the thousands of exhausted soldiers returning from the war struggling to re-integrate into Canadian society and desperately unable to find work. This got him directly involved in the famous Winnipeg General Strike where, as a result of his leadership, he was arrested.

After the strike Woodsworth openly declared himself to be a socialist, and he spent the rest of his life defending the rights of farmers, factory and construction workers and immigrants. The people of Canada, particularly those on the prairies, responded by joining him to form the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, which soon came to be known as the CCF Party. Although the party was never able to gain enough votes to form a national government, many people said that the CCF and J S Woodsworth served as the conscience of the nation. As a result of the work of J S Woodsworth and others who followed in his path the government of Canada eventually introduced a number of important programs such as unemployment insurance and a national health care system.

Today his home on Maryland Street in Winnipeg has been completely restored and it houses a theological school whose goal is the training of women and men who are committed to making the world 'more just and compassionate'.
