"STOUT LADIES AND AMAZONS": *Women in the British Columbia Coal-Mining Community of Ladysmith, 1912-14*

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During the week of 12 August 1913, riots shook the strike bound coal-mining communities of Vancouver Island.[1] Homes were looted and burned to the ground in Extension and vandalized in Ladysmith, South Wellington, and Nanaimo. Many people were physically assaulted, and, although no one was killed, one arrested miner, twenty-one-year-old Joseph Mairs Jr., died later in prison, and one strike-breaker, Alex McKinnon, had his right hand blown off when dynamite was thrown into his Ladysmith home. The provincial government had refused to intervene in the strike, but, when it received news of the violence, it responded swiftly and harshly, mobilizing the militia, declaring martial law in the affected regions, and, with the assistance of the police, drawing up lists of suspected rioters and union organizers. Within a week there were 450 soldiers in Cumberland, 130 in Ladysmith, and nearly 1,000 in Nanaimo. When the dust finally settled, authorities had arrested 213 men, tried 166, and sentenced 50 to prison. Of the 50 convicted men, 38 were from Ladysmith.

Respectable BC society was shocked to learn during the preliminary investigations and the subsequent trials that "at Ladysmith and at Extension a great deal of the damage done was the work of women sympathizers."[2] This was of grave concern to Frederick William Howay, the judge and historian who presided over the trial of the Ladysmith strikers. To add insult to his injured sense of middle-

[1] By far the best account of the strike is in Lynne Bowen, *Boss Whistle*, (Lantzville: Oolichan, 1982); see also John Norris, "The Vancouver Island Coal Miners, 1912-14: A Study of an Organizational Strike," *BC Studies* 45 (1980): 56-72, and Alan Wargo, "The Great Coal Strike: The Vancouver Island Coal Miners' Strike, 1912-1914" (Bachelor's essay, History Department, University of British Columbia, 1962). I would like to thank Patricia Roy and the two anonymous readers for their careful and challenging criticism of this article. An earlier version was read at the 1997 Qualicum History Conference.

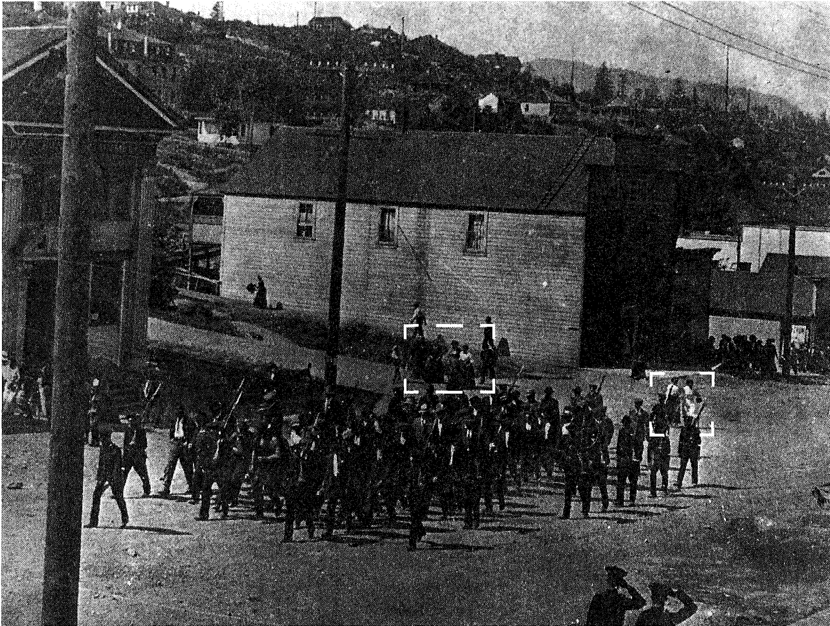
[2] *Vancouver Sun*, 1 September 1913.

class dignity, one of the women witnesses, Mrs. Charles Axelson, a member of the local United Mine Workers' Women's Auxiliary, showed no remorse for her role in the rioting and even less respect for the judge and his court. Wielding an axe, this "stout lady" — a "veritable Amazon in build, vigour and strength" — had successfully broken through a line of "awestruck" police and special constables to liberate her husband, recently arrested for abusing strike breakers, from Ladysmith's jail.[3] She denied being a ringleader of the riot but did admit to taunting the strikebreakers. When the patronizing prosecutor tried to teach this "rough," "uncouth," and "simple" woman a lesson by getting her to sing to the court, she enthusiastically obliged. One eyewitness recalled that

> she simply turned the tables on the lawyer. She had a lovely trained voice and in a short time the whole large audience wholeheartedly joined in. The judge tried in every way to stop them and had great difficulty in restoring order to court. There were laughs and boos and the whole proceeding was turning into an empty farce. Prisoners, witnesses and spectators burst forth in round after round of applause.[4]

Judge Howay did not appreciate Mrs. Axelson's mockery of his court. Still, she was not prosecuted. Although it had been reported that the names of a number of women were on the "waiting list," they were neither charged nor arrested. In a society in which women were presumed to be passive bystanders, charges against men were clearly preferred to charges against women. Unwilling to punish the women directly, despite their willing participation in "riotous assemblies," the judge decided to punish them indirectly and to set an example for the rest of the community by handing down harsh sentences to the men. In a statement to the *New Westminister News*, Howay declared that "fully 90 per cent of the women ranked with the men in disregard for property and life."[5] He consequently rejected the defendants' pleas for mercy and, in a revealing summation, condemned the women for violating accepted norms of behaviour: "Woman is sympathetic and kind, that is one of the features in her character that most appeals to us, but what do I find? I find in this case that the women, and in many instances your wives, were there in the crowd, singing, 'Drive the scabs away,' throwing stones themselves and urging on the work of destruction."[6]

[3] Ibid., and Bowen, *Boss Whistle*, 82.
[4] According to the oral testimony of Lempi Guthrie, quoted in ibid., 182.
[5] *New Westminister News*, 27 October 1913.
[6] GR1323, B2101, 7529-16-13, 176, BCARS.



