



Women Suffrage and Beyond

confronting the democratic deficit



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Violet McNaughton

[20 Jun 2012](#) | [No Comments](#) | posted by Georgina M. Taylor | in [Activism](#), [North America](#), [Person Profile](#), [Profiles](#), [Regions](#), [Themes](#)

(1879-1968)



(L-R) Violet Mcnaughton,
Zoe Haight, and Erma
Stocking of the Women
Grain Growers.

Violet Jackson, who went on to become one of western Canada's most extraordinary suffragists, was born

and raised in radical north Kent in England. Progressive politics were encouraged by co-operators and radicals in her family and others in the area. Her ancestors took an active part in rebellions in north Kent and James Terry, her great grandfather, was a founder of the Sheerness Co-operative. Founded by dockworkers in 1816 to supply good food and water for their families, it was the oldest co-operative in England in 1863. After work, James and his wife Sarah were water carriers for the co-operative. Violet had rickets as a baby so she was small in stature. All her life others called her “the mighty mite” and similar names indicating her small stature and her indomitable spirit.

Violet taught school before she immigrated to Canada in October 1909 after her fiancée died. She came to keep house for her father and brother who were homesteading in Saskatchewan. In May 1910, she married John McNaughton, a homesteader from New Zealand, who was her loyal supporter all his life. A feminist and pacifist sympathizer when she arrived, she was an active agrarian feminist by 1914. The ardour of her feminism arose originally out of the dire conditions on the rural prairies during the settlement period and having a hysterectomy in 1911 while living in these conditions. Unable to have children, she resolved during her recovery in their ragged little “sod shack” to improve the world for all children.

McNaughton became a leader in the Canadian farm, women’s, peace, and co-operative movements and a good friend to other activists, such as Irene Parlby of Alberta and Alexander McPhail, her protégé and the first president of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. She organized the Women Grain Growers (WGG) in Saskatchewan, one of the most radical groups in Canada. She was a leader of the provincial woman’s suffrage campaign and other WGG campaigns, including the one for “Medical Aid Within the Reach of All.” It pushed through legislation in 1916 enabling the establishment of union hospitals, municipal nurses, and municipal doctors. It was the first step on the long road to medicare in Saskatchewan and later in Canada. McNaughton and other members of the WGG were ‘mothers of medicare.’ McNaughton helped to organize farm women’s groups in other provinces and was the President of the Interprovincial Council of Farm Women and the Women’s Section of the Canadian Council of Agriculture from 1919 to 1923. The most influential Canadian farm woman, she was regarded as “the big little woman” in the farm movement and “one of the ablest women in Canada.”

By the early twenties McNaughton was one of the three most influential members of the powerful Saskatchewan Grain Growers’ Association. She was active in the Progressives and she helped to organize and maintain the Wheat Pool, the ‘Egg and Poultry Pool,’ and The Western Producer. Although she remained “first and foremost a farm woman,” she became its women’s editor in 1925. The “Mainly for Women” pages and the “Young Co-operators” pages edited by McNaughton and her staff, were read by tens of thousands of westerners.

During the interwar years, McNaughton was one of Canada’s most influential pacifists. She linked peace between nation states with co-operation among the various ethnic and racialized peoples in Canada. Having learned more about settlers from continental Europe and the bad conditions in which the Aboriginal Peoples lived she became an adamant supporter of their struggles for social justice.

A dedicated member of the Canadian Women’s Press Club, McNaughton retired as women’s editor at the end of 1950 and wrote a column for another ten years. She then annotated and treasured her voluminous papers and promoted the preservation of the history of western settlers, women, and female agrarian journalists. This collection is now held by the Saskatchewan Archives Board. The McNaughtons sold their farm in 1959, John died in 1965, and Violet in 1968. We still need a full biography of this extraordinary Canadian. The author of this post hopes to supply one. Stay tuned!

Further Reading & Resources:

Bacchi, Carol Lee. *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983.

Cleverdon Catherine L. *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*. 1950. Reprint. Toronto: University of Toronto, 1974.

