

Women of *The World* and Other Dailies: The Lives and Times of Vancouver Newspaperwomen in the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century*

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In the spring of 1904, Sara McLagan, owner of one of Vancouver's three daily newspapers, *The World*, embarked on a journey across the continent to cover the St. Louis World's Fair. She joined a group of eastern women journalists who were mustering as many of their number as they could find to cover the fair. They wanted to make visible the presence of newspaperwomen in the Canadian press. The end result of this gathering was the formation of the first nationally organized women's press club in the world, The Canadian Women's Press Club. Members aimed to advance the status of journalism as a profession which women could honourably and profitably practise. Within a few years the club embraced press women all across Canada, but of the original sixteen members only two were from west of Ontario, both from Vancouver: Sara McLagan and Sarah Crowe Atkins, who supplied the *Province* with news of the fair.

The small number of newspaperwomen who were able to make a living in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found their opportunities either in sophisticated and diverse urban settings with markets for the specialist journalist or in sparsely populated pioneering communities with comparatively few obstacles to the enterprising woman. To a certain extent Vancouver represented both extremes. Despite its youth, Vancouver had a lively newspaper scene.¹ In the newly inaugurated city of 1886, three newspapers shared the fate of destruction by fire. From the outset, women contributed to the expansion and diversification of the Vancouver press. Sara McLagan headed the tradition of newspaperwomen in Vancouver. With

* We would like to thank Robert A. J. McDonald and Veronica Strong-Boag for their comments and suggestions. Research for this paper was undertaken with the assistance of a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Women and Work Program.

¹ J. B. Kerr, "Journalism in Vancouver," *British Columbia Magazine* 7 (1911): 576-79; D. A. MacGregor, "Adventures of Vancouver Newspapers 1892-1926," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 10.2 (1946): 89-142; Bessie Lamb, "The Origin and Development of Newspapers in Vancouver" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1942).

her husband, J. C. McLagan, she founded *The World*, Vancouver's first evening daily, in 1888. Following the death of her husband in 1901, Sara continued to run it, recruiting her brother, Fred McClure, to join her as business manager. She was the first woman to own a daily newspaper in Canada. Moreover, when Sara McLagan sold *The World* in 1905 another woman, Alice Miller Barry, organized the purchasing company and subsequently became the only woman to be managing director of a Canadian daily newspaper.²

Not many women since have occupied such strategic positions of power in the daily field, but during the first decades of the twentieth century, Vancouver women launched weekly publications of all stripes from the specifically reformist to the frankly commercial. Vancouver offered a number of women journalists a chance to make their way in the newspaper world; in the first quarter of the twentieth century more than fifty women wrote for Vancouver newspapers.³ The few who made names for themselves in public print at a time when women's identities were supposed to be private did so by force of personality and persistence. They were unique in their time and fit uneasily into anything resembling a group portrait. They were not a homogeneous group but they shared a few traits. Their chosen occupation demanded a wide general knowledge and demonstrable literary ability. The first generation of Vancouver women journalists were well educated; some even had postgraduate degrees. They came from families which could afford to educate their daughters, but most of them needed to earn an independent living. The majority of the women were single when they embarked on their newspaper careers but a surprising number, for the early twentieth century, carried on their work after marriage. For many, the women's departments marked the borders of their beats, and only a few were able to break out into general reporting. But from the confines of the women's pages they were in a position to influence the cultural, social, and moral development of the new city by speaking to its women. Particularly in the decade of reformist activism in the 1910s, editors of women's sections demonstrated to the reading public that what women did was news.

Sara McLagan obviously was not representative of the typical Canadian

² E. O. J. Scholefield and F. W. Howay, *British Columbia from Earliest Times to the Present* IV (Vancouver: S. J. Clarke, 1914), 928-32.

³ The names of Vancouver women journalists can be identified by searching through the Vancouver newspapers, the records of the Vancouver Branch, Canadian Women's Press Club, City Archives of Vancouver (hereafter CAV), Add. Mss. 396 and the national records of the Media Club of Canada, National Archives of Canada, MG 28 1232.

newspaperwoman. Not only was she first to run a daily paper, she was also the first female telegraphist in western Canada. Her father, John McClure, ran the telegraph office at Matsqui and trained his daughter to substitute for him. Her expertise stood her in good stead when she moved into the newspaper business, especially in the isolated West, which depended heavily on long-distance communication. It was years before a Canadian woman rose to become telegraph editor on a major newspaper, but Sara McLagan regularly sat at the wire on her own paper.⁴ As a prominent figure in her community, she was conversant with the major political figures and their preoccupations. One of her colleagues said of her: "She is a most womanly woman and yet one of the very few who can talk politics with men without making them wish for an excuse to change the subject."⁵ Her associates may have wished to emphasize her femininity, but there can be no doubt that McLagan was a strong and independent woman, quite willing to rule autocratically and publicly in defence of the family enterprise. To prevent "unauthorized copy" from infiltrating the pages of *The World*, she insisted on screening all copy herself and doggedly defied the International Typographical Union rule regarding unionized proof-readers.⁶

Notwithstanding her technical skills, ability to wield authority, and all-round proficiency as a newspaperwoman, Sara McLagan's place on *The World* was in many respects more typical of a nineteenth-century newspaper tradition than the twentieth-century pattern. It was less unusual for a woman to run a newspaper with her husband or father than it was for women to be hired as staff journalists, as they were in the twentieth century. As part of a family business, Canadian women had engaged in all aspects of newspaper work from the early nineteenth century. Alice Lemmon Keeler carried on her husband's paper in Brockville when he fled during the Upper Canada rebellion. Margaret Ellis wrote the book reviews for her father's paper, the *Saint John Globe*, while Kate Massiah covered the House of Commons for her brother, J. L. Norris of the *Montreal Herald*, in 1879. Effie Laurie accompanied her father and the first printing press west of Winnipeg to North Battleford, where she learned her future vocation. Two of the Blackburn sisters worked on the family-owned London *Free Press*. Sara McLagan was part of that minor tradition of small

⁴ Zoe Trotter was telegraph editor on the Calgary *Albertan* in the mid-1920s; Dora Dibney became telegraph editor on the Saskatoon *Star Phoenix* in the early 1930s.