Strikers being marched off to jail, 1913, Ladysmith. BCARS E-01194. Below, details of women following behind strikers.

The story of Mrs. Axelson is significant for women's history and the history of British Columbia's coal-mining towns. It demonstrates

the complex relationship between gender and class and raises questions about conceptions of behaviour and the role of women in these working-class, resource-based communities. It also reveals that women played a significant role in the region's social and economic development and actively participated in the often violent class struggles; indeed, they often shaped these

conflicts. Seeing the strike from the perspective of the wives, mothers, and daughters of coal miners also reveals the extent to which strikes involved not just the workplace, but the entire community.[7] The support and solidarity of women, whether in the form of direct action or in the form of maintaining the household in times of economic distress, often made the

[7] This point is reinforced in the historiography of women in coal-mining communities. See Steven Penfold, "'Have You No Manhood In You?': Gender and Class in the Cape Breton

difference between success and failure. Finally, while women actively fought for social and economic justice, they also struggled against the dynamics of gender socialization, which was rooted in a sex-based division of labour and legal discrimination and which confined most women to the traditional submissive, nurturing role associated with the domestic sphere. Their experience of struggle and their commitment to class and community empowered women within the public sphere, anticipating the day when they would be full citizens.

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Europeans first occupied the central Vancouver Island town of Ladysmith, or Oyster Harbour as it was originally named, in 1898 and used it as a port for the coal that was mined eleven miles to the north at Extension.[8] Over the next few years, coal magnate James Dunsmuir moved the mining community of Extension — lock, stock, and barrel — to the new townsite above the wharves and coal bunkers that dominated the shoreline. Although Ladysmith was the product of the "instant urbanization" typical of many other BC resource communities,[9] it was by no means a typical camp town. As production at the Extension mines expanded over the course of the next few years, Ladysmith grew rapidly from a small company town with just under 750 inhabitants in 1901 into an economically, socially, and ethnically diverse community with a population of approximately 3,295 in 1911.[10]

Ladysmith was a predominantly working-class community. The Extension colliery, where 881 men worked in 1911, was the largest employer in the region.[11] Approximately 200 men also worked seasonally in the logging industry; others worked at the Tyee Copper

Coal Towns, 1920-1926," *Acadiensis* 23 (1994): 23; See also Ann Schofield, "An 'Army of Amazons': The Language of Protest in a Kansas Mining Community, 1921-22," *American Quarterly* 37 (1985): 686-701; Priscilla Long, "The Women of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Strike, 1913-14," in Ruth Milkman, ed., *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of US Women's Labor History* (Boston: Routledge Kegan and Paul, 1985), 62-85; Elizabeth Jameson, "Imperfect Unions: Class and Gender in Cripple Creek, 1894-1904," in Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 166-202.

[8] In 1897 Dunsmuir forced the miners in Wellington to move to his new works at Extension. He bought the townsite at Oyster Harbour in April 1896 for $6,340. Construction on the wharves began in September 1898, and the first shipments of Extension coal began one year later. See Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes in the Province of British Columbia, Ottawa, 1903, Minutes of Evidence, 242. Hereafter Royal Commission, 1903.

[9] See Richard Goodacre, *Dunsmuir's Dream* (Victoria: Town of Ladysmith, 1991), 39.

[10] *Census of Canada*, Ottawa, 1911.

[11] *Report of the Minister of Mines*, British Columbia Sessional Papers, 1912, K235.

Smelter and in the lumber mill.[12] Despite the town's working-class character, most miners lived and toiled in an environment hostile to organized labour; as they mobilized, they became locked in an intense class struggle against the mining company and the state. The first international trade union to attempt to organize the miners, the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), had initial success and was an important force in a 1903 strike. Following the failure of this strike, the WFM disappeared and, late in 1910, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) began organizing the coal miners.

As trade unionism grew on Vancouver Island, the class consciousness of the miners was translated into political action and found expression in the increasing strength of specifically working-class socialist parties.[13] The years 1903 to 1909 witnessed the high tide of the Socialist Party of British Columbia; the party almost tripled its vote in provincial elections, from 3,959 to 11,477. Two of the most important coal-mining constituencies on Vancouver Island, Nanaimo and Newcastle (which included Ladysmith), returned Socialists to the legislature in Victoria in 1903 and 1907, and they were the only two to survive Richard McBride's Tory onslaught in 1909 and 1912.[14]

Western Canadian industrial workers in general, and Vancouver Island coal miners in particular, had a reputation for being radical and militant. In the past scholars argued that this was a consequence of the peculiarities of the western Canadian industrial "frontier," which consisted almost entirely of hostile labourers and management living in raw, isolated, and polarized societies.[15] Ladysmith's rapid expansion, numerous taverns and hotels, and sizable population of

[12] See John W. Coburn, "Early History of the Town of Ladysmith, BC," ADD. MSS. 783, BCARS; Goodacre, *Dunsmuir's Dream*, 27ff.

[13] On the rise of trade unionism and working-class political movements in British Columbia see, among others, A.R. McCormack, "The Emergence of the Socialist Movement in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 21 (1974): 3-27, and *Rebels, Reformers, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); R.A.J. McDonald, "Working-Class Vancouver, 1886-1914: Urbanism and Class in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 69-70 (1986): 33-69; Allen Seager, "Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-21," *Labour/Le Travail* 16 (1985): 23-60; John Douglas Belshaw, "The British Collier in British Columbia: Another Archtype Reconsidered," *Labour/Le Travail* 34 (1994): 11-36; Jeremy Mouat, "The Genesis of Western Exceptionalism: British Columbia's Hard-Rock Miners, 1895-1903," *Canadian Historical Review* 81 (1990): 317-45.

