

The Brightest Women of Our Land: Vancouver Clubwomen 1910-1928

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Who is it greets you with a smile
And makes you feel life is worthwhile
You quite admire her breezy style
Of help and inspiration
The Club woman.

Who puts her shoulder to the wheel
And makes you feel her presence real
You know her by her high ideal
The Club woman.

Who gives the others of her store
Her wisdom, strength and time galore
And seeks herself for greater lore
The Club woman.

All honour to this noble band
The brightest women of our land
Whose motto is a helping hand
The Club woman.¹

Women's clubs of various sizes and strengths and with a multitude of interests and goals had, by the early decades of the twentieth century, become an accepted and effective medium for maternal feminist activism. The term "maternal feminism," coined by researchers, describes a philosophy which included the promotion of a wide range of reform goals and a loosely connected set of beliefs regarding women's role in society.² Maternal feminist clubwomen were at pains to show the world that natural motherly understanding and abilities were essential to the reform and succour of the

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basic institution within society, the family. By stepping out of their traditional sphere of the home into a wider public role, these women believed that they would be able to improve and strengthen society as a whole, both through and for the family.

Previous studies of clubwomen and their organizations have typified the former as married, middle-class and middle-aged. This image has been built, in large part, from studies of the leaders of organizations that had a national membership, such as the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC) and the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) or from studies of broadly based movements, like suffrage, which resulted in the formation of supporting groups across the continent.³ Women involved in the highest levels of clublife in organizations of such a scale and with such a high public profile certainly form a valid topic of study; their characteristics reveal a great deal about the movements they represented. They indeed were most usually responsible for the formulation and propagation of the ideology of their organizations.⁴ However, they were not necessarily representative of the many thousands of women who belonged to and supported the multitude of maternal feminist organizations which flourished across the country in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The majority of these women were, of course, rank and file members who belonged, not only to the large national associations, but also to smaller local groups.

An accurate picture of these women can only be reconstructed by looking directly at them, rather than at only their leaders. While it is important, in the historical study of Canadian women, to work towards the construction of a national picture, it must also be remembered that Canada was, and is, a geographically vast nation with a multitude of regional and local differences. For both these reasons, there is a need and a place in the study of Canadian women's history for the more narrowly focused and detailed case study. Such a study sheds a somewhat different light on the characteristics of early twentieth century clubwomen.

Vancouver women in the early years of this century were concerned with the same maternal feminist goals as were their sisters across Canada. So they sought to improve and strengthen society by stepping into a wider and more public role. Individually and collectively, they desired a variety of reforms. Many of them believed that the best way to achieve their goals was by gaining and exercising the powers of citizenship. The winning of suffrage was an important part of this concept but it was not the only factor involved. For these women, citizenship involved an active commitment to winning and using the vote to alter legislation concerning themselves and their children for the improvement of all society.

Between 1910 and 1928, five Vancouver women's organizations, in particular, promoted these ideals of female citizenship. Although the citizenship focus was not necessarily the primary reason for their existence nor their only concern, it was a major concern for all five groups both in terms of its perceived importance by members and the amount of time spent on its promotion. The Local Council of Women (LCW), as the Vancouver representative of the NCWC, encompassed a wide spectrum of women's groups. The University Women's Club (UWC) drew its membership

from only university-educated women. The Vancouver Women's Building Society (WBC) was primarily concerned with the erection of a building which would serve both as a home for many women's clubs and as a physical manifestation of women's new public role. The New Era League (NEL) formed in October 1916 immediately following the winning of the provincial franchise, used its name to reflect the optimism that its members felt regarding their new ability to extend their influence as citizens. Non-partisan and non-sectarian, the League aimed to encourage members to take a general interest in public affairs. It specifically promoted and supported legislation directed towards the greater protection of women and children, such as mothers' pensions and the minimum wage for women. The Women's Forum (WF), begun in 1912, hoped to organize and unite the women ratepayers of Vancouver "with the aim of dealing effectively with those public questions that affect them both as women and as citizens"⁵ at the municipal level. This always remained its primary focus but it soon became involved with the other four clubs in pursuing similar goals at the provincial level.⁶

