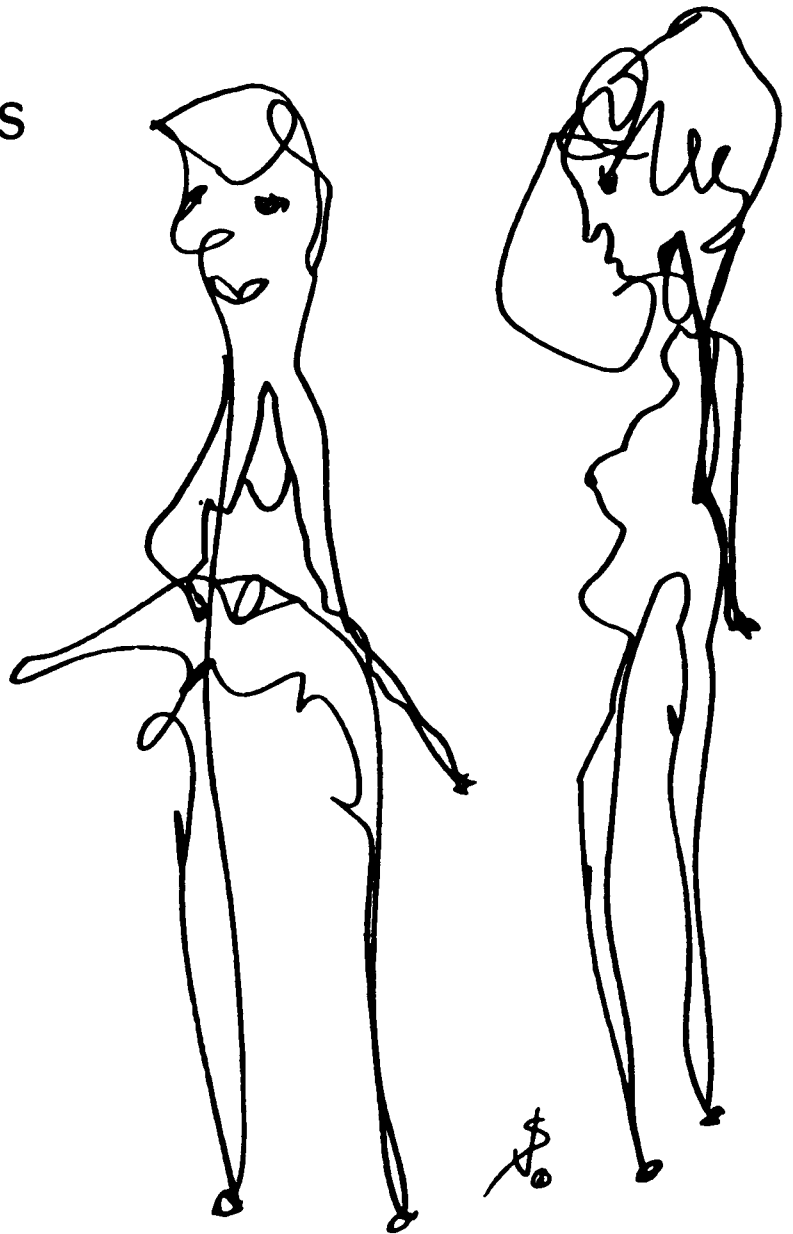


## Reports and Review Essays



*I was allowed to ask a question.*

# The Ideas of Carol Bacchi and The Suffragists of Halifax:

A Review Essay on  
*Liberation Deffered?*  
*The Ideas of the*  
*English Canadian*  
*Suffragists. 1877-1918.*

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During the thirty-four years since the appearance of Catherine Cleverdon's pioneering study of the suffrage movement in Canada, new sources have become available, the historiography on the progressive reform movement has advanced rapidly, and the field of women's studies has begun to come into its own.<sup>1</sup> In focusing on the thought of the English-Canadian suffragists from 1877 to 1918, Bacchi attempts a much-needed revision in the analysis of the movement. The result is a tightly-organized study, which

sketches the social and intellectual background of the suffragists in a series of broad and often controversial strokes. The new assessment refuses to accept reformers' own rationales for their motivation. Instead, it looks for more objective criteria in an emphasis on class; it seeks to re-assess women leaders in the light of the modern feminist position that the acceptance of any role distinctions based on gender are counter-productive; and it tries to eschew individual and personal judgements for generalizations based on a group

sample. Laudable as these goals may be, they lead to problems in this study. The repetitive invocation of class often gives the impression of reductionism, the condemnation of past women leaders raises the question as to whether their motivation has been fully understood, and the sample analysis suggests a lack of sophistication in the interpretation of quantitative data. In another sense Bacchi's study is a historiographic regression, abandoning as it does Cleverdon's panoramic regional approach for a narrow focus on Central Canada.