[14] The MLAs were the "socialist intellectual" James H. Hawthornthwaite, member for Nanaimo, and the collier Parker Williams, member for Newcastle. In 1912 Jack Place replaced Hawthornthwaite.

[15] For the western exceptionalism thesis, see McCormack, *Reformers, Radicals, and Revolutionaries*; Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in BC* (Vancouver: BC Federation of Labour, Boag Foundation, 1967); and David J. Bercuson, "Labour

itinerant single males certainly created the impression of a rough-and-tumble frontier community. Its newness and dependence on the coal industry notwithstanding, the town was quickly serviced by electricity, water, and a sewage system and was isolated neither from the region's urban centres nor from metropolitan culture. Nor was its population homogeneous. Although more than 60 per cent of the residents were British in origin, a cosmopolitan flavour was added by the many Belgians, Finns, and eastern Europeans who comprised a third of the total population. Approximately 177 Chinese, the majority of whom were unskilled mine labourers, also lived in Ladysmith, first in bunkhouses on Methuen Street and later, when they were forced to move to make room for a park, outside city limits.[16]

Unlike the camps, Ladysmith had a small but significant middle class made up of merchants and tradespeople (who offered a variety of goods and services) and a professional class made up of doctors, teachers, lawyers, and clergy.[17] The presence of small businesspeople and professionals did not mitigate class tension or dampen the political activism of the colliers, as Bercuson suggests should have been the case.[18] Although tension seldom reached the boiling point, signs of class division were apparent. Candidates for alderman were required to possess at least $500 worth of insured real estate; those for mayor had to have at least $1,000 worth of such property. Thus, businesspeople monopolized municipal politics after the town was

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Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier," *Canadian Historical Review* 58 (1977): 154-75. These arguments have been discredited by numerous important works, including McDonald, "Working Class Vancouver, 1886-1914"; James Conley, "Frontier Labourers, Crafts in Crisis and the Western Labour Revolt: The Case of Vancouver, 1900-1919," *Labour/Le Travail* 23 (1989): 9-37; Mouat, "The Genesis of Western Exceptionalism"; Mark Leier, "Ethnicity, Urbanism, and the Labour Aristocracy: Rethinking Vancouver Trade Unionism, 1889-1909," *Canadian Historical Review* 74 (1993): 510-34; Belshaw, "The British Collier in British Columbia," and "Cradle to Grave: An Examination of Demographic Behaviour on Two British Columbian Frontiers," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (1994): 41-62. For the most recent criticism of western exceptionalism see Mark Leier, "W[h]ither Labour History: Regionalism, Class, and the Writing of BC History," *BC Studies* 111 (1996): 61-75, and the other contributions to *Forum* in this issue.

[16] *Report of the Minister of Mines*, 1912, K234, lists 103 Chinese employed above ground at Extension. See also Viola Johnson-Cull, *Chronicle of Ladysmith and District* (Victoria: Ladysmith New Horizons Historical Society, 1980), 307; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 17 July 1904. On the Croatian community, see Zelimir B. Juricic, "Croatians Killed in Ladysmith Mine Blast," *BC Historical News* vol 26 (Winter 1992-93): 20-23, and "Croatians Enlivened Mining Towns," *BC Historical News* vol 27 (Summer 1994): 22-25.

[17] On the importance of the middle classes in the development of BC resource communities, see Gordon Hak, "The Socialist and Labourist Impulse in Small-Town British Columbia: Port Alberni and Prince George, 1911-33," *Canadian Historical Review* 70 (1989): 519-42.

[18] Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism," 168.

incorporated in 1904.[19] The layout of the town also reflected class divisions. Most miners lived in small houses on the hill to the west of Second Avenue on lots sold to them by Dunsmuir, whereas members of the middle class were located on larger lots east of Second Avenue towards the Esplanade, much closer to all amenities.[20]

Although a significant number of single men came to the region in search of employment, and possibly wives,[21] they did not dominate the town's demography or community life. Certainly, women were in the minority, and there were more single men than married men.[22] The female-male ratio in 1911 was 1:1.38, and 60 per cent of the male population (or 1,128 of 1,886) were listed as single while 646 men (or 34 per cent of the total) were listed as married. Women made up 42 per cent of the town's population. The percentage of single women, however, was only slightly less than that of single men. Of a total of 1,409 women, 815 (or 58 per cent) were single, while 544 (or 38 per cent) were married. The remainder were listed as widowed, separated, or divorced. But as the census data do not indicate age, and as presumably many of the individuals enumerated were children, the available figures present a somewhat skewed picture.[23]

Noteworthy, however, is the large number of married miners, a number consistent with company and government policies that encouraged families over single men because "families were thought

[19] *Ladysmith Daily Ledger*, 4 January 1905. See also John W. Coburn, "Early History of the Town of Ladysmith, BC" ADD MSS 783, BCARS. Coburn, Ladysmith's first mayor, owned the Ladysmith Lumber Company and was a member of the board of trade and the committee of property owners that petitioned for incorporation. In 1910, the mayor was Roy Dier, a dentist. Councilors included George Haworth, the manager of the opera house; Colin Campbell, a contractor; and George Roberts, the owner of a meat market.

[20] The *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 22 May 1901, reported that Dunsmuir had "granted two hundred lots in Ladysmith free to [the miners of Extension] on condition that they build their homes there at once." Goodacre repeats this, adding that "a similar offer for businesses wishing to establish themselves in the new town" was also made. Goodacre, *Dunsmuir's Dream,* 25. In fact, the miners were forced to purchase these lots at $100 per lot, a cost that was in addition to that of moving from Extension. See Dunsmuir's testimony in Royal Commission, 1903, 244.