⁵ NAC, Coleman Papers, MG 22 D112. Scrapbook, Gay Page (pseud., Florence Sherk), "My Friends of the Women's Press Club," *Daily News* (Port Arthur), n.d.

⁶ Lamb, 36.

proprietors who worked in a family context. But at the turn of the century, when McLagan took charge of *The World*, the family-owned city newspaper was becoming rarer. Except in small towns, women would henceforth find their opportunities in newspaper work, not as wives, sisters, and daughters, but as independent career women.

The creation of a place for women in the ranks of journalists emerged out of major changes in the ownership, orientation, and rationale of the press in Canada.⁷ Newspapers proliferated in the burgeoning cities, and Vancouver was no exception. So confident were ambitious newspaper entrepreneurs that they could make their fortune in the new Pacific coast city that they launched eight daily newspapers within the first three decades of its existence.⁸ Political ambitions figured in the motivation of Vancouver newspaper owners: Francis Carter-Cotton was an MLA for most of his years as editor of the *News-Advertiser*, while the short-lived *Telegram* was born mainly to counter Carter-Cotton's criticism of the local government.⁹ *De facto* party allegiance continued for some time, but the role of newspapers as overt party organs was declining in Vancouver as elsewhere in Canada. Forward-looking newspapers aspired to a reputation for independence. *The World's* editorial stance wavered between Conservative and Liberal but was professedly independent.¹⁰ Similarly, under the stewardship of W. C. Nichol, the *Province* professed an independent stance, one which usually concurred with the views of Vancouver businessmen. Unbiased public service became the slogan of modern newspaper ethics, and in this spirit the more enterprising new newspapers broadened their scope to appeal to the urban community in general rather than to a narrow political and commercial élite. Local news, human interest stories, and recreational features like sports, books, and music and drama reviews made the daily newspaper a medium of family entertainment rather than a mere soap-box for political oratory. For aspiring women journalists these changing notions of what was newsworthy created a market for "local colour" stories or "soft news" features that they could contribute. In these pre-suffrage days, the "hard news" stories of politics and finance were still

⁷ Paul Rutherford, *A Victorian Authority: The Daily Press in Late Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982). Rutherford does not focus on newspaper women but his analysis of major changes in the Canadian press provides a framework for understanding women's debut as journalists at the end of the nineteenth century.

⁸ *The Herald*, 1886-88; the *News*, 1886-87; the *Advertiser*, 1886-87; the *News-Advertiser*, 1887-1917; *The World*, 1888-1924; the *Telegram*, 1890-92; the *Daily Province*, 1898- ; the *Sun*, 1912- .

⁹ Kerr, 576.

¹⁰ Rutherford, 239, characterized *The World* as a "maverick" politically.

largely outside women's realm of experience, but aspiring newswomen could specialize in areas suited to their expertise: human relations, the arts, philanthropy, and entertainment.

Moreover, as newspapers extricated themselves from direct party allegiance, they became avowedly commercial enterprises with a need to show a profit. Competition for the loyalty of Vancouver's relatively small reading public was fierce among the three or four papers surviving at a given time. Large circulations to attract advertising revenue were imperative. It became increasingly apparent that women readers were essential to newspaper prosperity. Newspaper publishers acknowledged that they needed to demonstrate to advertisers their popularity with female subscribers. The *Province*, launched as a daily in Vancouver in 1898, required no convincing that a female audience was crucial to its survival. In the number for 2 October 1898, its "ad man" wrote a blatantly commercial account of why women read newspapers. Obviously addressing potential advertisers rather than women readers, he affirmed that

Advertising statements are really news to women . . . for they give to the woman information fully as valuable as that she will derive from any other part of the publication. . . . If the great publications, from the leading magazines down to the simple country local weeklies are spending every energy along the lines of feminine desire, it is certainly necessary that the advertisers should not forget that . . . woman is the pivot of trade turning.¹¹

In order to ensure that women were exposed to the blandishments of their advertisers, newspapers had to cater to women's interests. Whether in a daily column or a weekly page, offerings like society gossip, market news, fashion and beauty articles, and club reports had become regular features of most Vancouver newspapers by the early twentieth century.

However, the pace of innovations dedicated to women subscribers varied according to newspaper style. Although women's features were commonplace in American newspapers and fairly entrenched in many eastern Canadian dailies, Vancouver newspapers were not quick to discover their own formats for satisfying local women. In the first two years as a Vancouver daily, the *Province* merely paid lip service to the aim of addressing women readers, cutting and pasting miscellanies of trivia gleaned from other publications. Closer to the mark were the "Sunday at the Park" and "All in Vanity Fair" features which focused on local personalities, places, and events. The *Province* also dutifully devoted a whole page and turnover to the Women's Christian Temperance Union annual report, furnished by the corresponding secretary, M. A. Cunningham. "The Reporter's Note-

¹¹ "Advertising for Women," the *Province*, Oct. 1898, 6.

book,” adorned with a Gibson Girl-style illustration, was intended for female readers, but was really a shopping column, mixing endorsements for products like Blue Ribbon Baking Powder with personal trivia and local crime reports. Not until 17 February 1900 did a real woman’s page appear. The *Province* announced “In Woman’s Realm” and apologized that “uncontrollable circumstances” had previously stymied attempts to produce “a sheet such as cultured Vancouver will appreciate.” Mollie Glenn became the regular women’s page editor and henceforth served the women of Vancouver with hefty doses of local social news, club reports, and fashion comment.

The World was no swifter in establishing a regular women’s department. From its first years, “Daughters of Eve,” a mere catalogue of “facts” about internationally famous women, appeared episodically. An interesting series of articles, ostensibly written by “Lady Cook” for *The World*, conveyed modern ideas about dress, marriage and divorce, and other “new woman” notions to the Vancouver audience in the winter and spring of 1896. It was perhaps not mere happenstance that the introduction of a regular woman’s page in *The World* coincided with Mrs. McLagan’s ascension to control following her husband’s death. To be sure, *The World* had to match the *Province*’s appeal to women given that these two newspapers were the most popular contenders in the Vancouver market. Notwithstanding the vagaries of competition and commercialism, *The World*’s Saturday woman’s pages were more solid, varied, and lively than those of any other Vancouver paper at the time. Mrs. McLagan’s colleagues in the Canadian Women’s Press Club credited to her influence the ability of Vancouver women journalists to demonstrate what they could accomplish.