Bacchi argues that the suffrage movement in Canada was a highly conservative one. Introduced by a small clique of genuine feminists, it was later dominated by social reformers whose motives were different; "...the female suffragists did not *fail* to effect a social revolution for women," Bacchi maintains; "the majority never had a revolution in mind." (p.148) Each chapter leads to virtually the same conclusion; the suffragists belonged to a professional and industrial elite who felt threatened by social changes brought on by industrialization; they sought not to basically alter the system but merely to slow the pace of such changes. The social gospel which led men and women to seek reforms and some to become suffragists as a means of achieving them was essentially an attempt by the middle classes to prevent a more fundamental transformation. By accepting and stressing the terminology of a separate "maternal" sphere for women and at most a "housekeeping" role in society, the social reformers undercut feminists who sought occupational and domestic equality. Temperance supporters became suffragists to strengthen the dry vote. But temperance was not a feminist crusade. The goal of the prohibitionists was to impose puritanical middle-class values on society in order to moderate social change. The presence of a large group of "temperance women" diluted and softened the feminism of the suffrage movement. Even the more sophisticated "secular" reformers were basically moralistic or humanitarian rather than feminist in their motivation.

Their administrative structures reflected a mixture of class and personal ambitions which created responsibilities for a few women while the majority were told to stay in the home. The suffragists opposed venereal disease because it threatened the survival of the race and prostitution because it challenged the "values, authority and goals of the Protestant social elite." While some were offended at the sexual double standard, sympathized with individual prostitutes and sought more equitable marriage and divorce laws, their tactics of demanding chastity for both sexes retarded liberation through birth control and reinforced women's image of superior morality. Class loyalty took precedence over sexual loyalty and blocked the co-operation of suffragists with the farm and labour women's groups. The suffrage movement finally succeeded as politicians came to realize that a movement dominated by conservative reformers offered no feminist threat; women could safely be given the ballot when it seemed politically expedient to do so.

This picture is derived in part from an examination of some 200 suffragists, 156 of whom were women. Unfortunately, the sample is small, its members far from typical and the generalizations drawn sometimes exaggerated. For example, in discussing the role of higher education in producing suffragists, Bacchi claims that it "provided a common denominator for the entire membership." The statistics offered show that 93% of the select group received some form of post-secondary education. We then learn from a footnote that the educational background of 73 of the 156 women could not be ascertained. A moment's reflection reminds one that those rare women who had university degrees would unlikely have hidden them. In other words "the entire membership" drops to about half the group. But since the sample is made up of the executives of suffrage societies, this tells us only that the 10,000 rank and file members had a high respect for educational achievement in choosing their leaders. It does not tell us why they or their

leaders became suffragists. Most aggravating for the scholar who would evaluate or build on Bacchi's evidence is the absence of vital information about the individuals in the sample group, including their names, their societies and their geographical location.

Undergraduate students and non-specialists in the field will find this book an easily-read introduction to the suffrage movement in Canada. However, students may be confused by Bacchi's juxtaposition of similar terms with different meanings. She states that the "majority" of suffragists were "liberal reformers" in the British tradition while a "smaller number" were "committed Conservatives." (p.44) Her later suggestion that "ideologically all Liberals ought to have endorsed women suffrage and all Conservatives to have opposed it" is equally baffling. (p.136) But these crudities are not characteristic. Indeed, if teaching were only the art of simplification this work would rate commendation for that purpose. But scholars in the field will find the degree of over-simplification hard to accept. The rise of the social gospel, for instance, is attributed to a single factor—declining congregations. Moreover, Bacchi's use of primary materials on women's organizations in Canada is less than comprehensive. Although she refers to the problems of suffrage societies "fragmented both by geography and ideology" and troubled by "sectionalism," the study is largely confined to societies in Montreal and Toronto and two cities on the Prairies. (p.35) The records of even suffrage societies in the Maritimes were apparently not consulted.<sup>2</sup>