[21] Johnson-Cull recalls that the population of Ladysmith consisted of "young married couples with large families, and young men looking for wives." See Johnson-Cull, *Chronicle of Ladysmith,* 280.

[22] For a critical re-examination of BC demographic history see Belshaw, "Cradle to Grave."

[23] According to the 1911 Census, men made up 63 per cent of the total population of the province, women made up 37 per cent. Thirty-five per cent of men were married, 42 per cent of women were married. Some indication of the number of children in Ladysmith can be found in school attendence reports. In August 1908, for instance, there were 223 boys and 241 girls attending school in Ladysmith, mostly in the junior grades. In October there were 19 children registered in high school. See *Ladysmith Chronicle*, 5 September 1908, 3 October 1908.

more likely to 'sink roots'" and provide a stable workforce.[24] Given the fact that 57 per cent of its population was married and that a total of 672 families were enumerated in 1911, it is apparent that, from the outset, Ladysmith was conceived not as a camp town dominated by transient single men but, rather, as a modern, permanent settlement where the families of coalminers could live comfortably as a community.[25] The generally high wages of the miners and the promise of relative economic security was conducive to marriage and family life and contributed to the overwhelming optimism that, for a time, prevailed in Ladysmith.[26] As in Nanaimo, families formed the backbone of active community life. As Belshaw notes, "it was the population of married men, their wives, and their offspring who nurtured community associations, friendly societies, and even early trade unions."[27] As families were the foundation of community life, it seems likely that miners' radicalism stemmed, at least in part, from their determination to secure decent livelihoods for them.[28]

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The demographic situation in Ladysmith resulted in a chronic minority status for women which, in turn, reinforced "rather than revolutionize[d] the sexual status quo." It encouraged early marriage, kept nuptual rates high, and defined and shaped gender roles, often restricting women to the domestic sphere.[29] But gender, as much as

[24] In coal communities in general, miners' daughters tended not only to marry within their class, but to marry at an early age and to have large families. Belshaw, "Cradle to Grave," 50, 54, 56, 61.

[25] This might have been in the back of Dunsmuir's mind when he ordered the miners to move from Extension to Ladysmith, where the water supply and the general environment were healthier. The main reasons, however, were that he feared that the proximity of Extension to Nanaimo would inspire union agitation in the former and that the slope in Extension, like the one in Wellington a few years earlier, would have to be abandoned because the seam stretched towards Ladysmith, near where the company planned to sink new shafts. See Royal Commission, 1903, 242ff.

[26] On the standard of living of miners on Vancouver Island and its implication for labour unrest, see John Douglas Belshaw, "The Standard of Living of British Miners on Vancouver Island, 1848-1900," *BC Studies* 84 (1989-90): 37-64, "Columbia," and "Cradle to Grave."

[27] Belshaw, "Cradle to Grave," 61.

[28] Ibid., 60. As Belshaw claims, "married men with large numbers of dependents had more at stake and thus more to fight for." This is also the conclusion of Sara Daimond, "A Union Man's Wife: The Ladies' Auxiliary Movement in the iwa, the Lake Cowichan Experience," in Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro, eds., *Not Just Pin Money* (Victoria: Comosun College, 1984), 290, who writes that "the existence of a permanent community fostered the development of unionism and auxiliaries in this single industry town. The possibility of a home and of a wage capable of supporting a wife and children provided an incentive to organize."

[29] Allen Seager and Adele Perry, "Mining the Connections: Structure and Experience in a Nineteenth-Century Coalfield" (Paper presented at BC Studies Conference, Victoria, 1992), 12; see also Veronica Strong-Boag, "Society in the Twentieth Century," in Hugh J.M. Johnston, ed. *The Pacific Province* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1996), 273.

class, race, or demography, defined social relationships in Ladysmith. Gendered ideals of masculinity and femininity shaped structures of authority, dominated production and the family, and penetrated and influenced class and ethnic relations.

This was especially pronounced in British Columbia's small, single-resource communities. In larger urban centres women had more employment opportunities and were able to organize in the struggle for better wages and working conditions. Women living in resource-extraction towns like Ladysmith, however, had fewer options available to them, a fact that reinforced gender roles and that may have made women reluctant to go to such settlements in the first place.[30] Legal restrictions reinforced a sexual division of labour by preventing women from working in the coalfields. Although Native women had worked in the coalyards during the early colonial period,[31] such work was considered unsuitable for European women. Laws prohibiting female employment in the coalfields in British Columbia had been in place since 1877, when "An Act to make Regulations with Respect to Coal Mines" prohibited women and children under the age of twelve from working underground. These regulations, based on an English law, only legalized popular prejudices and superstitions about women underground.[32]

Regardless of how "much narrower" the domestic sphere was in working-class than in middle-class lives,[33] the notion of separate spheres was accepted as a norm. It was taken for granted that women's role was restricted to the home. However, within the home women could exert considerable influence, especially in running the household economy and raising children. Given the generally irregular nature of employment in the mines, and the threat to the family's security posed by work stoppages, a woman's ability as a "miner's financier" took on great significance in the daily struggle for economic

[30] See Belshaw, "Cradle to Grave," 48-49; and Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag, "Taking Gender into Account in British Columbia: More than Just Women's Studies," *BC Studies* 105/106 (1995): 19-20.

[31] Seager and Perry, "Mining the Connections," 16.

[32] *Statutes of British Columbia*, 1877 c.122. See Jeremy Mouat, *Roaring Days: Rossland's Mines and the History of British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), 68. The act did not forbid women from working above ground. Some immigrant women from continental Europe, unaware of the prohibition against female labour in mines in BC or Britain, apparently tried to find work at the Wellington collieries. See Johnson-Cull, *Chronicle of Ladysmith*, 324. For women workers in British coal mines, see also Angela John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Women Workers in Victorian Coal Mines* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

[33] Rusty Bitterman, "Women and the Escheat Movement: The Politics of Everyday Life on Prince Edward Island," in Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton, eds., *Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the Nineteenth-Century Maritimes* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1994), 31.

survival.[34] However, this relationship was still gendered and was reinforced by the miners' belief that they were the sole breadwinners and, therefore, entitled to a "living" wage in order to provide for their families.[35] Moreover, given the shortage of employment for women outside the home and the burden of domestic work, few women were able to contribute to the household income unless they performed domestic service or took in lodgers.