Because of the old-fashioned attitudes of its proprietor, the Vancouver *News-Advertiser* established its women’s section belatedly. With his eye to political advantage rather than innovation, Carter-Cotton was averse to new and popular features like sports, society, or fashion columns.¹² As a result, by 1900 the *News-Advertiser*’s circulation had fallen to third place among Vancouver newspapers.¹³ In 1909, just before Carter-Cotton sold the paper, Julia Henshaw’s “G’wan” signature began to adorn the *News-Advertiser*’s society column.

By this time, while the woman’s page was an established but often intermittent feature of Vancouver papers, the society column was an institution. All the Vancouver papers offered readers some sort of chronicle, usually

¹² McGregor, 608.

¹³ *The Canadian Newspaper Directory* (Montreal: A. McKim and Co., 3rd edition, 1901), 202-03.

daily, of the comings and goings of the fashionable élite. From mere lists of hotel registrants or ship passengers, the society column expanded to fill column after column with breathless accounts of wedding gowns, teas, and social fêtes. The society feature signalled Vancouver's arrival as a sophisticated metropolitan centre and complemented the more mundane newspaper articles which vaunted Vancouver's attractions as a business community and investment haven.

It was no accident that women monopolized this journalistic opportunity. It had become an axiom of the newspaper and advertising business that women read society columns before any other matter and that no newspaper could survive without chronicling who drank tea with whom, who poured, and what they wore.¹⁴ The advent of society columns coincided with women's début in Vancouver newspapers, and it was assumed that only a woman journalist would have the requisite understanding of precedence, manners, and mores to convey the right tone to readers. Women journalists were also to be called "society editors," regardless of what they did in the women's department. When she began in 1909, feminist Lily Laverock had to insist on the more dignified title of "woman's editor" to change the ways of the *News-Advertiser*.

For many newspaperwomen, "social work," as it was frequently called, was the nadir of their aspirations — a ghetto from which they could not escape whatever their interests, talents, and ambitions. Julia Henshaw's newspaper career charted this course from the heights of drama and music to the shoals of tea parties and balls. In its very first years, the *Province* had taken advantage of local talent where it found it. Henshaw, a well-educated Englishwoman, became the first music and drama critic, writing under the pseudonym "Julian Durham," the only regular by-line in the early issues of the *Daily Province*. It was an unusual opportunity for a woman journalist, but in every respect Henshaw was up to the challenge of reviewing local productions. Columns by "Julian Durham" were confidently opinionated, crisply written, and liberally littered with Latin phrases. She carried on her learned discourse with readers, answering queries about the classical origins of commonly used phrases and thus displaying to advantage her grounding in Greek as well as Latin scholarship. In her reviews she gave credit to adequately trained performers but scorched with sarcasm the typical vaudeville farce available to turn-of-the-century Vancouver audiences. Evidently her column was intended to be a status symbol for the

¹⁴ See, for example, the standard American journalism textbook by H. F. Harrington and T. T. Frankenburg, *Essentials in Journalism: A Manual of Newspapermaking for College Classes* (Boston: Atheneum Press, 1912), 113.

Province, flattering readers by the assumption of their sophistication and culture. But perhaps her erudition was too much or her stance too pompous for Vancouver readers. Alternatively, perhaps her employers valued her social connections more highly than her learning. "What Durham Thinks" faded after the summer of 1898 and, in years to come, Henshaw exchanged the prestigious position of critic for the more conventional one of society editor, first on the *Province*, then on the *News-Advertiser*. Thus did "Julian Durham" become "G'wan," and only the rather churlish tone, chiding a provincial public for its lack of continental sophistication, remained. She was able to lampoon the ostensible power "G'wan" exercised over her readers in ways that manifested her lofty disdain for the woman's editor role. For instance, in the wake of the Hetty Green forgery scandal, "G'wan" wrote with arch dismay of the horrendous possibilities should her own signature be forged:

What then might happen, I shudder in my sealskin at the thought, if some mere man, someone who knows naught of beauty, were to write something altogether false, and sign it "G'wan"? You, seeing the closely imitated signature, might read it with all the loving trustfulness of your simple natures, believing in me, G'wan as you have a right to believe, and oh! what poison might you not imbibe.¹⁵

To fulfil the responsibilities of society editor, a pre-established network of connections among the "right people" was imperative. Mrs. C. R. Henshaw, for example, was listed in the first directory of Vancouver socialites and thus possessed a ready-made entrée into the most fashionable affairs.¹⁶ Given her literary abilities and her wide social circle (Lady Williams-Taylor of Montreal was her sister-in-law), she had assets as a society editor quite rare in Vancouver at the time. Local prominence usually sufficed. Thus, the daughter of Vancouver's first mayor, Isabel Ross MacLean, was society editor on the *Province*, and it is more than likely that Mrs. McLagan, who was frequently in attendance at Vancouver's fashionable functions, wrote them up for her own paper.

The form and function of a society column in the fluid social topography of a new city posed an interesting challenge for the society editor. She would be kept alert by issues such as how the élite of immigration mixed with the élite of local achievement and how formal manners and modes from the East or from England were imposed upon the utilitarian casualness of a frontier settlement. One part of her job was to identify a definite group

¹⁵ "From a Woman's Point of View," the *Province*, 2 May 1904, 11.

