



EXTRAORDINARY
CANADIANS

Nellie McClung
by CHARLOTTE GRAY



CHAPTER ONE

What Is So Great about Nellie?

..... Never retract, never explain, never apologize.
..... Get the thing done and let them howl.
..... MCCLUNG CAMPAIGN SLOGAN

Getting to know Nellie McClung over the past year has crystallized insights into Canadian women that have intrigued me ever since I arrived in this country in 1979. I have often noticed a sort of robust self-assurance exuded by women I've met here. And now I realize that Nellie has had a lot to do with this trait.

I noticed the confidence soon after I settled in Ottawa, and started to acquire a circle of women friends. In some respects—age, background, education—they were similar to the friends I had left behind in England. But as I got to know them better, I realized that, in subtle respects, they were quite different. It wasn't just that they were better cooks—perhaps because, back then, most Canadians were only one or two

generations away from rural or small-town roots. It seemed to me that they had more confidence in their own opinions, and they were more self-assured about expressing them. They took themselves seriously, and they expected to be taken seriously.

What lay behind this sense of entitlement to their space in the world? I wondered. An obvious source was the egalitarianism that pervades Canada's public ethos—the assumption that anyone can make it up the ladder here. In 1979, this was a dramatic contrast to the class-ridden society I had left behind, where our accents and education betrayed the social niche into which we had been born. Another explanation for the difference was the Women's Movement, which in 1979 had had far more impact in North America than in Britain. Second-wave feminism had swept through my new Canadian friends' cohort while they were still in high school or university. The self-image of women had changed, and so had the way they related to men. Within Ottawa, my new home, political parties and the federal civil service were scrambling to recruit women. Not long after, this feminist tide also swept the land of my birth.

But I felt there was something else going on in Canada as well. Sure, women here had learned new political and social attitudes, but my new female friends already shared a conviction that the roles they played were as important in

themselves as men's. What's more, the Canadian men I met often seemed to share that view.

All generalizations about human behaviour are dangerous, and there were plenty of exceptions on both sides of the Atlantic. The year I arrived here, 1979, was also the year that Britain voted for its first woman prime minister (Margaret Thatcher). Canada did not equal this advance for another decade and a half, and then for no longer than a blink of an eye: Kim Campbell was gone in months. And yet. . . .

Over the next few years, I immersed myself in Canadian literature. The women I met in books shared the sturdy self-image of my new Canadian friends. Novels and short stories by writers such as Carol Shields, Margaret Laurence, and Margaret Atwood often featured a particular archetype—a forthright, witty woman who was a dramatic contrast to the passive-aggressive women I met in British novels by the likes of Jane Austen, Elizabeth Bowen, and Penelope Lively. Then, in the mid-1990s, I started writing biographies of nineteenth-century Canadian women, including Isabel Mackenzie King (mother of Prime Minister King), the Mohawk poet Pauline Johnson, and those two resilient sisters Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill, who recorded their experiences in the backwoods of Canada. All these women fit the female Canadian archetype that I had already

glimpsed in both modern Canadian literature and my own Canadian contemporaries.

Moodie and Traill, who arrived in Upper Canada as British immigrants in 1832 and whom I portrayed in *Sisters in the Wilderness*, best epitomize the determination and confidence of the archetype. These pioneer women displayed extraordinary courage, resourcefulness, and humour. It was their hard work, rather than that of their husbands, that kept their families afloat: they knew that they would survive only by their own efforts. One of my favourite quotes from Traill was her definition of what to do in an emergency: “It is folly to fold one’s hands and sit down to bewail in abject terror: it is better to be up and doing.”

At the other end of the nineteenth century, Nellie McClung belongs to the same tradition as those two redoubtable sisters. She too was a pragmatist who knew that survival in a harsh landscape depended on an individual’s will to be “up and doing.” As a child in the 1880s and 1890s, she watched her father breaking sod on the prairies, but she also recognized that her mother’s efforts and determination played a crucial role in keeping the six children in the McClung family fed and healthy.

Like Moodie and Traill, Nellie chose to capture her experiences in print. She first established her reputation as the

bestselling author of the novel *Sowing Seeds in Danny*. This wonderful portrait of small-town life in the West, published in 1908, has been undeservedly forgotten. But unlike Moodie and Traill, Nellie wanted to do more than write about the people she knew. She was an activist who wanted to improve society. Yes, there were folksy humour and quaint characters on the prairies, but there were also cruel gossip, drunken husbands, family abuse, and starving children. In the early years of the twentieth century, Nellie was already hard at work, making the personal political. She was a key figure in two of the critical campaigns of first-wave feminism: the fight to win the vote for women and (as a member of the Famous Five) the right of women to be considered “persons,” and to be entitled to sit in the federal Senate.

Those achievements alone would be enough to earn Nellie McClung a place in our political pantheon. Her zest, her convictions, her campaigns helped shape the Canada we live in today. A prairie populist, she embodied the values that still characterize Canada—faith in government, a collective commitment to social programs. She altered the political landscape. However, success in both campaigns was a collective achievement: Nellie was not alone. She fought alongside other women—Cora Hind, Francis Beynon, Emily Murphy, Louise McKinney—who played a full part and shared the credit.

It is another aspect of Nellie McClung's career that has caught my attention, and which, I think, goes a long way to explaining the differences I noticed, nearly thirty years ago, between my British friends and my Canadian friends. It is also the reason that she is the pivotal feminist of first-wave feminism. Nellie's most important achievement was that she kept feminism mainstream, and she set the tone and pattern for the next century of women's political activity. Throughout the suffrage campaign and the Persons Case, she made sure that she did not marginalize herself or her views. Even as she challenged the status quo, she did not withdraw from the political centre into a third party that had little hope of forming a government.

Nellie McClung had seen with her own eyes that the Canadian west was settled by the combined efforts of both men and women, and that both genders deserved credit for what had been achieved in the face of daunting challenges. But in her view, the battles were never exclusively about women's rights. Even as she campaigned for a radical change in gender relations, she deliberately kept on board groups that were not obvious allies—immigrant women, farmers and their wives, working-class men, factory workers. Because of her childhood experiences as a homesteader, she had a broad and down-to-earth view of how society should

operate, without discrimination against anyone—women, immigrants, Native people, Japanese Canadians, or strangers whose looks, accents, language, and gods differed from those of the dominant elite. Her egalitarianism set her apart from many of her fellow activists, who often shared the prejudices of their day.

Nellie was a tough fighter, but she was fair and she was funny. Indeed, in a country where we have always enjoyed mocking our politicians, her humour was absolutely essential to her success. (To rile her critics, she would quote a quip from her youngest son, “I am a suffragist’s child and have never known a mother’s love.”) Nellie achieved with wit and irony what feminist leaders elsewhere achieved only with harsh rhetoric and demonstrations. She did this both as a bestselling author, threading feminist messages into her lively prose, and as a brilliant public speaker. Nellie McClung was the first Canadian woman who became famous as a political campaigner, and her reputation spread far beyond Canadian borders. The audiences who flocked to hear her speak absorbed her messages as they roared with laughter.

One cannot write about feminism without introducing a few heavy-handed references to patriarchy. Nellie was operating in a male-dominated society, and her actions did not dislodge the deeply rooted power structures of her Canada.

She never used the word herself, but by the time I arrived here references to “patriarchy” underlay every feminist analysis. They still do: society is slow to change. But I think that there is more gender equality in Canadian society than in any other country I have lived in (including Japan, Britain, and the United States), and I think in large measure we can thank Nellie McClung, the most important feminist of her time, for this.