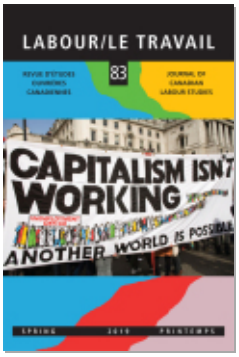
One Hundred Years of Struggle: The History of Women and the Vote in Canada by Joan Sangster (review)



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In conclusion, to raise these questions and issues is not to cast doubt upon the vital importance of Marcel's work, his contribution to the discipline and the great debt of gratitude owed to him by many scholars across the globe. It is, however, to raise the continued importance of critical engagement rather than simply celebration, of shortcomings alongside strengths. Critical engagement is vital to the further development of the exciting and wide-open fields of transnational and global labour history.

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Joan Sangster, *One Hundred Years of Struggle: The History of Women and the Vote in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2018)

Joan Sangster's *One Hundred Years of Struggle* is a remarkable inaugural volume on the centenary of the federal extension of the suffrage to white women in Canada. It is an overview of the rich diversity of suffrage histories that led to the final extension of universal suffrage in 1960. Subsequent volumes will treat the topics introduced here in greater depth, but this work will doubtless become a standard text for students of Canadian women's history. At under 300 pages, its length is manageable. It is accurate and historiographically mature, but still readable. The publisher agreed to include numerous images and primary texts, all of which will facilitate classroom integration. Most importantly, Sangster has remembered the primary task of the historian, which is to tell good stories. Every chapter employs biography to tell personal stories of individual suffragists, most of whom have escaped the traditional narratives around Canadian women's history. Because of its decentralized complexity in both space and time, the story of Canadian women's suffrage is especially difficult to tell. I can't imagine anyone having done it better.

The introduction invites us to imagine suffrage as a series of concentric circles. Those in the innermost circle were focused almost exclusively on the vote, extending their activism beyond the vote only to pursue other, related objectives like expanding women's roles in society. Beyond the first circle lies a group of activists whose objectives were broader. Whereas the first group pursued the women's vote as end unto itself – political equality as a goal with inherent justice and consequent worth – the second group may be thought of as women who viewed suffrage as a means to an end. The justice of women's equality with men, for this group, was tied up with achieving a more just society generally. The third circle looked broader still, its members organizing occasionally around suffrage, but more often around religion or social clubs. All looked to leverage women's talents to improve society. Some envisioned structural transformation that would strike at the root of injustice; others accepted the basic ordering of their society but worked to make less radical improvements.

Subsequent chapters address issues that divided women, like property, race, imperialism, and war. A loose chronology is maintained, making the dense, disparate, non-linear history easier to follow. Suffrage intersected frequently, if not universally, with other struggles. Land, labour, class, religion, language, or race play parts in every story. Party politics favoured women's enfranchisement in some circumstances and hindered it in others. Ideology inconsistently supported or opposed suffrage depending on the political moment. Assumptions around progress, the superiority of white culture and Christianity vis-à-vis Indigenous, Asian, or Afro-Canadian groups, even

after assimilation, permeated white discourses about suffrage extensions.

Two chapters help readers imagine the competing worldviews that emerged around the suffrage debate between those who participated in the creation of what Sangster calls "feminist countercultures" and the "antis" who opposed them. She helpfully categorizes all arguments employed by antis into five themes on gender relations: "innate sex differences and separate spheres; maternity, domesticity and the family; the protection of traditions and order…; war and military might; and culture and religion." (118) She also reminds us that there was always more at stake than gender. Race and class hierarchies intersected with gender and reinforced one another, both rhetorically and politically. Feminists pushed back with mock parliaments, women's journals, women's columns, novels, cartoons, films, and marches. Together, they created an ethos of resistance whose importance Sangster highlights. They allowed feminists to *feel* a certain way, a part of something shared among many across many parts of the world, something meaningful and greater than themselves.

An entire chapter is devoted to complicating the popular narrative that has associated women's participation in war with their success in achieving the suffrage. "Myths tied to patriotic versions of history," Sangster points out, "are difficult to disrupt." (175) Such mythologies, however, unravel under scrutiny. Inconsistencies between, for example, the presumption that women are naturally more inclined to peace than men and the presumption that women automatically supported the war effort on the home front, emerge. In reality, war divided women as much as it divided any other group.

