

# A Simple Matter of Justice: Agnes Deans Cameron and the British Columbia Department of Education, 1906-8

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*The accompanying letter, written by Agnes Deans Cameron (1863-1912) to the Honourable John Sebastian Helmcken (1824-1920), concerns the British Columbia government's suspension of her teaching certificate. It is unclear why Helmcken, an elderly man who had long since retired from provincial politics, contacted Cameron about this matter. The letter from Helmcken to Cameron, which precipitated this response and would likely clarify his involvement, cannot be located and may no longer exist. Cameron's letter is in a private collection in Victoria, British Columbia.*

*Cameron, born in Victoria, British Columbia, to Scots immigrants, Jessie and Duncan Cameron, was educated at Victoria High School and began teaching at age sixteen. Her career was marked by a number of "firsts: in 1890, she was the first woman high school teacher in British Columbia and, in 1894, she became the province's first woman principal. Unfortunately, her*

*career was more marked by controversy than by victory.*

*In 1890, a dispute raged in Victoria over her whipping of a male student. In this instance, Cameron did have the support of the Victoria school trustees, something she would not always maintain in future controversies.*

*Cameron's name surfaced in the local newspapers in 1901 regarding two issues: sex discrimination in Victoria teachers' salaries and alleged disobedience to a school trustees' decision. In the former case, Cameron spoke out unsuccessfully against a proposed salary increase for male teachers only. The latter instance resulted in the suspension of Cameron and another teacher, the only two women principals in the city, for having supposedly disregarded the trustees' decision to replace written promotional exams with oral ones. The matter was settled privately and Cameron was reinstated.*



Photo credits: Agnes Deans Cameron (as a young girl - born 1863, died 1912). (*Provincial Archives of British Columbia* -#2423).

*The most vexing and persistent problem of Cameron's life began in 1905 while she was principal of South Park School, Victoria. Cameron was accused of having allowed students taking high school entrance exams to use rulers for the drawing portion of the exam. For this transgression, she was again suspended in December, 1905. The suspension was immediately followed by a public inquiry which continued for two months. Having found the use of rulers in every South Park drawing book but one, Justice Lampman decided against Cameron. The final blow came in April, 1906, when the provincial government suspended Cameron's teaching certificate for three years effective June 1, 1906. She was left without a means of supporting herself.*

*The suspension following the drawing book controversy, to which this letter refers, was a clear case of the government ridding itself of an independent, out-spoken and controversial teacher. Even Judge Lampman was aware of the animosity between Superintendent of Schools Robinson and Cameron when he noted in his decision **Re: South Park School Drawing Books** on February 23, 1906, that "...there has apparently been considerable friction [between the two] for some time." The discrimination against Cameron is further highlighted by the fact that students in three other schools were accused of having ruled in their drawing books, but their principals, **all males**, retained their positions.*

*The injustice of this situation was obvious to the public. Local people, many of them prominent members of the community, rallied around Cameron to nominate her for the position of school trustee in the upcoming election. She received more votes than any other candidate! Having to then work with the very people who had caused her so much agony was not an enviable situation so it was not surprising that she prepared to leave Victoria.*

*Even after having established herself in a new career in journalism, Cameron never accepted*

*the suspension of her teaching certificate nor did her supporters. The issue was occasionally raised in the local newspapers during the ensuing years and was even discussed in the Legislature in March, 1908. This is the action to which Cameron's letter undoubtedly refers. The provincial government was unrelenting, however, and never restored her certificate.*

*As late as 1911, Cameron showed her anger publicly while addressing the crowd who had gathered to hear famed British suffragist, Emmeline Pankhurst. The December 21, 1911, edition of the **Victoria Times** reported that Cameron reminded the British Columbia government that they had "...take[n] away her only honourable means of livelihood, her certificate as a teacher."*

*Cameron's journalism career peaked in 1908 when she took a 10,000 mile trip to the North. Her journey commenced in Chicago and ended six months later after she had travelled up the Athabasca and Mackenzie Rivers to the Arctic Circle. The trip, documented in her only book, **The New North: Being Some Account of a Woman's Journey Through Canada to the Arctic**, was published in 1910. In 1912, she returned to Victoria as a celebrity, fell ill and died there at the age of forty-eight.*