¹⁶ *The Elite Directory of Vancouver* (Vancouver: n.p., c. 1908).

which constituted the élite of the local scene.¹⁷ Merely by naming them, she created interest in their comings and goings, soirées and fêtes, and confirmed their status. The New York papers pioneered this concept in the 1880s when they enumerated the famous "Four Hundred," ever expansive, elusive and elastic, and thus focused international attention on the frivolous fads and fancies of New York's *beau monde*.¹⁸ To mimic the effect, *The World* published in 1901 a kind of social register listing 218 hostesses and their receiving days.¹⁹ Vancouver's first social register appeared a few years later, in 1908; perhaps *The World's* listing was reverently clipped and preserved by those who followed the blossoming of the city's high society.²⁰

Curiously enough, *The World* also tried to claim a democratic egalitarianism in its reporting of social affairs, accusing the *Province* of cliquish snobbery. When "G'wan" (Julia Henshaw), then of the *Province*, pointed out *The World's* errors in reporting the costumes at a major ball, *The World* retorted:

This paper endeavours to give a full and complete list of persons at every function of note and one is happy to say *The World's* list of dresses worn and "among the most prominent present" is not confined to a small clique.²¹

If the anonymous social reports in *The World* were indeed by Sara McLagan, she had sufficient presence in the Vancouver social scene to parry with Julia Henshaw in rival newspaper columns.

A social editor who did not possess unimpeachable social status in her own right could be manipulated in the interests of socially ambitious hostesses. When Edna Brown came out from Saint John to be social editor of the *News-Advertiser* she was very young and had no particular access to Vancouver's élite. Thus, when a would-be social leader befriended her and supplied her with details of her parties and other affairs she attended,

¹⁷ Two historians have also tried to impose form on the embryonic social élite of early Vancouver. See Robert A. J. McDonald, "Business Leaders in Early Vancouver, 1886-1914" (Ph.D. thesis, UBC, 1977), and Angus Everett Robertson, "The Pursuit of Power, Profit and Privacy: A Study of Vancouver's West End Elite, 1886-1914" (M.A. thesis, UBC, 1977).

¹⁸ Emma Meyer, "Society Reporting Among the '400,'" *Editor and Publisher* 64.30 (12 Dec. 1931), 11.

¹⁹ "Of Interest to Women," *The World*, 26 Oct. 1901.

²⁰ *The Elite Directory of Vancouver* (Vancouver, n.p., 1908). *Vancouver Social Register and Club Directory* (Vancouver: Welch and Gibbs, 1914) was somewhat more expansive.

²¹ "The Week in Society," *The World*, 12 April 1902. The gravity with which these errors were viewed did not diminish quickly. Dorothy Bell was fired by the *Province* twenty years later for "getting wedding clothes mixed up." CAV, CWPC, Scrapbook 1, p. 36, Letter, Dorothy Bell to Edna Brown Baker, 10 June 1955.

Brown was a grateful fellow conspirator in the social career of her patron and dutifully gave her top billing. On one occasion, her confidante intimated that she was giving a very important entertainment and to be sure to call at nine. Brown did just that, only to be coolly brushed aside with "Of course I don't want my party in the paper." The next day Brown's contact explained that she had staged the subterfuge to disguise the fact that she acted as a press agent for her own affairs. Humiliated by this exercise, Brown nonetheless printed the story her deceiving informant supplied.²²

Brown's experience demonstrated both the vulnerability and dependence of social editors on one hand and their potential power on the other. If they were excluded from all social affairs, they would have no news to report, and thus they had to maintain the favour of the local social leaders. Increasingly, however, the press confirmed the arrival of marginal players in the social scene, and the social editor had it within her capacity to advance the careers of some and banish others into the obscurity of "also attended."

If she chose, a society editor was well placed to exercise a certain amount of social control. Through well-dropped hints she could aim barbs of infamy at the vulgar, unconventional, or immoral. The popular press made publicity and therefore scandal possible on a hitherto unprecedented scale. Mollie Glenn exercised the option of publicly scolding an unnamed miscreant who was probably well known to elite insiders. "A rumour is afloat," she intimated, "that the family of a well-known man in town has been sadly neglected, in fact are in destitute circumstances, while the man in question has been entertaining parties at dinner and acting the part of genial host to all but his worthy family." She noted that funds were taken up and plain sewing orders organized for the wife, but Glenn's intention was clearly to rally the forces that could excommunicate the cad.²³

Occasions of this sort were probably rare enough. For the most part, the society editor's job was a humdrum routine of spinning sugar. Most career journalists were anxious to graduate from the department — Gwen Cash, who began as a junior reporter on the *Province* in 1917 and erroneously called herself Canada's first woman reporter, prided herself on having side-stepped the "snob stuff";²⁴ Grace McGaw, who apprenticed on the challenging "street beat," considered her appointment to the social department

²² Eva Reid, "Newspaper Woman Recalls Early Days in Profession," *Calgary Albertan*, 17 Oct. 1957, 54.

²³ "In Woman's Realm," the *Province*, 17 March 1900, 10.

²⁴ Gwen Cash, *Off The Record: Reminiscences of Canada's First Female Reporter* (Langley, B.C.: Stage Coach Publishing Co., 1977), 15.

a descent.²⁵ Social reporting did little to advance the status and esteem in which women journalists in general were held in the press world. During the Triennial Convention of 1923, when members of the Canadian Women's Press Club gathered in Vancouver, an independent weekly, the *Hook*, used the occasion to blast the CPR for trying to bribe the press by issuing passes and hosting banquets for women journalists from across Canada:

Most of them live and move and have their being in a sphere of journalism bounded on the north by a pink tea, on the south by a "pretty bridge was held" and on the east and west by descriptions of how a handful of women in their town are upholstered and decorated when they attend a theatre or a dance or a horse race. We call it a pretty barren prospect for journalism or for travel publicity but the CPR is willing to spend thousands of dollars on it.²⁶

The obvious constraints of society reporting did not, however, necessarily limit the scope of all writing for the woman's page. Clever craftswomen such as Clare Battle, Lily Laverock, Mabel Durham, A. M. Ross, and Edna Brown gradually transformed the woman's pages of *The World*, the *News-Advertiser*, the *Province*, and the *Sun* by interspersing substantive issues and reform campaigns with more mundane and routine features. Under mastheads ranging from the conventional "My Lady's Realm" to the provocative "Women, Wraps, and Wrangles" and the sober "Women's Forum," they introduced readers to controversies of personal, local, national, and international import. Through their columns, they familiarized the women of Vancouver with the current debates about women's role and power in society. Female subscribers had the opportunity to evaluate arguments about woman suffrage, women in the professions, day care, female factory inspectors, police matrons, prohibition, immigration, conscription, minimum wages, and a plethora of other news topics which directly touched women's lives. In addition, woman's page editors offered their audience directions and reassurances on how to cope with new situations such as entering the public workplace, living away from the nuclear family, unemployment, and the difficult realities of the war in Europe.