Because this work glosses over the movement in the Maritimes, it is useful to test its contentions in a look at the suffragists of a city there. As Bacchi generalizes, the Halifax movement was originally introduced by a dedicated group of feminists. Three of these—Anna Leonowens, Eliza Ritchie, and Edith Archibald were apparently included in Bacchi's list of suffrage leaders. All could be said to belong to the professional

and industrial classes.<sup>3</sup> But hereafter Bacchi's model does not readily apply. Archibald, as president of the Maritime WCTU, was in Bacchi's categorization merely a "temperance suffragist" and Ritchie with her Ph.D. and university position a "straight suffragist." Yet Archibald was the more outspoken feminist. She helped found a journal entitled *Equal Suffrage*, worked to organize local councils of women and even engaged MLA C.J. Wilcox in public debate on the suffrage issue.<sup>4</sup> Nor did the original feminists lose control of suffrage activity in Halifax as the journalist, Mrs. E.M. Murray, discovered in 1914 when she tried to form a suffrage group of her own, only to wind up deposed as president and offered the position of librarian. Although Leonowens left Halifax in 1897, Archibald and Ritchie teamed up with two other feminists, Agnes Dennis and May Sexton to direct women's organizations in Halifax until after the Great War.<sup>5</sup> Preferring, after their suffrage defeats of the 1890s, to work through the Local Council of Women, these women waited on the suffrage issue until, in Ritchie's words, "the time was ripe."<sup>6</sup>

Despite their caution on the suffrage issue, the Halifax Council endorsed causes which in Bacchi's terms would be considered radical. In 1908, when the "majority" of suffragists were supposedly committed to the belief that women should stay in the home, the Council launched a campaign for an industrial school to provide career training for women at Halifax. The women lobbied on the issue for years at the provincial level and later presented their case to the federal Royal Commission on Technical Education.<sup>7</sup> At a time when Bacchi says that most suffragists put aside feminist concerns for the war effort, the Halifax Council tried to use the war to open new employment opportunities for women through the creation of a women's employment bureau. They persisted in their efforts in spite of the insistence by Halifax employers that they were not needed and even in the face of the employers' steadfast refusal to hire

the women whom these suffragists put forward.<sup>8</sup> It would be ironic indeed if the Halifax women, long designated conservative by Cleverdon because they did not maintain suffragist organizations, would now appear radical because they emphasized other issues. One suspects, however, that the anomaly arises from Bacchi's exaggeration of other suffragists' lack of feminist concern.

In trying to establish class as the determining factor, Bacchi consistently minimizes the importance of a distinct women's perspective. Thus the temperance movement is treated as monolithic and pronounced non-feminist in nature. This, of course, is to overlook the possible feminist motives of many who joined—especially those who joined the WCTU. By the time of Confederation the Sons of Temperance had emerged as the mainstream temperance organization in the Maritimes. The Nova Scotia membership of approximately 15,000 was more than one-third women and by the 1890s women held executive positions in the local divisions and often represented them on the Grand Council.<sup>9</sup> That approximately 1500 saw the need to join an exclusively women's organization suggests that they were conscious of personal and group needs which were not met by the traditional societies. The local branches of the WCTU included among their concerns battered wives and children, the double sexual standard and venereal disease, and in the 1890s a women's campaign for peace through international arbitration.<sup>10</sup> While the WCTU may have exaggerated the association of such problems with booze, its attraction for women of a feminist bent is understandable. Many WCTU members probably endorsed women's suffrage, not because of an obsessive abhorrence of liquor, but because women's suffrage promised a more effective means of attacking the feminist concerns which had led them to the WCTU in the first place.