In a study of the membership of these clubs, 1534 women who were members of one or more of the clubs during the period 1910-1928 have been identified by name. The names were obtained from a wide variety of sources including club records, press accounts, government reports and correspondence which dealt with club activities. The list, although it is extensive, does not pretend to be complete. The UWC archives contain membership records for the entire period and probably include well over ninety percent of the members during these years.⁷ The LCW papers consistently recorded executive committee members throughout the period as well as individual members.⁸ A large proportion of delegates from affiliated societies were also recorded on a regular basis, but no effort was made to trace women who were simply members of affiliated groups. All shareholders in the WBC are recorded in annual reports submitted to the Registrar of Companies.⁹ The names of a small number of women who appear to have been WBC members without having been shareholders, were found in social and club notes in the daily press. Membership in the NEL and WF was much more difficult to ascertain. No records of these clubs remain, and so their names were culled from press reports, social notes, records of other clubs and correspondence with government bodies. In the case of these last two clubs, the number of executive and committee members identified was almost as great as the number of rank and file members discovered. Both the NEL and WF were considerably smaller than the LCW, UWC and WBC and the proportion of members involved in executive and committee work appears to have been greater. It may be, therefore, that only a small number of members remains unidentified.

One notable characteristic of membership in all the clubs was its long duration. Well over half the women identified were members of one or more clubs for three years or longer and many were active over the entire period studied. Although it is impossible to ascertain the exact number of women involved in these clubs during the years 1910-1928, those identified represent a significant proportion, probably over half. They also represent those women who were most involved. Women who remained unidentified were probably those who played a very minor role in clublife.

Clubwomen were drawn together initially by two shared factors: their gender and their desire to improve their position by extending their influence in the public sphere. Many of them shared further characteristics but there were also differences amongst them which are too significant to dismiss in an attempt to describe only the norm. The study examined seven characteristics: marital status, age, education, place of birth, ethnic origin, religion, and socio-economic status as determined by occupation and place of residence.

While the majority of identified clubwomen were married, as previous studies have emphasized, nevertheless, a large number of the women were single. According to the *1921 Census of Canada*, the proportions of married and unmarried women in Vancouver were roughly equal; 46.5% of women over the age of sixteen were married, 45% were single.¹⁰ But 70.2% of identified clubwomen were married and 26% were single. Married women, then, although they were in the majority, did not have a monopoly on reform and citizenship activities. Most single clubwomen were members of the UWC which consistently had more single than married members. Many were young, relatively recent graduates but a considerable number were older, remained single and pursued both careers and reform over an extended period. Like married clubwomen whose families had grown past the stage of needing constant attention, these single women had some free time to devote to clublife. Frequently, though not invariably, their concern for reform arose out of their professional activities.

The age of clubmembers was impossible to determine with accuracy except in the case of a few individuals. Of these, the youngest were in their mid to late twenties in 1910. The remainder ranged in age from the mid-thirties to nearly fifty. By the 1920s, the oldest members were quite elderly women. Indirect clues, such as age of children, photographs and dates of significant life events, such as marriage or graduation, indicated that the majority of clubwomen were in the over-forty age group. The UWC, with the highest proportions of single members, had the largest number of young members, particularly after 1920 when new graduates of the University of British Columbia joined. The small proportion of single members in clubs other than the UWC appears to have been older and to have remained unmarried, although some single members of the LCW may have been delegates from affiliated clubs with younger members. The Graduate Nurses Association, for instance, was almost always represented by single women.¹¹ The WBC, as well, probably had a small number of younger women amongst its members. For instance, the American Girls' Club, the Girls' Auxiliaries of the Vancouver General Hospital and the Loyal Circle of King's Daughters were shareholders while the UBC Girls' Auxiliary was active in fundraising for the building.¹²