As it developed in the second decade of the twentieth century, the woman's page of Vancouver papers was far more than a roster of local city and suburban women's activities. Woman's page editors and their assistants reported events, analyzed arguments, and advocated points of view which allowed women greater latitude inside and outside the home. They used

²⁵ CAV, CWPC, Scrapbook 1, p. 36, Letter, Grace McGaw to Edna Baker, 10 June 1955.

²⁶ CAV, CWPC, Scrapbook 1, p. 36, the *Hook*, 28 Sept. 1923. The editorial was most likely by the vitriolic J. S. Cowper.

their position in the public media to promote those causes they deemed most worthy of attention and commitment. In so doing, they, along with their counterparts elsewhere in Canada, contributed to the redefinition of what constituted a newsworthy item. No longer would the opinions and activities of Canadian women remain in obscurity. On the woman's page, at least, women as newsmakers received some exposure and positive publicity and, by the same token, furnished newswomen with lively copy. As Isabelle Mac-Lean made explicit in her lecture at the Canadian Women's Press Club convention in 1913, "Feminism itself has opened a tremendous area to the woman journalist. . . . The feminist page now embraces the live issues of the day and many problems, common to all humanity. . . ." ²⁷

In-depth club reporting was a principal vehicle utilized by these newswomen to introduce new ideas to the wider constituency of newspaper readers. Regular reports of the reform movements at work in Vancouver kept ongoing matters before the public eye and raised support for such local improvement schemes as hospital or "city beautiful" tag days. By attending meetings and publishing verbatim accounts of speeches and annual reports delivered to the various women's organizations, club reporters acquainted readers with the views of Vancouver's women reformers, philanthropists, and missionaries. ²⁸ Publicity served as a demonstration of wide support for specific viewpoints. In the guise of "objective" reporting and public service, women journalists could act as advocates for the causes they espoused, often without overtly committing themselves in print. Typical of this type of reporting was Edna Brown's careful and sensitive introduction of a new political group for Vancouver women ratepayers. She assuaged potential misgivings by affirming that the nonpartisan Vancouver Women's Forum was designed simply "to educate the women voters on civic affairs, in such a way that they might make the best possible use of the franchise which had been extended to them." Recognizing the reluctance of newly qualified municipal women voters to enter the unfamiliar territory of a political meeting, she assured her readers that the Women's Forum would provide a congenial setting for them to meet candidates for civic office. ²⁹

²⁷ "The Equipment of the Woman Journalist: and Keeping Up with the Times," Canadian Women's Press Club, Triennial Report 1910-13, 21-22. Media Club of Canada Papers, NAC, MG 28 I232, Vol. 1, file 7.

²⁸ By the early twentieth century, Vancouver women's clubs were legion. Among the most commonly reported in the press were the Vancouver Local Council of Women, the Women's Canadian Club, the Pioneer Political Equality League, the New Era League, the Young Women's Christian Association, the Women's Auxiliary to the Vancouver General Hospital, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and innumerable denominational auxiliaries and missionary societies.

²⁹ *News-Advertiser*, 4 Jan. 1914, 13.

Similarly, by reporting the recommendations and findings of the Vancouver Local Council of Women's various committees, Brown and her cohorts placed suggestions before the public on diverse topics such as public health concerns or measures to ensure the safety of women travelling alone to Vancouver by rail or ship. Interviews with prominent visitors such as Barbara Wylie, Jane Addams, and Nellie McClung popularized controversial views and widened the scope of club reports. A skilfully written account could balance the negative publicity sometimes directed towards well-known feminists and reformers and link local issues to the national or even international context.

Woman's page journalists of this era, provided they worked on papers which granted them sufficient latitude, did not think it necessary to remain detached observers. Not infrequently, they belonged to the organizations whose activities they reported. With their access to the public attention, journalists were extremely valuable members of the causes they embraced. Through publicity they could potentially influence the future course of events. Although in club reports they perforce maintained a semblance of impartiality, the personal essays which were the privilege of the editor allowed them to express forcefully their own positions on specific issues or general movements. Clare Battle of *The World*, for instance, took up the torch for a maternity ward, which Vancouver still lacked twenty-two years after incorporation. Writing under the pseudonym "Beth" in her *World* editorial, she lambasted Vancouver General Hospital directors for their tardiness: "The need that exists for such a department in the general hospital of a large and growing city like Vancouver can scarcely be questioned."³⁰ She suggested a method of raising additional funds and prodded the women of Vancouver to become involved in securing the ward. In an equally definitive tone, "Antoinette" (Miss A. M. Ross) of the *Sun* joined the University Women's Club battle for women's admission into the professions. As a result of her intervention, Vancouver readers become well acquainted with Miss Elsie French's struggle to gain admission to the bar in British Columbia and her ultimate victory.³¹

When it came to the divisive issue of the suffrage, most Vancouver women journalists came out strongly in favour of "the cause." As Emmeline Pankhurst had taught suffragists everywhere, making the headlines was crucial to success. Vancouver newswomen rarely wrote headlines, but they did provide publicity through editorials and reports of the numerous local suffrage society meetings. Further, they clipped inspirational items

³⁰ *The World*, 4 April 1908, 30.

³¹ *Sun*, 15 Feb. 1912, 7.

from newspapers elsewhere to chart the movement's successes at home and abroad. Links between newspaperwomen and the local suffrage cause were strengthened by the fact that several prominent Vancouver leaders, including Helen Gregory MacGill, Alice Ashworth Townley, Helena Gutteridge, and Susie Lane Clark, pursued journalism as part of their careers.