6325 Monroe Avenue, Chicago, Ill.  
March 2, 1908.

Hon. J.S. Helmcken,  
Victoria, B.C./

My dear Dr. Helmcken,

Your letter surprises me not a little. Do I want my certificate back again? Of course I do. If you found yourself in the position of an unfrocked priest, would you not wish to be restored to your lost dignity? Your notice from the minutes of the house is the first intimation I have received of an effort being put forth toward this act of tardy justice. I have not the slightest idea of

the personality of the people who are moving in this matter; it is with them clearly a question of right and principle and decency. It can not be a personal matter, for I don't even know who they are.

The status of the affair is briefly this; the Education Department of the Province of B.C/ punished a whole class of children for alleged dishonesty, and refused them a hearing in their own defence. As the guardian of the honor of those children, I demanded that they be heard, contending that if but one was innocent, it was a gross act of cowardice and injustice to punish him for the sins of the others.

Even in that travesty of Justice, the farcical "Royal Commission" (so-called), the Government-appointed sole arbiter, Justice Lampman declared that one lad (Anton Henderson) was wholly guiltless of all the false charges of the government.

My certificate was rescinded for three years on the ground that I had made charges against the Education Department that I had failed to prove. I made no charges. My crime was that I insisted that defenceless children were entitled to the British fair-play of an opportunity of speaking in their own defence against a wholesale charge of dishonor.

For this crime, I was subjected to the indignity of a reversal of my certificate, branded as one unworthy to hold the position of teacher, and turned out in the world with that slur upon me to make a living after a quarter of a century spent in the service of the young people of British Columbia.

The Royal Commission had run me into debt, debt incurred on behalf of those children to whom I held the place of guardian; the fight was never a personal one with me. It would have been infinitely easier to have followed the line of least resistance, shut my eyes to all the heinous



"Here and there a lusty trout and here and there a grayling -Great Slave Lake" from the album of an "Expedition down the Mackenzie and up the Peace in the summer of 1908" by Agnes Deans Cameron and her niece. (*Victoria City Archives*).

rotteness of that Education Department, and continued to draw my salary. My mother was dying. I was wearied in body and soul, weary with the strife to retain to her the old home while she lived. I spent one whole night alone out at the beach trying to find some way in which I could honorably let the school-matter drop. And I couldn't do it. The very love I had for my Mother made me unable to dishonor her by cowardly silence. God! When I think how I suffered those days in that iniquitous Royal Commission watching the door for a messenger from home where the dear Mither was slipping away from me hour by hour, I have murder in my heart.

A letter from dear Bishop Cridge the other day says "*I know by your silence that you have nobly forgiven.*" I have not forgiven; I'm not made that way. I want my pound of flesh.

I haven't whined these two years but I have worked and I have suffered. I have lived mean and cheap and I have paid off the lawyers' bills for both the Royal Commission and the City of Victoria litigation about the old home. It is not the fault of the Government of British Columbia that they did not break me. They tried hard. They took away in my certificate the means of making my living; and after a life-time of service I had to begin a new kind of work in a foreign land. I did the meanest kind of office work; I worked at anything and everything I could get and I worked often 18 and 19 hours a day. And I have managed to keep my head above water, but it was no fault of theirs that I didn't go under.

And you ask me if I want the restitution of my certificate! I certainly do. I want it as a simple matter of justice. It was taken away unjustly. Let them restore it. It is not my place to ask for this; it is theirs to give it.

*(signed)* Agnes Deans Cameron

## NOTES

1. The original copy of the Agnes Deans Cameron letter is from a Private Collection, Victoria, B.C.
2. The following footnote provides an explanation of the two references to "the old home" which occur in Cameron's letter: The city of Victoria wished to raze Cameron's mother's house, where she had resided for more than fifty years, in order to extend Government Street, the city's main thoroughfare. Cameron fought with the city and lost. After her mother's death in 1906, the house was demolished.