Previous studies have indicated that clubleaders were generally from the more mature age group. In Vancouver, this also seems to have been the case, although at the beginning of the 1910s, three of the leaders were in their thirties.¹³ Rank and file membership in Vancouver always included a number of women in their early twenties but there is no evidence that they played a particularly active role in club life or that they remained members through middle age. It is possible that they withdrew from club activities when

they married and rejoined in later years, but there is no evidence of this. Clubwomen on the whole were in their forties or older, though a number were young and single; young matrons with growing families, however, rarely appeared as clubmembers.

Educational achievement was a significant factor for certain clubwomen. All UWC members necessarily had a Bachelor or higher degree, but such a level of achievement was unusual among members of other clubs; only sixteen out of 430 women identified as having a degree did not belong to the UWC. Nevertheless, the 430 who did have degrees comprised thirty-eight percent of identified clubwomen. This was a high proportion, considering the small number of women graduates in the general population even by the end of the 1920s when female university attendance had increased. A smaller number of women pursued occupations which required post-secondary education. For instance, only sixty-six of the eighty-one members who were teachers held degrees. The remainder had presumably attended teachers' college. Other occupations such as nursing, journalism, librarianship and stenography clearly required a certain level of education though they did not necessarily require formal certification. The majority of clubwomen, however, shows no evidence of any education beyond elementary or possibly secondary level.

Place of birth and ethnic origin of members were virtually impossible to determine with any degree of accuracy. The newness of Vancouver and the age of the majority of clubwomen meant that very few members prior to the 1920s would have been natives of the city. Most of the few women whose place of birth was discovered came from eastern Canada. In the 1911 census, seventy-five percent of men and eighty-two percent of women in the city were classified as British racial stock and of these, thirty-nine percent of men and fifty-one percent of women had been born in Canada.¹⁴

In keeping with the origins of the city's population, the names of clubmembers were predominantly British. In the case of married women, this represented the probable origins of the husband rather than the wife, but it seems likely that the origin was generally shared. Some non-British names were found amongst members, but were probably at least second generation Canadians or Americans. Altogether, it seems probable that the majority of clubwomen came from eastern Canada, Britain or the United States with an increasing number of locally born women among the younger members by the 1920s.¹⁵

Religion was not a factor that directly affected membership in the clubs studied, but it was an observable and important factor in relation to the general reform movement of the period. Richard Allen has pointed out the importance of the social gospel movement, both in the years of its ascent, 1890-1914, and during the period of its greatest influence, 1914-1928.¹⁶ Just how great an effect the social gospel had on clubwomen in Vancouver is impossible to determine because there was no direct link between the two movements. However, the existence of the social gospel movement may have encouraged a woman with strong religious conviction to take part in reform activities. This is suggested by the fact that sixty percent of women whose religious affiliation was identified were either Methodist or Presbyterian, the

two denominations most closely involved with the social gospel. Only a handful of Anglican women, on the other hand, were identified.¹⁷ The activities of the churches at this time served to enhance the climate of social reform within which women's clubs operated and no doubt some women were strongly influenced by their own personal religious convictions, but there is no evidence that these women's clubs were major vehicles through which the churches worked.

The socio-economic status of 508 of the 1041 married clubwomen was ascertained by the occupations of their husbands. Status was assigned on a five-point scale from one (high) to five (low).¹⁸ Category One included the major professions, senior business and commercial occupations: the very top stratum of society.¹⁹ Medicine, law and the church were well represented with a considerable number of accountants, high-ranking company officers, large-scale merchants or company owners and university professors. Twenty-five percent of the husbands fell into this category. Category Two consisted of the minor professions, middle and low-level business occupations, including ownership of small businesses, white-collar occupations and one or two highly skilled, non-professional occupations. Just over half (fifty-six percent) of husbands fell into this category which represented the middle to upper-middle-class section of society. Category Three included the skilled trades in a variety of areas. The social position of this fifteen percent probably ranged from lower-middle-class to prosperous working-class. Category Four consisted of semi-skilled occupations and contained only four percent of husbands. They were clearly working class. The lowest category, Five, which contained unskilled, seasonal or transient workers, was not represented at all.