Bacchi also appears to take publicly-acceptable rationales for conduct as synonymous with actual motivation. While this is always danger-

ous, it is particularly so in the case of women. Successful women leaders of necessity became experts at dissimulation and deference in a male-dominated society. Illustrative of this point is the Halifax women's bid for technical education. In the Council minutes of 1908 and 1909 the women's goal was clear—to open avenues of occupational advancement to women in industry and to reduce the confining drudgery for those who remained in the home. They arranged a meeting with factory women to learn of their wishes and polled women with school-age daughters as to their needs. The motivation from this perspective appears feminist. Yet in the press campaign that follows one looks in vain for feminist statements. Here, the women obviously stressed what they believed would appeal to the men in power. An industrial school would increase the trained labour force. It would be "better than a curfew" in keeping young women off the street at night. Women with technical training would make more efficient servants.<sup>11</sup> Reading only the leaders' statements in newspapers one might conclude that the scheme was motivated chiefly by class interest and the maintenance of social control. Having read the minutes I do not believe it. Neither, apparently, did the men who rejected their proposals.

Bacchi suggests a continual lessening in distrust of the suffragists by politicians and public from the time of John A. MacDonald's franchise bill of 1883 to the later passage of the suffrage legislation during and after the Great War. (p.135) This is not only factually misleading but overlooks the effect on the suffragists of their very discouraging defeats of the 1890s. As Cleverdon shows, initial gains in legislative support in the early part of the decade melted away before its end in almost every province. At the beginning of the 1890s it seemed to many women that their emancipation was almost at hand. Some had launched their personal forays directly into men's sphere. Eliza Ritchie, a second generation feminist, having completed her degree at Dalhousie and post-graduate studies in philosophy

at Cornell, Oxford and Leipzig universities, had just begun a career of university teaching. A young May West (later Sexton) was then developing the enthusiasm which would later take her into the science programme at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Edith Archibald, her children almost grown, was rising through the echelons of WCTU leadership and working for a greater organizational unity among Canadian women.<sup>12</sup> Even Agnes Dennis, her teaching given way to a domestic career which included the bearing of ten children, could support local feminist activity while following the reports of women's attempted breakthroughs in the newspapers of the period.

Not only was a doctrine of "women's rights" apparently gaining adherents world wide, but there was evidence of some acceptance locally. In 1887 the Nova Scotia Legislature had recognized the right of women taxpayers to vote at the municipal level and support was mounting for women's suffrage provincially. The women activists, their confidence built in a variety of organizations from missionary to Shakespearean societies were conducting drills in parliamentary procedure and preparing for a new role in public life.<sup>13</sup> The WCTU led the way in openly endorsing women's suffrage and launched a campaign featuring speakers, pamphlets and petitions for its implementation. A few women formed a society devoted exclusively to suffrage, but the feminist energies were directed primarily towards the Local Council of Women which brought together 21 organizations to work for women's causes.

Husbands and fathers tended to be sympathetic or indulgent as were members of the local legislature. In 1893 a bill to give Nova Scotia women the vote on the same basis as men passed second reading by two votes. Attorney-general J.W. Longley only prevented its passage by keeping it in committee until after some members had gone home near the end of the session.<sup>14</sup> The

feminists confidently predicted victory at the next meeting of the Legislature.

That the suffrage leaders saw the ballot as a part of more basic social change may be inferred from their statements intended to re-assure men that domestic duties would not be neglected. Edith Archibald posed the problem in a paper to the Halifax Local Council in 1896. "Even if we do vote and govern and do all kinds of independent things in the near future, the dinner has got to be cooked," she wrote. Her solution was technical education for women, which could be used to create high-status careers for professional houseworkers and, through greater domestic efficiency, allow those women who chose to remain in the home to participate in outside activities.<sup>15</sup> Whether or not "a majority" of Halifax suffragists had "a revolution in mind," their leaders were clearly evolving a design for basic change in the role of women. Their later campaign for technical education can be seen as an attempted move towards their ultimate objective. While the goals of the rank and file are more difficult to assess, it is suggestive that they regularly elected feminists to lead them and passed every motion put before them which might be interpreted as feminist. Of course the suffragists, for obvious tactical reasons, did not publicly stress the social implications of their proposals. It was their opponents, such as J.W. Longley, who diagnosed the thrust of their campaign as constituting an attempt at social revolution and rang the alarm bells to rouse the conservative forces in society against them.