The attitudes surrounding a male-dominated workplace fostered rigid stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, inevitably to the disadvantage of women. The specialized language of the mines, the masculine "pit talk," created barriers between the men initiated into the coal-mining culture and the women who lived forever "on the surface,"[36] while the job itself "socialized" men "into manhood," teaching boys such traditional "masculine" values as independence, courage, toughness, cooperation, and common interest. Excluded from this culture, women were socialized to be wives and mothers. Men regarded women as dependent and nurturing but also as a potential threat to class solidarity because of their social aspirations, seductive power, and corruptability.[37] In this way, common perceptions of gender influenced the development of class consciousness and the nature of class relations.[38]

Excluding women from areas of primary economic production reduced their economic autonomy, entrenched and legitimized inequality, and contributed to their lack of power in society at large. But there were some economic opportunities for women in single-industry communities. As Ladysmith grew during the first decade of the twentieth century, so too did the economic prospects for women, especially in the service industries, the public sector, and private business. Such employment, however, was viewed not as a long-term career, but as a temporary occupation. As a rule women

[34] On women's role in the household see David Frank, "The Miner's Financier: Women in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917," *Atlantis* 8 (1983): 137-43. Wage levels for coal miners depended upon numerous variables, including geology, the use of boys in the mines, management's assignment of places, and seasonal fluctuations in markets. See Belshaw, "The Standard of Living of British Miners on Vancouver Island."

[35] On the importance of the ideology of the "male breadwinner" within the context of the development of Canadian socialism, see Linda Kealey, "Canadian Socialism and the Woman Question, 1900-1914," *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (1984): 78.

[36] Ian McKay, "Realm of Uncertainty: The Experience of Work in the Cumberland Coal Mines, 1873-1927," *Acadiensis* 7 (1986): 24.

[37] Penfold, "'Have You No Manhood in You?'" 29.

[38] Male-dominated unions ignored women because of their alleged lack of class consciousness, their "false consciousness," and "femininity." See Star Rosenthal, "Union Maids: Organized Women Workers in Vancouver, 1900-1915," *BC Studies* 41 (1979): 37.

sought work outside the home either before they married or after the death of a husband. Most women in Ladysmith's labour force were single, as, for example, were the town's first telephone operators, Ethel and Bertha Clay, and Mary and Edith Pannel. Likewise, in 1909 seven of Ladysmith's nine teachers were single women.[39] Employment positions for women of all classes tended to be low-wage equivalents of work in the home (such positions included that of domestic, store clerk, teacher, and office worker). These jobs seldom enabled women to become economically and socially independent. The exception was the small number of businesswomen who owned and operated a wide variety of stores and services, including a hotel, a general store, and several specialty shops.[40]

Many women played active if limited roles in the public domain, especially in religious and social organizations. Vancouver Island coal-mining towns had a rich tradition of associational life. The various church groups, fraternal organizations, mutual aid societies, ethnic lodges, and social clubs were vital to the community, providing health and accident insurance, fundraising for numerous charities, and a wide range of social activities.[41] These societies drew leaders and members from the ranks of businesspeople and the working class,[42] and this fostered a sense of common interest, especially during times of crisis, such as would be brought on by a death or an accident in the mines. For instance, when Frederick Greaves, a miner active on the school board and in civic affairs, was killed in the mines, he was eulogized as a man "held in high esteem by all classes." On the day of his funeral, businesses closed, the St. John's lodge and the Masons held processions, and all the pallbearers were past masters of the Masonic lodge. This ritual, carried out with depressing regularity, transcended class divisions, bringing the community together and serving as a reminder of the centrality of the workplace and the mines in the lives of the town's residents.[43]

[39] Johnson-Cull, *Chronicle of Ladysmith*, 255 and 280; *Ladysmith Chronicle*, 25 August 1909.

[40] See, for example, *Henderson's Gazetteer and Directory*, 1910. BCARS.

[41] See Lynne Bowen, "Friendly Societies in Nanaimo: The British Tradition of Self-Help in a Canadian Coal-Mining Community" (Master's thesis, Department of History, University of Victoria, 1980).

[42] Ibid., 17. Bowen estimates that half of the membership was working-class.

[43] *Ladysmith Chronicle*, 16 September 1908, 19 September 1908. The Wellington-Extension Medical, Accident and Burial Fund paid out a claim of $300 upon Greaves's death (*Ladysmith Chronicle*, 10 October 1908). Likewise, when Edward Armstrong was killed, leaving his wife and six children, the body was attended by the Knights of Pythias and the Ancient Order of Druids (*Ladysmith Chronicle*, 16 June 1909). Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) had a very high death rate. Between 1910 and 1912 (not including the disasterous explosion of 1909), the death rate averaged 3.29 per thousand men employed. This was

Women played a prominent role in local associational life, especially in women's auxiliaries. Although by their nature the auxiliaries reinforced gender divisions and reflected women's subordinate status in society, they provided a valuable vehicle for enabling women to participate in the public sphere. [44] The United Mine Workers' Women's Auxiliary, in particular, played a central role during the Great Strike of 1912-14. Its numerous activities included organizing social events such as dances, dinners, picnics, and excursions, in addition to providing political education designed to raise the class consciousness of its members and to mobilize women in the defence of their class and family. During the strike it held weekly strategy meetings, organized protests and demonstrations, and raised much needed funds for the union and the families in need. While the UMWA Women's Auxiliary was socially exclusive, membership in other groups tended to cross class lines. Wives of miners and businesspeople, for example, organized and ran the Ladysmith Hospital Auxiliary, one of the most important societies in Ladysmith. It provided essential services to the new hospital, built by the miners and administered by the Miners' Accident and Burial Fund, and it held numerous charity events to raise money for supplies and equipment.[45]