The wartime columns of the dailies' woman's pages exemplified the women journalists' dual commitment to the communities in which they worked and the expansion of acceptable roles for women. As the war dragged on and manpower shortages increased, newspaperwomen like Edna Brown encouraged women to broaden their focus from the more traditional and passive activities of knitting and bandage making to tackle jobs previously undertaken only by men. Their articles sanctioned the assumption of new roles by women and provided a publicly authoritative voice for new initiatives.

Writing on the woman's page furnished newspaperwomen with a strategic platform to further the social reform projects they favoured. Even so, some Vancouver women journalists aspired to greater autonomy and more freedom to express their opinions. Lily Laverock, for example, found the restrictions placed on her as the *News-Advertiser's* first woman's editor too great to tolerate. She left at the end of 1910 to found her own paper, *The Chronicle*. Laverock had impressive intellectual qualifications for her chosen career. She was the first woman to receive a Master's degree in Moral Philosophy from McGill University and was offered an academic post at Smith College, but her commitment was to Canada. She came to Vancouver hoping for an opportunity to fulfil her talents as a journalist. By all accounts, *The Chronicle* was a moral and literary *tour de force* but, unfortunately, a commercial failure.

Some years later, in 1917, Amy Kerr undertook an even more ambitious endeavour, the *Western Woman's Weekly*. Coming from a well-known family of journalists, Miss Kerr had the acumen and experience to conduct her paper successfully for seven years.³² The weekly received the endorsement of an impressive number of Vancouver women's organizations and provided a forum for the publication of articles by many of the city's leading clubwomen, reformers, and politicians. More important for Vancouver newspaperwomen, a stint on the *Western Woman's Weekly* developed the journalistic skills of many a young writer. Edith McConnell apprenticed with Miss Kerr, graduated to become woman's page editor

³² Her partner in the paper was her sister, Alice Pogue, wife of the columnist Pollough Pogue. Her sister-in-law was Mrs. J. B. Kerr, "Constance Erroll" of the *Morning Albertan*, *Sun*, and *Province*. Her brother James Kerr was a journalist as well.

on the *Sun*, and pursued a career that spanned four decades. By placing freelance articles in the *Weekly*, Fanny Bruce was able to maintain her career as a journalist while raising her children. On this woman-run paper, female journalists rose to the challenge of non-traditional departments like sports reporting or selling advertising space.

By the end of the Great War, Vancouver newspaperwomen were spreading their wings and venturing beyond the borders of "Woman's Realm." In the case of Edna Brown, the wings were real and misadventure the result. While she was still woman's page editor of *The World*, she and Winifred Davenport of the *Province* agreed to publicize an Air League tag day by flying over Vancouver in a Curtis Jenny. True to its reputation as a flying death trap, the Jenny crashed, seriously injuring Miss Brown and garnering for her the unwanted distinction of being the first woman involved in an air crash in Canada. On crutches she covered the ball for Edward, the Prince of Wales, a few weeks later.

Undeterred, the intrepid Edna Brown aimed to demonstrate that a woman "could handle any assignment as well as a man."³³ As a young woman of eighteen, she had begun her newspaper career by reporting a hanging, a grisly experience that remained vivid in her memory. Even so, she and her generation of newspaperwomen knew well that they had continually to prove their toughness, versatility, and resourcefulness. For the most ambitious, it was a mark of distinction to leave the relatively protected enclave of the woman's department and enter the bohemian world of the general reporter.

In the Vancouver papers of the early twentieth century, to be a general reporter was often to concentrate on crime. Both Carrie Logan of *The World* and Mrytle Patterson of the *Sun* included police among their regular assignments. Suburban reporters like Dorothy Bell of the *Sun* and Gwen Cash of the *Province* were also expected to report interesting crimes and criminal proceedings in their jurisdictions.

Few reporters, male or female, would have seen more of the "rougher" side of early Vancouver life than Ella Johnson, the marine and financial editor of the *Sun*.³⁴ Miss Johnson, with her revolver safely stowed in the front pocket of her sensible tweed suit, frequented the Vancouver waterfront in pursuit of her stories on shipping and all aspects of commerce. She

³³ Irwin Fricke, "Former Edmonton Woman Counts 'firsts' in Newspaper Career," *Edmonton Journal*, 31 Jan. 1958, 24.

³⁴ Two obituary reports covered the colourful aspects of Ella Johnson's career: P. Luce, "At Odds with Life," the *Sun*, 3 Nov. 1951, Magazine Section, 6, and Edith McConnell Murray, "Let's Go Shopping," *News-Herald*, 5 Oct. 1951, 7. See also CAV, CWPC, Vol. 2, Scrapbook, "Member's News, 1924."

knew the colourful characters on the waterfront, such as the “King of the Bootleggers,” whom she described as a fine man who kept most of the denizens of the harbour alive in the winter. Although it was unusual to find a woman occupying a financial editor’s chair, her credentials suited the job.³⁵ As a teenager in the early years of the century, she had been hired as district reporter for *The World*. She left newspaper work to develop her business acumen in a variety of enterprises; for instance, she owned and operated a successful cement company which secured contracts for a CPR roundhouse and the first sewer system in the municipality of Burnaby.³⁶ When she decided to return to journalism at the end of the war, the frank Miss Johnson, better known as “The Skipper,” possessed all the requisite background for financial editor in a young resource-centred city. She had the force of personality to convince the *Sun*’s management that she was the right choice.

The *Sun*’s willingness to permit women to occupy atypical posts was also apparent in publisher Robert Cromie’s decision in 1923 to hire Genevieve Lipsett Skinner as the paper’s Ottawa correspondent. Like Miss Johnson, Mrs. Skinner seemed aptly suited to the position; she was already a well-known and respected journalist on the national scene and a competent lawyer. In the competitive local newspaper market, securing her exclusive services as a staff parliamentary correspondent for the *Sun* was a coup; Mrs. Skinner would no longer be selling her popular freelance copy to the *Province*. The association with the *Sun* was a marriage of convenience that served Skinner very well, legitimizing her position in the press gallery. She had been denied re-admission to the gallery after a summer recess on the grounds that she was not the accredited correspondent of any particular paper. The fact that she regularly sold her copy to papers in Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver was discounted as irrelevant. Thus, she needed the *Sun* connection to pursue her ambition, remaining with the Vancouver paper until 1926, when she accepted a position on the editorial staff of the Montreal *Gazette*.