Taylor, Georgina M. “‘Let us co-operate’: Violet McNaughton and the Co-operative Ideal” in *Co-operatives in the Year 2000: Memory, Mutual Aid, and the Millennium*. Ed. Brett Fairbairn and Ian MacPherson (Saskatoon: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan, 2000), 57-78.

“‘What Can We, the Plain Common People Do?’: Violet McNaughton and the Hillview Local of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers’ Association” in *The Prairie Agrarian Movement Revisited*. Ed. Murray Knuttila and Bob Stirling (Regina: University of Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center, 2007), 31-60.

Gert Harding

[4 Jun 2012](#) | [No Comments](#) | posted by Gretchen Kelbaugh | in [North America](#), [Person Profile](#), [Profiles](#), [Regions](#)

(1889-1977)



Gert Harding

Are you starved, as I am, to read more books about heroic Canadian women? To see movies on the big screen about brave women – from any country – who stand up to oppression and help change the course of humanity? Not many know it, but Canada has such a heroine.

Gert Harding, who grew up on a farm in rural New Brunswick, joined one of the most radical groups of women ever to fight for a woman’s cause: the militant suffragettes of Great Britain (members of the Women’s Social and Political Union were dubbed suffragettes by the press.) When the British Government finally granted women a partial vote in 1918, Gert was one of the longest-lasting and highest-ranking suffragettes. In researching her biography, I came across only one other Canadian who even joined the WSPU, which numbered over 4000 members at its height.

In 1912, aged 23, Gert Harding was invited to join her sister's family in London, England. Within days, she witnessed her first poster parade of women carrying placards with slogans such as "Votes for Women" and "No Taxation without Representation". Drawn to the cause (which had begun 47 years earlier), she was soon a paid WSPU organizer, financially independent at last.

Gert's first big 'job' was to stage a midnight attack on rare orchids at Kew Gardens. A dozen newspapers reported 'the outrage', two claiming it must have been male sympathizers to the cause, as only men could scale the six-foot wall to escape.

Deciding not to perpetrate the violence anymore, Gert worked on the underground newspaper, "The Suffragette", eventually becoming its editor; she was private secretary to Christabel Pankhurst, the brains of the organization; and she headed up the secret bodyguard of women assigned to protect their leader, Mrs Pankhurst, from constant re-arrest by Scotland Yard. The bodyguard couldn't out-fight constables, but they outwitted them on many occasions. Gert worked undercover, sneaking through back alleys at night and wearing disguises by day. Such engagement undoubtedly helped when she later worked as a social worker in the slums of New Jersey and was fondly remembered in her eventual retirement in Rothesay, New Brunswick.

The story of Gert and her comrades should be debated and celebrated. Canadian school books skim over the story of how, through 50 years of ignoring or lying to suffrage activists, jailing militants as common criminals (rather than political prisoners) and force-feeding those who chose to hunger-strike, the British Government escalated the confrontation. Hundreds of women went from every legal means of protest to noisy demonstrations, window-breaking and eventually bombing and burning empty buildings. Such tactics were always used in the past by men fighting for the vote, but with many deaths. The suffragettes never harmed 'so much as a canary in a cage'. A feminine form of violent protest, if ever there was one.

Gert Harding deserves status as one of Canada's most exciting political figures, male or female. She risked family support and her reputation, health and physical freedom in pursuit of the basic right of democracy for women. As her great-niece (did I mention that?), I'm proud of this resourceful, passionate, humourous and brave heroine. Some may condemn the suffragettes' tactics, but without their radical edge of the movement, it might have been decades longer before Canadian and American women were granted the franchise after WWI. Women in France couldn't vote until 1944.

Does Gert deserve a place in Canadian history books?

Further Reading and Resources

Gretchen Wilson, 'Gertrude Harding, militant suffragette,' *section 15.ca*,
http://section15.ca/features/people/1999/12/07/gertrude_harding/

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Catherine L. Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 1974).

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Who We Are

We are based at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. Our team consists of [Dr. Veronica Strong-Boag](#), Canadian historian in Women's and Gender Studies and Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia, [Dr. Genevieve LeBaron](#), post-doctoral researcher at the Liu Institute for Global Issues, and [Kelly Christensen](#), MA candidate in Asia Pacific Policy Studies at the Institute of Asian Research.

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In The News

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