And here they were largely successful. A local Roman Catholic organ took up the challenge denouncing the feminists and the "new woman" in increasingly severe terms.<sup>16</sup> The suffrage bill was defeated in the legislature by a single vote in 1894. By 1895 Edith Archibald reported to the WCTU that the suffrage struggle had entered a new level of bitterness, which she optimistically predicted would win them new support.<sup>17</sup> But the reverse was true. It seemed the more embattled

the women became the more their support dwindled. In the first test of strength after the election, their bill lost by a dozen votes. Suffragist MLAs retained their loyalty but the newcomers seemed to be all on the other side. By 1897 there was barely a handful to rally to their cause.<sup>18</sup>

Female suffrage fared badly outside the legislature as well. An estimated five or six hundred people in Halifax paid 25 cents a head to hear the women's champion, May Wright Sewall of the United States, publicly debate the suffrage issue with J.W. Longley. The outcome was suggested by Lady Aberdeen's expression of dissatisfaction with the visitor's performance.<sup>19</sup> The contest was hardly an even one. A "master of ridicule and invective," Longley was on his home ground with decades of courtrooms and legislative experience behind him. When logic failed, he could resort to cruder invocations of humour. John Doull, a student at Dalhousie at the time, concluded on the basis of Longley's performances in the suffrage debates that he was the "greatest speaker in the country if not the world." In the 1960s Judge Doull, still remembered a line of doggerel verse with which Longley met the claim of women's advances in parts of the United States: "They have whiskers on their legs down in Kansas."<sup>20</sup> Public confrontation with male conservative forces frequently exposed feminists to ribald humour as their opponents launched a campaign of ridicule against both the doctrine of women's rights and its proponents.

Once the struggle was joined the women were reminded just how powerless they were. Universities, press and government were all under male control. Even when elements of these were sympathetic to feminism it was on male terms from a male perspective. And controversy and ridicule quickly scared off the faint hearted. The politicians were among the first to go. That women might be offended on the suffrage question translated only obliquely into votes through

possible male sympathizers. That a significant element of the male electorate should be antagonized on the same issue spelled direct loss of support. In any political confrontation the women were bound to lose.

The mid 1890s saw the expectations of the feminists largely dashed as one American state after another rejected suffrage proposals and legislative support for suffrage measures declined in each Canadian province. As an opponent gleefully pointed out, even the Methodist Church, whose leaders supported prohibition and women's suffrage had rejected the appointment of women as official representatives to a local conference.<sup>21</sup> In 1897 at the Halifax Local Council, which now suffered a decline in membership, a woman inquired as to the source of their "failures" only to be rebuked by Anna Leonowens who urged that the Council "refuse to acknowledge the word 'defeat'" and "press forward."<sup>22</sup> But brave talk could not conceal their disappointment. Amid a climate of anti-feminist reaction, what programs or strategy could feminist leaders offer which would continue to rally women to the cause?

In the WCTU in 1897, Edith Archibald suggested that, since "women's rights" had been so criticized, they should talk more of the "rights of children."<sup>23</sup> Hers was not an abandonment of feminism but a pragmatic shift of emphasis to goals which enjoyed some hope of achievement in the near future. There was much which needed to be done to improve the lot of women which could be rationalized as being within women's traditional sphere. Archibald dropped her suffrage activities and as president of the Local Council led the campaign to organize the Halifax Victorian Order of Nurses. The Halifax feminists returned to women's suffrage and more obviously-feminist causes whenever they believed progress was feasible. Meanwhile, they worked to build up women's organizations through an emphasis on social reform—an important cloak for feminist goals in a city,

which was one-third Roman Catholic, at a time when the Hierarchy were strongly opposed to what they perceived to be a threat to the family.

Whenever possible the leaders avoided taking a confrontationist stance on feminist issues. For that purpose the maternalistic philosophy was very useful. Indeed, Archibald and Agnes Dennis, her successor in the Council presidency, virtually smothered the conservatives with a maternalistic rhetoric on every issue suggestive of controversy. Meanwhile the organization grew and was in a stronger position to address feminist issues when they did surface. In 1910 the Local Council emphatically endorsed women's suffrage. In 1917, swelled by the affiliations gained through reform and war work the Council spoke for a membership of more than three thousand when it endorsed the same resolution in "a unanimous standing vote." In that year Archibald led the suffrage delegation to the Legislature and Ritchie conducted the publicity campaign which preceded it. The Council later spearheaded the drive to register women voters and Archibald led in the attempt to infiltrate the federal Liberal-Conservative Party.<sup>24</sup>

Bacchi's explanation for the ultimate attainment of women's suffrage suggests that the long range strategy of the feminists who exhibited a maternal philosophy really worked—that governments were so re-assured by the deferential women with their maternalistic rationales that they allowed women's suffrage to pass. Archibald and her colleagues—had they ever thought of it—would have considered any difficulty their maternalistic rhetoric might have caused later feminists a fair trade-off against the potentially useful weapon of the ballot which it helped to place in their hands.

