

Her Work for Wages Earned the Vote

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Alderman H.L. Corey, Fred Crone and Helena Guttridge

This article will not provide a definitive study of either the woman's labour movement or the woman's suffrage movement in British Columbia. It will, instead, relate the two, through the ideas and work of one woman who was dedicated to both — Helena Rose Guttridge.

Her early life reflects the independence of mind and action important, and perhaps necessary, for involvement with such unpopular causes as suffrage and the unionization of women. Born in London, England, in 1879 or 1880, she left home to break off all contact with her family at the age of 13. Her parents did not believe that girls merited higher

education, so Guttridge worked to support herself and to pay for her studies at the Holy Trinity Church School and the Regent Street Polytechnic School. She also attended the Royal Sanitary Institute and earned South Kensington Department of Education certificates for teaching, hygiene, and sanitary science.

She joined the dramatic struggle for women's suffrage in Britain:

... it was as a militant suffragette that I worked. I took the stump at Hyde Park corner, took part in hundreds of parades, got thrown out of numerous meetings, waved banners in the House of Commons, anything at all to attract attention to our cause ...

She emigrated to Vancouver, B.C., in 1911, sailing to Canada with a number of other British suffragettes who were planning to stay for four years. Gutteridge, as it turned out, stayed much longer.

She became actively involved in the B.C. suffrage movement almost immediately after her arrival ... within weeks of first arriving in Vancouver, she formed the British Columbia Woman's Suffrage League 'for the purpose of obtaining votes for women on the same terms it is granted to men' and 'to deal with all matters connected with the interests of women, particularly those things that affect women out in the labour market.'

Gutteridge believed that, on the basis of human equality, women deserved the vote as much as men, and for the same reasons:

Every reason that men advanced for having the vote applies to women. We need the vote for specific legislation but outside of that we deserve it for the very reasons that earned it for men ... Men don't have the vote because of their ability or intellectual attainments. They vote because they are British subjects over twenty-one years of age.

Though clearly an equal rights feminist, Gutteridge was also, at least in part, a maternal feminist. She decided to 'attract the attention of working-class women through specific, pragmatic appeals clearly relevant to their lives.' This, of course, referred to the enactment of reform legislation, designed to improve conditions for working women.

One such area of particular concern to Gutteridge was prostitution, and its possible elimination through minimum wages for women. She wrote in 1913:

If women will concentrate their energies on getting the vote they will then be able to do as the women of Washington did — clean out the restricted districts and lessen the supply of women to the vice trust [prostitution] by passing a minimum wage act that all women workers may get a living wage.



Mary Ellen Smith

Provincial Archives of B.C.



Cecilia Spofford

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Gutteridge was also worried about the White Slave Trade. Her fears regarding it may today seem exaggerated, but it must be remembered that the trade was a major concern at that time. In 1913, as editor of the *B.C. Federationist's* suffrage column, she stated:

White Slavery is a splendid business success, an example of the efficacy of commercial organization, so why should it be stopped! It pays! That is from the male point of view, only keep those sentimental women out of the way or the city will lose the three or four thousand dollars a month paid in fines. Besides, no nice woman knows anything about the social evil! For years, women have been kept quiet with the phrase that no modest woman would seek to know anything concerning the so-called fallen women. They must rest content with the fact that the safety of the virtuous women depended upon the shame of their sisters, and if they did anything at all it must be by way of rescuing these vicious women, putting them into homes, and showing them in every way possible what disgraceful creatures they were.

Gutteridge, very expedient by nature, did not reserve much time for middle-class women, except when they could be of assistance in her never-ending cause of aid for working-class women.

...Until her death Helena Gutteridge worked ceaselessly for the rights of women. While it would be simple to praise Gutteridge for her work, it is perhaps better to let her have the last word ...

I always try to follow the advice I give to other women: Take an interest in public affairs. Keep yourself informed and express your opinions. Above all, be active. No matter how busy they may be with their families and homes, women are part of the larger community. They owe it to themselves to develop their abilities and to work for a better, peaceful world. There's still a lot to be done! ☉