A total of 190, or twelve percent of clubwomen, were identified as working at paid jobs between 1910 and 1928. The majority of these were single women, but approximately one quarter were married. Many married club members took on major responsibilities on an unpaid or nominally-paid basis, for instance on public boards, or, as in the case of Helen MacGill and Laura Jamieson, on the bench of the Juvenile Court. Others worked sporadically, for instance as journalists, but while they may have earned some money, because they did not consider themselves working women they are not included among the 190.

Women were rated on the same occupational status scale as men, but were placed one category lower to allow for their lower status both as women and as workers. No women were, therefore, eligible for Category One and none appeared in Category Five. The highest category (in this case Category Two) which included medicine and law, university teachers and the highest ranks of business, accounted for seventeen percent of the women. The middle category (Category Three) included the majority of women (eighty percent). They worked as teachers, nurses, journalists and in a variety of skilled clerical and office jobs in the middle to lower-middle-class range. Only a small number (less than three percent) worked at jobs in Category Four which included domestic service, factory jobs and semi-skilled office and retail occupations.

The fact that twelve percent of clubwomen were employed is significant. The total female labour force, according to the 1921 census, was

approximately fifteen percent of the female population over the age of ten years and was composed predominantly of working-class women in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations.²⁰ The twelve percent of employed and largely middle-class clubwomen is therefore a higher proportion than that of working women of the same class in the general population. In other words, while paid employment for women of higher than working-class status was still not common, amongst clubwomen it was more common than in the general population.

The occupations of working Vancouver clubwomen and/or their husbands indicate that the majority of these women were of middle-class status, a category which includes the whole spectrum from those who were just below the elite level to those who were just above working class. A small proportion who came from a higher level can be classed as members of the social elite. However, almost as large a proportion of members were from the upper levels of the working class. The mix of classes is confirmed by an examination of the place of residence of individual members.²¹

From the late 1880s until the end of the first decade of the new century, Vancouver's West End, which lay between Stanley Park and the industrial and commercial activity of the central business district, was the chief residential area for the city's prosperous upper-middle and elite classes.²¹ By 1910, however, members of the business and professional class began to relocate into areas such as Point Grey, Kerrisdale and fashionable Shaughnessy Heights, opened in that year by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company on one of its many land grants. At the same time, middle-class families and some of the more prosperous of the working class began to move from their original homes in Yaletown and Strathcona to Fairview, Mount Pleasant, Grandview and South Vancouver.

The districts of the West End, Kitsilano, Point Grey, Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy, which Edward Gibson has characterized as solidly high status at this time,²² were home to over two-thirds of identified clubwomen, the majority of whom resided in the West End. The areas that he considered to be predominantly working class, Mount Pleasant, Grandview, Hastings, Strathcona, Little Mountain, Cedar Cottage, Riley and Renfrew housed a further one-fifth of members. However, no area, with the exception of prestigious Shaughnessy Heights, was the exclusive domain of a single social group.²³ The working-class areas contained small numbers of middle-class and even the occasional upper-class family. Likewise, small numbers of working-class clubwomen could be found in supposedly high-status areas like the West End, Kitsilano and Point Grey.

Place of residence of clubmembers is not an absolute guide to social status nor is the occupations of clubwomen and/or their husbands. However, both factors indicate the same general trends in relation to class and club membership, namely that along with the large body of middle-class members and a smaller number of women from the highest level of society, there was a small, but significant, number of working-class clubwomen. Previous studies have identified occasional clubwomen from working-class backgrounds, but those studies have failed to indicate that membership from this level of society has consistently involved numbers which, though small, are too large to

dismiss as unimportant.