Bacchi's study of Canadian suffragists raises some issues which must be considered by any student of the period and is the source of useful information. But the picture of the Canadian suffragists which it presents is open to question.

Were the Halifax suffragists significantly different in their motives and goals from suffragists elsewhere in the country? The answer to this question is to be found in more local studies. We also need a general treatment of the suffrage movement in Canada which would combine Cleverdon's scope in inter-regional comparison, Bacchi's revisionist skepticism, and the balance and maturity which are beginning to characterize recent North American scholarship in the field.

#### Notes

1. *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (second edition, Toronto, 1974).
2. See also M.E. Clarke, "The Saint John Women's Enfranchisement Association, 1894-1919," M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1979.
3. See brief sketches of Archibald and Ritchie in H.J. Morgan, *Types of Canadian Women* (Toronto, 1899) and of Leonowens in Ruth Blake, "Anna of Siam lived in Canada," *Maritime Advocate and Busy East* (January, 1951), pp.41-45.
4. *Annual Reports*, Maritime WCTU, 1891-96 and Nova Scotia WCTU, 1897 in WCTU Papers, PANS MG 20 vol. 356.
5. See information on Sexton in the entry on F.H. Sexton in David Allison, *History of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1971) and on Dennis in M.G. Stevens, *Mrs. Agnes Dennis, C.B.E.: Her Life* (Halifax, 1938).
6. Mrs. E.M. Murray to Cleverdon, 19 April 1943, C.L. Cleverdon Collection, P.A.C.
7. "Minutes," Halifax Local Council of Women, 19 November and 17 December 1908, 22 April 1909 and 21 July 1910, LCW Papers, PANS, MG20 vol 535. See also Dominion of Canada, Royal Commission on Industrial Training and Technical Education *Report*, 1913, Part IV, pp. 1746-50.
8. "Minutes," Halifax LCW, 28 June 1917.
9. *Journal of Proceedings of the Grand Division of the Sons of Temperance of Nova Scotia*, 1866, insert at page 1 and 1891, pp. 5 and 196.
10. See *Annual Reports*, Maritime WCTU. In a study of the WCTU in the United States entitled *Women and Temperance: the Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900* (Philadelphia, 1931), R.B. Bordin concludes that "Temperance became the medium through which nineteenth-century women expressed their deeper, sometimes unconscious, feminist concerns." See bald to Hector McInnes, 9 October 1921, Hector McInnes Papers, Halifax *Echo*, 28 November 1908, 21 July 1910 and 29 September 1911.
11. R.L. Shaw, *Proud Heritage: A History of the National Council of Women in Canada* (Toronto, 1957), p. 2.
12. The WCTU conducted "schools" of "methods and of parliamentary usage"; Anna Leonowens organized a women's Shakespearean society before the appearance of a suffrage society in Halifax.
13. Nova Scotia, House of Assembly, *Debates*, 1893, pp. 282-3, 288 and 295.
14. "On the Ethics of Homemaking" in *Second Annual Report of the Local Council of Women of Halifax* (Halifax, 1896), pp. 65-70. See also *ibid.*, p. 39.



16. *Antigonish Casket*, 27 April 1893 and 24 and 31 January 1895.
17. *Annual Reports* Maritime WCTU, 1895, p. 22.
18. *Nova Scotia Debates* 1895, p. 147 and 1897, pp. 93-94.
19. J.T. Saywell, ed., *The Canadian Journal of Lady Aberdeen* (Toronto, 1960), p. 402.
20. John Doull, *Sketches of Attorney-Generals of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1964), pp. 106-107.
21. *Nova Scotia, Debates*, 1895, p. 147.
22. "Minutes," Halifax LCW, 29 January, 1897.
23. *Annual Reports*, Nova Scotia WCTU, 1897, p. 10.
24. "Minutes," Halifax LCW, 23 February 1919 and E.J. Archibald to Hector McInnes courtesy of Donald McInnes, Halifax, N.S.