Then as now, political reporting held high rank in the newspaper world. Most Vancouver newspaperwomen who participated in the political scene did so indirectly. They interviewed politicians travelling through Vancouver, followed various political campaigns, and, most important, wrote editorials in favour of women candidates like Mary Ellen Smith. Beatrice

³⁵ E. Cora Hind of the *Manitoba Free Press* was the only other female commercial editor in Canada at this time.

³⁶ She was the first woman to own a taxicab company in Canada, and sold real estate and insurance during the boom years of early Vancouver expansion. Johnson also trained as a millwright and worked as a timber cruiser and broker.

Nasmyth, however, took her involvement in politics somewhat further than her contemporaries by acting as campaign manager for Roberta Catherine McAdams, the only woman seeking election under the Alberta Military Representation Act in 1917.³⁷ Well known in Vancouver for her work as a staff journalist on *The World*, assistant social editor on the *Province*, and society and book review editor for the *Saturday Sunset*, Miss Nasmyth had travelled to London in January 1914 to work as publicity secretary to John Reid, Agent General for Alberta. With the outbreak of the war, she stayed on and supplied the *Province* with articles on the course of the war and its aftermath. In the autumn of 1918, Beatrice Nasmyth, Mary McLeod Moore of *Saturday Night*, and Elsie Montizambert of the Montreal *Star* were the first Canadian newspaperwomen to visit the battlefields of France. Subsequently, the *Province* assigned Nasmyth to cover the Versailles Peace Conference. Mabel Durham, Nasmyth's former boss, also provided the *Province's* readers with political, economic, and social reconstruction news as she toured Europe from 1919 to 1922.

Examination of the career paths of Vancouver newspaperwomen suggests that staff journalists required an innovative and enterprising outlook to survive in the business. Rivalry among the dailies was keen. The *News-Advertiser*, a thirty-year player on the Vancouver scene, succumbed on 1 September 1917 to the wartime depression and vigorous competition for the morning market offered by the upstart *Sun*. *The World* suffered a similar fate a few years later. Sara McLagan died on 20 March 1924, a few days before the *Sun* absorbed the enterprise she and her husband founded in 1888. Resultant price wars and management changes unsettled the rank and file journalists. Whenever possible, successful newspaperwomen learned to anticipate the crises and roll with the punches, selling their services to the highest bidder. Beatrice Green, for instance, switched her allegiance from the *Sun*, where she had edited the society page from 1915 to 1920, to the *Province*. In her case, entrepreneurship outstripped journalistic ethics. When she accepted a position as official representative of the Society of the Macabbees, a sly notice in Amy Kerr's *Western Woman's Weekly* drew attention to her new salaried position and to the amount of publicity the Macabbees seemed to be getting in the *Province*. She was fired in 1924 for conflict of interest. Ever a survivor, Mrs. Green hopped over to the newly founded Vancouver *Star*. Dorothy Bell was another flexible veteran who managed to be fired by three of the four major Vancouver papers — the *Sun*, the *News-Advertiser*, and the *Province* — but

³⁷ Sheilagh S. Jameson, "Give Your Other Vote to the Sister," *Alberta Historical Review* 15.4 (1967): 10-16.

seemingly emerged relatively unscathed from the frays. On occasion she came out ahead; the *Sun* once offered to double her salary if she would return.³⁸ In the midst of these changes she found time to work as woman's editor, feature writer, and manuscript editor for *Maclean's* magazine in Toronto and to start a feature photograph service in Vancouver. No doubt this varied experience came to her aid when she launched a luxury goods advertising and society sheet just as the stock market crashed in 1929. She ran *About Town* for a decade. Another typical example of a newspaper-woman's circuitous career path was that of Edith Cuppage, whose peregrinations took her through various Victoria publications to become society editor of the *Province*, then to *The World*. She realized her ambition to be her own boss when she introduced *The Ladies' Mirror* and then collaborated in the *Saturday Tribune*. Back in Victoria in the 1920s, she eased into retirement as a freelance journalist.

Versatility was indispensable to those who had to earn their livelihoods in the turbulent world of journalism. The most dedicated newspaper-women often found it necessary to sideline for a time in advertising and public relations, or writing magazine features. Lily Laverock began writing theatre promotion copy following the demise of *The Chronicle*. Fanny Bruce wrote at space rates for all the Vancouver papers in the intervals surrounding the births of her children. Features by freelancers, including Judge Helen Gregory MacGill, Margaret McNaughton Manson, Mrs. R. J. Templeton, Ethel Stoddard, and the poet Pauline Johnson, enriched the features pages and other sections of Vancouver newspapers with their contributions.

Changing their type and place of work, then, was a common experience for this generation of Vancouver newspaperwomen. The degree of movement from job to job was partly attributable to the dynamic nature of the newspaper publishing business, but it was also due to the peripatetic spirit of women who chose to pursue journalism when it was still an unusual career option. Of the approximately fifty-five women who plied the journalist's trade in Vancouver in the first quarter of the twentieth century, only Isabel MacLean was native-born and only a handful were raised in the city. Attracted by the opportunities available to women journalists in the young port, the adventurous came seeking positions. Most newspaper women's careers included stints on newspapers and magazines in other cities and towns, before, after, or in between their Vancouver days. Win Davenport, for example, left her position on the editorial staff of the *Province*

³⁸ CAV, CWPC, Vol. 2, Scrapbook 1, p. 36, Letter, Dorothy Bell to Edna Baker, 10 June 1955.

in 1923 to pursue her career in Chicago and ultimately New York. Edith McConnell followed her husband, former *Sun* staffer Ivan Denton, to San Francisco and then back to Vancouver. Widowed and remarried, she was back at the *News-Herald* through the 1940s and 1950s. *The World* gave self-educated and inexperienced Isabelle Patterson a chance to prove herself as a general reporter in 1912. She graduated to the New York *Herald Tribune*, where she became one of the most feared and courted critics of the influential literary department. Similarly, Constance Lindsay Skinner gained her first experience writing for *The World* before winning renown as drama critic for New York's *Ainsley's Magazine*.