Although the active associational life in Ladysmith reinforced rather than undermined established gender relations, many women became prominent members of the community through their leadership roles in the auxiliaries. Through their work in these service clubs women were able to function relatively autonomously and independently in the public sphere, exerting considerable influence over

close to the US average of 3.31, worse than the average in the immense German coalfields (2.2) between 1897 and 1911, and far worse than the average in Belgium (1.03), France (1.52), or Britain (1.32). See GR1323, B2101, 7529-16-13, 38, BCARS, and Stephen Hickey, "The Shaping of the German Labour Movement: Miners in the Ruhr," in Richard J. Evans, ed. *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 238, n. 16.

[44] Joan Sangster has written, with regard to the CCF, that:

> Auxiliaries supplied a secure niche for socialist women uncomfortable in the male-dominated mainstream of the party, but who nonethless wished to offer support based on traditional female roles. And their dances, picnics, euchres, and dinners did contribute meaningfully, in a financial and social sense, to the growth of the CCF. Yet, women's auxiliaries were also places where women were channelled and forgotten by party leaders unconscious and uncaring of the need to break down the sexual division of labour in the party and offer women more challenging political roles.

See Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989), 225.

[45] The Hospital Auxiliary was very active in assisting the widows and orphans of miners killed in cave-ins and in the explosion of 1909. See *Ladysmith Chronicle*, 13 October 1909. See also Johnson-Cull, *Chronicle of Ladysmith*, 278-79.

decisions affecting the day-to-day life of the community without having to compete with or be subordinated to the demands of men. While women played a peripheral role in the productive economy, this was true neither in the household nor in society at large, even if the value of their commitment and work was seldom recognized.

* * *

Women were often active in labour disputes. Wives of striking miners often took up the union cause against the company, joined their husbands and sons on the picket line, and provided other means of active support during times of severe stress and hardship. Such was the case in early struggles against the Dunsmuir empire in 1877 and 1890, when women resisted eviction from company housing, joined in mass demonstrations, and fought against the militia and strikebreakers.[46] At no time previously, however, were women as prominent as they were in the Great Strike of 1912-14. In many respects, this strike was the culmination of decades of struggle between Vancouver Island coal miners and the combined forces of the government and coal companies. Its impact on the miners and their families was enormous. The violence and duration of the confrontation left communities bitterly divided, while the strike's collapse in August 1914 led to the demise of the UMWA and severely weakened the position of the miners. More than anything else, perhaps, it symbolized the miners' inability to translate industrial strength into political and economic power. After the First World War, as the Vancouver Island coalfields slowly declined, the miners were no longer in a position to continue the struggle.

The strike began in September 1912 when Oscar Mottishaw, an active union member, was dismissed from his position in the Cumberland mines.[47] Mottishaw, targetted by management as a "trouble-maker and agitator,"[48] had previously worked as a member of the gas committee at Extension, where, during the summer, he

[46] See note 6 above; see also Lynne Bowen, *Three Dollar Dreams* (Lantzville: Oolichan, 1987), 162, 165, 344.

[47] Formerly part of the Dunsmuir empire, the collieries at Cumberland and Extension had been purchased by railway magnates William McKenzie and Donald Mann, with financial backing from Sir Edmund Walker, president of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, in 1910. Renamed Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir), the new owners made no attempt to promote better relations with their employees. On the contrary, they perpetuated the management style of Dunsmuir, refusing to recognize the miners' right to organize and initiating further measures to erode their traditional workplace authority.

[48] Samuel Price, *Report of the Royal Commissioner on Coal Mining Disputes on Vancouver Island*, 1913, 16.

and Isaac Portrey had reported the presence of gas in five locations in the Number Two mine. When their "places" had been worked, they were refused new ones (a procedure that was tantamount to dismissal), whereupon Mottishaw left for Cumberland. In response to his dismissal from the Cumberland mines, the local UMWA called a work stoppage or "holiday" for 16 September. The company retaliated swiftly, but predictably, by locking the men out. When word spread to Ladysmith and Extension, the miners declared a "holiday" in sympathy with their colleagues in Cumberland, and they too were locked out; up to 1,700 men reportedly joined the union that day.

Despite economic hardship, a hostile and repressive state, and an inflexible company determined to crush the strikers, the miners were able to maintain solidarity for almost two years. This reflected the high level of class consciousness that had matured over the course of earlier coalfield battles against the Dunsmuirs in 1877, 1890-91, and 1903 as well as the success of the miners' organization under the UMWA. However, the miners were able to present such a united front only because of the depth of community support and the strength and commitment of the miners' families. Union leaders, the local socialist MLAS, and the strikers knew this, and they spared no effort to mobilize the community and to gather public opinion on their side.

The wives and families of the striking miners played a crucial role in maintaining strong community solidarity.[49] Confronted with the disintegration of the household economy and the domestic burden of trying to feed and clothe their children on meagre strike pay,[50] women found jobs outside the home and assisted families in need in an attempt to preserve striker solidarity. Most significantly, they joined their striking husbands, sons, and brothers on the picket lines, in numerous demonstrations, and in harrassing strikebreakers and special constables. These activities intensified during the first half of 1913, when the position of the strikers and their families began to deteriorate due to increased pressure from Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) (CC[D]) and the general decline in the economy. At the onset of the strike, many miners and their families left Vancouver Island in search of employment. Those who remained had difficulty

[49] At the same time, however, some miners broke solidarity and returned to work because of pressure from their wives. As one commentator claimed: "I know what happened how he had to work and he had pressure on him you know. If a man's wife isn't with him it makes him pretty miserable," Bowen, *Boss Whistle*, 144, 148, and 196.