An examination of participation by women at the executive and committee levels of the Vancouver clubs further indicated that the small body of working-class women played an active role.²⁴ In terms of total numbers, clubwomen whose occupations or whose husbands' occupations placed them in Categories One or Two formed the majority of club officers and committee members. But working-class women were also represented at this level of club life. While the total number of working-class clubwomen was small, their rate of participation in executive positions and on committees was as great as that of higher-status women. Thus, lower-class status was not, in principle, a barrier to full involvement in club life.

The picture that remains of the "typical" clubwoman even after a closer examination is not far removed from that mentioned at the beginning of the paper. A "typical" woman in Vancouver clublife was indeed married, of British background, probably middle-aged and certainly of middle-class status as defined by her own or her husband's occupation and place of residence. He was most likely a professional man or in the middle to upper levels of business or commerce and they were most likely to live in the West End, Kitsilano or Fairview.

However, while a closer examination confirmed this view of the average clubwoman, it also illuminated the fact that significant numbers of deviations from this norm were also important. For all their similarities, clubwomen were clearly not an homogeneous group.

Among the significant differences were, first, a sizeable minority of single women, many of whom worked for a living. Often their jobs were professional, but even those jobs of lower status generally required skill and training. Both the proportion who were employed and the status of their jobs were considerably higher than those figures for the general female population. Second, not all clubwomen were middle-aged. Amongst UWC members in particular, there was a large proportion of women in their twenties and thirties. This does not appear to have been so common in the other clubs, although some younger women were members of the LCW and WBC. Third, although Presbyterian and Methodist women were in the majority, clubwomen came from a wide variety of religious denominations. Personal religious convictions may have directly influenced some women, but it was not a significant factor in determining their involvement except in a most general sense. Fourth, there was a wide range of educational backgrounds from the highest academic accomplishments to levels that may not have included attendance at high school. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, not all clubwomen were middle-class. Although middle-class women, together with a smaller number from the very highest stratum of the city's society, formed the vast bulk of clubmembers, it is clear that the lower middle-class as well as the upper levels of the working-class were represented. Moreover, the membership of these working-class women was not purely nominal; some of them played an active role on the executive and/or committees of their clubs.

Insofar as this is a case study, only a handful of women's clubs in a single city over a relatively short period of time are included. However, its value lies in the collected specific data which can be compared with

generalizations that have been made previously regarding the nature and activities of women's clubs and their members. The results of such a comparison do not refute existing interpretations of the early twentieth century women's movement. Indeed, they confirm the fact that the movement in British Columbia followed lines of development similar to maternal feminist organizations in the rest of English-speaking Canada. However, the study does indicate that generalizations about the kinds of women involved in the movement may obscure important factors that deserve consideration. The involvement of significant numbers of lower-middle and working-class women in Vancouver clubs may, or may not, have been unique to the city. Vancouver's newness may have meant that barriers between classes were more fluid than in the older established cities of the east. Lack of a large industrial sector offering a multitude of poorly paid, semi-skilled jobs for women may have helped create a different social climate. Although some studies have painted an outline of the historical reality of women's lives in Canada it remains for case studies to identify and explain the details so that local and regional differences can be part of the big picture.

