

Historicizing Whiteness within Canadian First Wave Feminism



How was the first wave feminist movement related to moral panic, drug laws, and eugenics?

Social Reform

- Although there were different types of feminists, the mainstream first-wave feminists (of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century) tended to be middle-class, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. They wanted to "purify" society from attributes that deviated from white Anglo-Saxon values.
- They wanted the vote for "proper" women, arguing that Anglo-Saxon women were more moral than men of their own class, as well as "foreigners."
- The feminist activists feared the decline of Canadian society and blamed immigration, the poor, non-Anglo-Saxon "races", and drugs, among other things.
- These activists feared the decline of Anglo-Canadian society and pressured the federal government to implement legislation to maintain white Anglo-Saxon Protestant supremacy.



Drug Legislation



- Following the 1907 Vancouver Riots, a moral panic emerged regarding drugs and race. In 1908, the first drug legislation was created.
- The riots led to a moral panic, as the riots were perceived by the ruling classes as a threat to their values. Therefore, the government implemented more coercive measures of control which limited the liberties of all Canadians, but especially poor drug users.
- Chinese Canadian men were viewed as "dope fiends" and a threat to white children. In 1923, new drug legislation was created, including the deportation of foreigners caught with illegal substances.
- Most feminists were not directly involved in policymaking but circulated these beliefs, as they feared the moral threat of drugs and their supposed consequences, like promiscuity and miscegenation. Others like Emily Murphy, however, were directly involved in policies that influenced drug legislation.

Eugenics

- Alongside many other social reformers, prominent first-wave feminists were in favour of sexual sterilization legislation.
- The legislation was enacted in Alberta in 1928 and in British Columbia in 1933. The feminist Nellie McClung saw this as one of her greatest achievements as an MLA.
- The "feebleminded" were the targets of this legislation, but groups such as women, southern and eastern Europeans, Indigenous and Metis peoples were over-represented.
- The sterilization was permanent and prevented the ability of these people to procreate. It was an attack on vulnerable communities and people that social reformers did not see as compatible with their ideals for Canadian society.



Contributions of prominent feminists: Emily Murphy and Nellie McClung

Murphy's book, *The Black Candle* equated social purity and morality to whiteness. Non-white Canadians were seen to have less self-control regarding vices and sexuality.

Murphy played a key role in the creation of the Canadian moral panic, by alluding to or portraying miscegenation between white women and Chinese or Black men. These men were portrayed as dangerous and motivated by greed and lust.

McClung believed in the superiority of Anglo culture in Canada. She advocated for the extension of Anglo Christianity and "humanity" to "less civilized" countries, which, in her view, treated women with no respect.



Case Studies: Lizzie Cyr and Leilani Muir

Let's explore the stories of two women whose lives were negatively impacted by social reform ideology.



Lizzie Cyr

- Lizzie Cyr was a twenty-nine-year-old Metis woman arrested and charged under Section 238 (a) of the Criminal Code for vagrancy in 1917.
- The female magistrate, Alice Jamieson, did not allow Cyr a fair opportunity to defend herself. Cyr was sentenced to six months of hard labour. Cyr's lawyer challenged Jamieson's status, arguing that, since women were not recognized as "persons" by Canadian law, Jamieson's ruling as a magistrate was invalid. The Canadian Supreme Court confirmed that Jamieson was not legally a person.
- However, in 1928, the UK Privy Council overturned this ruling. This victory legitimized Jamieson's decision to sentence Lizzie Cyr, so the latter served six months at the NWMP barracks in MacLeod.

Leilani Muir

- Leilani Muir was one of many people who were sterilized by the Albertan government without their consent.
- In 1957, Muir, a student at the Red Deer Provincial Training School, was permanently sterilized at 14 and was unaware of this until later in life.
- She was sterilized for her IQ and perceived "feeblemindedness." Later IQ tests confirmed Muir was of average intelligence and was wrongfully sterilized.
- She was of Irish-Polish descent and grew up in an abusive home.
- In 1996, Muir won a legal case against the Canadian government.
- Many others never received any form of justice. In the forty-four years of the Sexual Sterilization Act, 2822 Albertans were sterilized.

Final Remarks

- In Canada, first-wave feminism corresponded with the social reform movement and racialized moral panic.
- Many prominent first-wave feminists advocated for harmful policies to marginalized communities, such as non-Anglo-Saxon settlers, the poor, and Canadians who participated in "immoral" behaviour (drug use, poverty, prostitution, etc.).
- Within the mainstream feminist movement, feminists sought power for middle-class Anglo-Saxon women, but social reforms often penalized women who did not fit this standard. Cyr and Muir are two examples of this.
- Mainstream first-wave feminism was intertwined with white supremacy.

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