[50] Strikers received $4 per week strike pay. If they were married they received another $2 plus $1 for each child. The average wage for skilled colliers at CC(D) was $4 per diem. Price, *Report of the Royal Commissioner on Coal Mining Disputes on Vancouver Island*, 6.

finding alternative employment, and a small number of strikers broke ranks and trickled back to work. At the same time, CC(D) recruited non-local strikebreakers and used licensed Chinese miners underground. This tactic was most successful in the recently mechanized Cumberland mines, where production surpassed 1911 levels over the course of 1913. At Extension, in contrast, production declined significantly.[51] On May Day 1913, in an attempt to shut down all coal production on the Island and to pressure the government to intervene, the union struck the Western Fuel Company in Nanaimo and the small Pacific Coast Colliery at South Wellington.

During the early months of the strike, the miners and their families had largely restricted their activities to mass street protests. In Cumberland, the chief constable reported that, "while conducting workers to their homes, the usual mob of about five hundred men, women and children followed, playing discordant music, shouting, yelling, and waving umbrellas, and otherwise behaving in a very disorderly and disgraceful manner."[52] As the frustrations of the strikers mounted, however, there was a marked increase in aggressive confrontations between them and the strikebreakers. The strikebreakers, "now in large numbers," were becoming more confident and assertive. Protected by the police and often in possession of firearms and other weapons, they were "beginning to resent any slurring remarks thrown at them."[53] During the summer of 1913 the situation worsened in Cumberland, when a group of fifteen special constables on horseback charged into a crowd of strikers in an attempt to drive them out of town. The situation in Ladysmith also deteriorated. Following the 20 July arrival from Vancouver of a transfer barge with strikebreakers on board, the local constable noted a significant increase in the number of confrontations between the strikers and the "working men." These incidents were still relatively minor, ranging from the use of "bad language while in bathing" to preventing CC(D) employees from unloading freight. More serious were reports that strikers were tampering with the railway switches.[54] Much to the dismay of the authorities, women were also involved. In Ladysmith, they daily accosted strikebreakers and their police escorts at the train station,

[51] *Report of the Minister of Mines*, 1912, K225-239; 1914, K340-366. See also Norris, "The Vancouver Island Coal Miners, 1912-14," 61-63.

[52] GR1323, B2087, 9318-16-12, 10 and 17, BCARS.

[53] GR1323, B2087, 9318-16-12, 49, BCARS.

[54] GR445, box 5, file 3, Provincial Police Reports, July 1913, BCARS. On 5 August police in South Wellington arrested two "foreign" strikebreakers for threatening pickets with a shotgun. They were fined $50 and costs. *Nanaimo Free Press*, 6 August 1913, 7 August 1913.

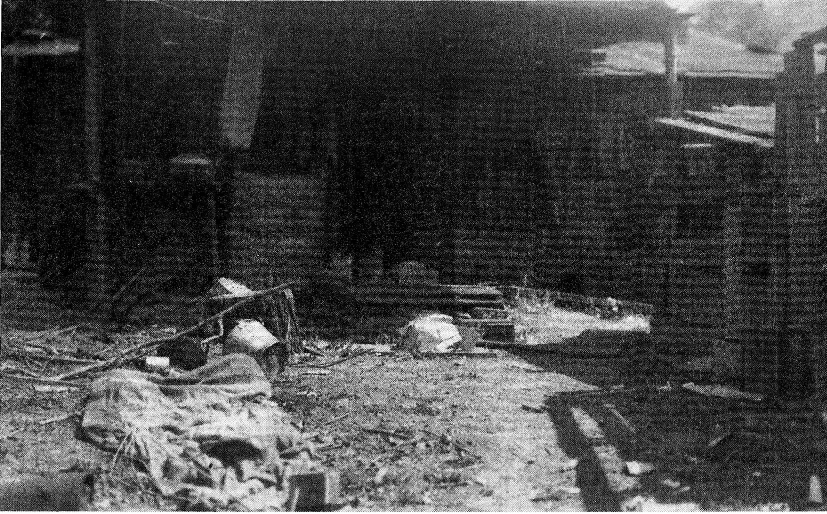
General store looted during strike, 1913. BCARS D-03318.

and at Nanaimo two women were fined $20 for calling the pit bosses "scab[s]." The women, the magistrate warned, surely risked losing "the respect of their husbands" with such behaviour.[55]

By the beginning of August the situation had become even more volatile. In Extension, the scene of the worst violence, strikebreakers employed numerous tactics to drive the strikers and their families out of the town, such as shining a searchlight at the strikers' homes and abusing their wives and children. On 13 August the miners finally responded by marching to the "bull pen" where the strikebreakers were encamped. The strikebreakers opened fire, and a short time later a rumour that six men had been killed reached Nanaimo. Hundreds of miners — estimates are as high as 1,500 — headed for Extension. That evening, their targets apparently picked out in advance, the crowd ransacked and set alight numerous homes and buildings belonging to the company, the strikebreakers, and the Chinese, driving their inhabitants into the woods.[56]