Footnotes

1. Written by "Jennie Columbia," possibly Mrs. Jennie Smith, Women's Special Issue, *Vancouver Sun*, March 19, 1913: 3.
2. Terence Morrison, "Their Proper Sphere: Feminism, the Family and Child-Centred Social Reform in Ontario, 1875-1900," *Ontario History* 68:1 (March, 1976): 51.
3. For instance, Veronica Strong-Boag, *The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada 1893-1929* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1976): Ch. 4; Carol Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983): 13; Wendy Mitchinson, "The WCTU: 'For God, Home and Native Land:' A Study in Nineteenth-Century Feminism," in Linda Kealey ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada 1880s-1920s* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1979): 152, 155; Catherine Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955) reprint ed., with Introduction by Ramsay Cook, 1974: 4; Diane Crossley, "The B.C. Liberal Party and Women's Reforms 1916-28" in Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess, eds., *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in B.C.* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1980): 230; Neil Sutherland, *Children in English Canadian-Society: Framing the Twentieth Century Consensus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976): 14; Carol Dennison, "The Women's Institutes of British Columbia 1909-1946: Housewives 'For Home and Country'" M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1983): 65, notes that the social status of leaders and that of rank and file members may not be identical.
4. Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred*: 4.
5. Women's Edition, *Vancouver Sun*, March 19, 1913: 6.
6. For a detailed discussion of all the clubs, see Gillian Weiss, "'As Women and as Citizens:' Clubwomen in Vancouver, 1910-1928" (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1984): Ch. 2.
7. Vancouver University Women's Club. Papers 1907-28. Boxes 1-2. Vancouver University Women's Club Archives.
8. Vancouver Local Council of Women. Papers 1900-30. Boxes 2-9. Special Collections Division. The Library, University of British Columbia.
9. British Columbia. Registrar of Companies. Vancouver Women's Building Limited Reports filed annually with Registrar of Companies, Victoria.
10. Canada, *Census of Canada* 1921, vol. 2: 117, 222.
11. Provision for the examination and registration of nurses and the incorporation of a graduate nurses' organization were included in the Registered Nurses' Act 1918: Ch. 65. However, a Graduate Nurses' Association had been in existence since at least 1912 when it affiliated with the LCW. The LCW was involved in lobbying for recognition of standard qualifications and from 1916-20 had a standing committee on Nursing; see also Judi Coburn, "'I See and Am Silent:' A Short History of Nursing," in Janice Acton, Penny Goldsmith and Bonnie Shepard, *Women at Work in Ontario 1850-1920* (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974): 151-155.
12. For a list of corporate shareholders see Gillian Weiss, "As Women and as Citizens:" 99.
13. *Ibid.*: 250.
14. Canada, *Census of Canada* 1911, vol. 2: 426-427.
15. Veronica Strong-Boag, *Parliament of Women*: 167-168; Carol Dennison, "The Women's Institutes in B.C.:" 61-62.
16. Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914-1928* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973).
17. Sheila Mosher, "Social Gospel in British Columbia: Social Reforms as a

Dimension of Religion, 1900-1920" (M.A. thesis, UBC, 1974): 1; Carol Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred?*, also found most suffragists were Presbyterian, Methodist or Anglican.

18. The scale was based on that used by Michael Katz in *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Harvard University Press, 1975). For further discussion, see Weiss, "As Women and as Citizens," Appendix C.

19. Robert MacDonald, "Business Leaders in Early Vancouver 1886-1914" (Ph.D. thesis, UBC, 1977) and Angus Robertson, "The Pursuit of Power, Profit and Privacy: A Study of Vancouver's West End Elite" (M.A. thesis, UBC, 1977). Both examine selected groups of the city's social elite. Very few husbands of clubwomen are included in the studies but they occupied a similar, if marginally lower, social position. Most of the husbands in category 1 were mentioned in the *Vancouver Social Register and Club Directory* (Vancouver: Welch and Gibbs Publishers, 1914).

20. Canada, *Census of Canada* 1921, vol. 4: XIV.

21. MacDonald, "Business Leaders:" 259-266; Robertson, "The Pursuit of Power:" 2-12; see also Edward Gibson, "The Impact of Social Belief on Landscape Change: A Geographical Study of Vancouver" (Ph.D. thesis, UBC, 1971): Ch. 3; Alan Morley, *From Milltown to Metropolis*: 119-120, 127-128; Patricia Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Co. and National Museums of Canada, 1980): Ch. 2.

22. Gibson, *Ibid.*

23. Weiss.

24. For detailed discussion of the leadership of Vancouver clubs, see Weiss, "As Women and Citizens:" 267-274.