Within this atmosphere of competition and change, and with an acute awareness of the smallness of their ranks in the Vancouver newspaper publishing world, Vancouver newspaperwomen banded together in 1909 to found a local branch of the Canadian Women's Press Club. Like the parent body, the Vancouver branch was dedicated to the advancement of the status of women in the field of journalism. To this end, it offered members a range of services. Monthly meetings featured craft talks by experienced journalists and publishers, which were designed to guide women seeking to improve their skills in particular areas. In addition to providing these technical sessions, program organizers invited well-known Canadian women such as Alice Ravenhill or Nellie McClung to address the groups and contribute to their informal education. Talks by Vancouver reformers on issues such as the need for female probation officers or woman suffrage also enabled members to gain a fuller grasp of "women's news" in the local scene. The club welcomed newswomen from elsewhere in Canada to attend meetings and bring news of events in their home communities. Through these informal meetings and the larger national conventions, Vancouver women journalists strengthened their ties with colleagues across the country and gained a sense of professional companionship in what was frequently an insecure and isolating occupation. The social component of the meetings — a tea or a luncheon — provided members with a congenial atmosphere in which to relax and share gossip, grievances, and information about job opportunities.

Through the first two decades of its history, the Vancouver branch maintained an atmosphere of sisterly solidarity that members were loath to give up, even when moved elsewhere. Gerry Appleby in San Francisco, Genevieve Lipsett Skinner in Ottawa, and Jessie Bryan in Edmonton retained their ties to the Vancouver branch. Edna Brown Baker, although she spent her married life in Edmonton and participated actively in Edmonton branch affairs, remained loyal to the Vancouver branch. In retirement back

in Vancouver, she doggedly pieced together an archive of her original branch's records. However sentimental and loyal individual members might be, they were subject always to the same rigorous qualifications, which demanded that everyone prove every year that she was a *bona fide* journalist, regularly employed and paid for her work.

The Vancouver Women's Press Club, much as it aspired informally to certify the credentials of its members and contribute to the raising of the status of women in journalism, was neither a craft union nor a professional association. It could implore employers not to hire "women who have no journalistic training and who are, therefore, encroaching on the profession" and request that publishers give 'preference' to club women when seeking space writers, but it could not regulate the occupation any more than male journalists could control the terms of their employment.³⁹ The press club was powerless to intervene in cases where women were fired capriciously. Further, the club's membership did not include all Vancouver newspaperwomen. There were always a few, like Aileen Brown, society co-editor of the *Sun* from 1922 to 1924, and Julia Henshaw, veteran newspaperwoman from the 1890s to the 1930s, who chose to remain aloof.

Those who were committed to the club were, on the whole, united by a desire to live by the pen and their wits. Clare Battle, in typical if rather effusive terms, expressed the spirit of adventure that drove the first generation of newspaperwomen in Vancouver:

I joined the staff of the *Vancouver World* in the autumn of 1905. That is 54 years ago, but I still have a vivid remembrance of those golden days. How I loved my dear, dingy old office! The sound of the presses was more to me than any symphony. They were indeed the music to which the joyful current of my life was set. Can you wonder at my enthusiasm? I was eighteen. I had always wanted to write, and now I had been given the chance. I was so happy that as I walked down Hastings Street it was as though I walked on air. And when I tell that I started newspaper work on a pay-packet of four dollars a week, you may wonder if I lived on air as well. Did it matter to me? Not a bit. In those halcyon days food was only a matter of secondary importance. I remember I consumed masses of oatmeal, fish paste and bread, and as I was bursting with health as well as enthusiasm, it did me no harm.⁴⁰

In those early decades, the mystique of a career in journalism was sufficient to overcome the hardships and insecurity that reality presented. Newspaper work was notoriously ill-paid for men as well as women. Battle's salary of \$4 a week in 1905 tallied in at the low end of the average begin-

³⁹ CAV, CWPC, Vol. 1, Minutes, 27 May 1921.

⁴⁰ CAV, CWPC, Vol. 2, Scrapbook, Letter, Mrs. Sylvia-White (Clare Battle), To the Editor, *Vancouver Sun*, 29 Sept. 1959.

ning wage for university-educated male reporters.⁴¹ For Clare Battle the adventure was of short duration; after a few years she exchanged the fish-paste diet and ink-smudged fingers for a more serene life as a clergyman's wife. But the most dedicated would do whatever it took to get ahead. Myrtle Patterson, Canada's highest-paid woman journalist, earning \$50 per week in her halcyon days in the mid-1920s on the *Sun*, was not above faking automobile trouble to gain entrance to the private Vancouver residence temporarily housing the Prince of Wales. Similarly, Ella Johnson used her close ties with the Vancouver Japanese community to secure the worldwide news scoop that the Americans intended to withdraw from the tripartite naval alliance with Japan and Britain after World War I.

Aside from the intoxication of the occasional headline, what this first generation of newspaperwomen contributed to the progress of women in the profession of journalism and to the development of Vancouver was to define as significant and newsworthy the participation of women in city life. Further, women journalists promoted the development of Vancouver's cultural and social infrastructure. They provided a widely accessible forum for debate on pressing social issues and the myriad of forces which transformed the lives of women in the twentieth century. For later-day readers, their columns serve as an informal register of the problems facing Vancouverites and introduce the perspectives of some of the brightest Canadian newswomen of the period. To be a "woman of *The World*" or any other of the early Vancouver newspapers gave women journalists a chance to explore and express their world.

⁴¹ "Mack" (Joe Clark), "Salaries Paid to Journalists in Canada," *Saturday Night*, 14 Oct. 1899, 7. Clark lamented that well-educated young men could expect only four to eight dollars a week, rising to twelve to fourteen dollars a week after three years, where it would remain unless the reporter advanced to the editorial department. Women's salaries in the early period were located in this low range, but, unlike the ambitious male, they could not aspire to the more lucrative positions of managing editor or editor-in-chief.