Sangster acknowledges special sympathy for a diverse group she calls the "forgotten foremothers" (57) of modern feminism: labour and socialist activists. She takes the time to delineate among utopian (mostly Finnish) socialists, Christian/ethical socialists, and scientific/materialist socialists (à la Marx and Engels), not all of whom advocated women's suffrage. Some denounced suffragism as bourgeois, while others said it was socialist. Yet even those who agitated for the vote often, like May Darwin, exist "on the fringes of suffrage histories, in part because of her multiple loyalties to class, gender, and socialism." (73) Other factors similarly have excluded labour-oriented women's activists from the historical record, including the straightforward limitation of how much effort these women could expend on producing paper trails of their activity. More affluent feminists had access to a host of advantages including "education, access to news coverage, social and professional networks, and knowledge of institutional power, not to mention their class-based confidence." (93) They also had the luxury of replacing their domestic labour with the paid labour of other women, giving them far more of that most critical resource: time.

Sangster is especially gifted at breaking the paralysis that so often afflicts feminist writers who must face the critiques levied at early authors who tended to simplify narratives – lionizing some groups while ignoring others, forcing a teleology onto a far more crooked reality, or accepting uncritically hypotheses that fail to pass empirical tests, like the role of war in advancing women's rights. To be sure, those critiques are generally correct and necessary. It is far easier, however, to tear something down than it is to build it up again. If Canada is to break through its traditional exclusion from global and transnational feminist history, we must do more than criticize oversimplified stories: we must find ways to tell stories that can hold the complexity of the history without losing the compelling quality of

narrative itself. This book is an exciting first step in a series that promises to do just that.

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Dominique Clément, *Human Rights in Canada: A History* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 2016)

The author of *Human Rights in Canada* sets out an important agenda. Dominique Clément is intent on explaining "how and when human rights became Canada's primary language for social change." (2) An important question, because, as he argues, it is in the language of human rights that Canadians have learned to "frame the most profound – and the most commonplace – grievances." Moreover, the recognition and enforcement of human rights "has proven more bitterly controversial over the past generation" than any other issue in the public sphere. (1)

Clément begins his account with a search for the origins of human rights in Canada's colonial history to World War I. He argues that the constrained notion of rights associated with British justice in the colonial history of Canada cannot be taken as human rights, or as the origin of contemporary rights talk. The British conquest brought a particular rights culture to the colonies – basic freedoms and due process, but rights talk in the 19th century encompassed only basic civil and political rights, not human rights.

This account mirrors the trajectory of the current historiography of human rights away from searches for the origins of human rights in the historical roots of modernity. Clément presents his history of human rights in Canada in a chronological narrative, but he cautions readers not to look for the development of modern human rights in a linear story of progress. Such strictures foreshadow Clement's eventual portrayal of what he terms the human rights revolution as a sudden and deep discursive rupture that ushered in the era of human rights.

Clément's hermeneutics of human rights is often a story of the transformation or invention of new languages to advance human freedom and dignity. In his account of human rights from World War I to the early 1960s, Clément discerns no human rights victories, but clear progress was made to entrench antidiscrimination laws in Canada. In the 1940s, civil liberties – historically associated with state abuse of rights – were redefined to include the principle of non-discrimination in the public and private spheres. Ontario passed Canada's first antidiscrimination law in 1944. Clément's later focus on the agency of social movements in Canada's "rights revolution" is anticipated here in his account of the role of activists associated with the Jewish Labour Committee campaign to ban discrimination in employment and accommodation.

Some historians of human rights, pointing to the postwar creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations, and the European Convention on Human Rights, have rooted the origin of the modern human rights regime in the late 1940s. Clément rejects this origins story and periodization. In his view, "human rights has evolved in Canada not because of the existence of some abstract principle or in response to global developments, but because of circumstances specific to this country." (20) Moreover, the language of "human rights" was nowhere part of postwar public discourse in Canada. In the 1940s and 1950s Canadians were concerned with civil rights not human rights.

In an implicit manner, language and subjectivity are at the center of Clément's account of human rights in Canada. He is sensitive to the social and political