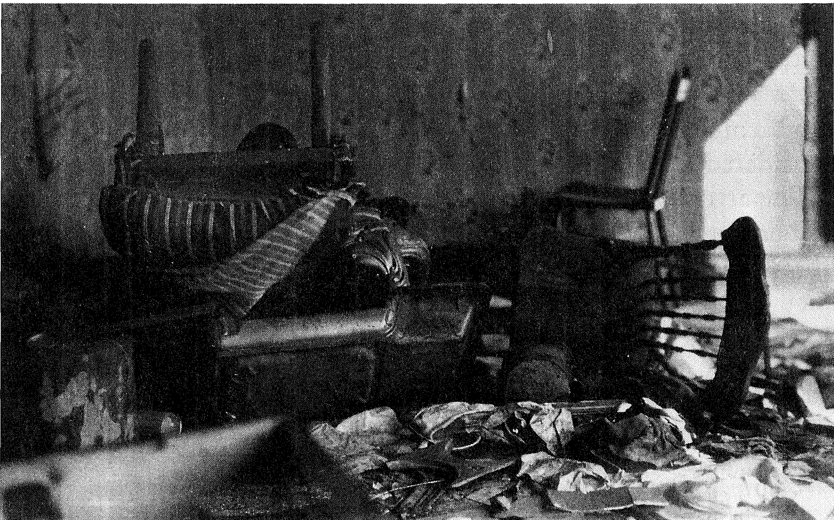
[55] *BC Federationist*, 27 June 1913. In Cumberland, two women were tried for assault and found guilty. According to the prosecutor, T.B. Shoebotham, "the trouble was what to do with them. Knowing of the Prison Congestion, I felt it to be useless to have them sentenced to imprisonment. To impose a fine meant that their sympathizers would pay it, and would have no restraining effect on that account. I therefore impressed upon the Magistrate the necessity of putting them on their good behavior and allowing them out on suspended sentence, which he did. It has had a salutory effect and there has been no trouble with women since." See GR1323, B2087, 9318-16-12, 20, BCARS.

[56] See Norris, "The Vancouver Island Coal Miners," 69-70; Bowen, *Boss Whistle*, 151-74. See also the contemporary pamphlets by John Hedley, "The Labor Trouble in Nanaimo District," and J. Kavanagh, "The Vancouver Island Strike," 1914, both in the Nanaimo Community Archives (NCA).



Chinese miner's home looted during strike, 1913. BCARS D-03308.

According to testimony from the ensuing trial, women were active participants in the violence. On the morning of 13 August, women marched alongside men up and down the streets of Ladysmith, throwing bricks through the windows of strikebreakers' homes, calling out abuse, and assaulting any strikebreaker they found outside. Such was the reputation of the strikers' wives during the riots in Extension that the wives and children of the strikebreakers fled into the woods,



Miner's home looted during strike, 1913. BCARS D-03315.

Mine manager Cunningham's home burned during strike, 1913. BCARS D-03316.

allegedly in fear of them.[57] But women also took the initiative against the strikebreakers, acting without the support of men. In many cases, women played upon established cultural codes of masculinity and femininity, derived from their everyday experience, to force home their point. In one recorded incident in Ladysmith, for example, "two tiny Scotch women had grabbed the dinner pails from the nervous hands of two husky young fellows and were smearing their faces with the jam sandwiches. 'Now ye blasted ninnies, go hame and see if your ain mithers will ken ye,' they shouted at them."[58] Breaking union ranks was a sign of lack of honour, duty, and courage, qualities the tiny Scotch women obviously possessed; paradoxically, it was also considered to be effeminate.

The arrival of the militia halted the violence but not the protests and picketing. Within days, hundreds of men, including most union officials and even John Place, opposition MLA from Nanaimo, had been arrested.[59] The fact that no strikebreakers were arrested for their

[57] Bowen, *Boss Whistle,* 168. Not all wives of strikebreakers responded this way. Charlotte Schivardi caused a sensation when she admitted giving a strikebreaker a gun: she "played as militant a part as a leader of her people in the strike troubles as she has in these trials." She was not condemned like the union women but was heralded as a "non-union Joan of Arc." See *Vancouver Sun*, 31 January 1914.

[58] Cited in Bowen, *Boss Whistle,* 163.

[59] David Williams, the son Parker Williams, the opposition MLA from Newcastle, was also arbitrarily arrested. See David Williams's untitled account in Miners' Strikes, Information File, NCA.

role in the disturbances, in particular at Extension, suggests that the arrests were intended to crush the strike and to destroy the union. Despite the hardships suffered by the families of the arrested miners, the mood of the community remained cautiously optimistic. A Pinkerton agent, recruited by the attorney general to provide information about "the future actions of the mob," reported that the strikers were behaving like "chastised children" and posed no threat of further violence. The solidarity of the strikers, however, had not been seriously undermined. Boosted by news that the management of the Jingle Pot Mine had agreed to recognize the union and that a settlement was expected at Nanaimo's Western Fuel Company, the strikers were confident of victory.[60]

The presence of the militia, the mass arrest of the striking miners, and the subsequent trials had a curious effect on the community. Whereas early in the strike women were praised for "striving to keep [the striking men] from lawless deeds" and for planning and scheming "innocent diversions to keep their menfolks in good humor,"[61] the women were now more militant and the men more subdued, fearing that continued protest would lead to more arrests. The refusal to grant bail to those arrested and the harsh, arbitrary sentences handed down by the courts prompted the women into further action. Although no woman was arrested for participating in the riots, women, along with their husbands and those sympathetic to the union cause, interpreted the actions of the Crown as a declaration of war not just against unions and the working class, but also against women and their families. As the *BC Federationist* claimed, in an attempt to drum up sympathy for its cause, the state and the companies were waging a "war on women."[62] The result was that women confronted the special constables, the odious symbol of state authority and company repression, with renewed vigour.[63]

[60] GR0429, box 19, Pinkerton Reports, 14 August 1913, 23 August 1913, 24 August 1913, 29 August 1913, 5 September 1913, BCARS. See also the report by Operative 29, who claimed that "it is almost certain that not over two dozen men have quitted the ranks of the union to resume work since the critical period which followed the passing of sentence here by Judge Howay and which so nearly approached breaking the strike ... the men are far from giving up the battle at this stage." See GR68, vol. 2, 29 November 1913, BCARS.

[61] *Vancouver Sun*, 12 February 1913.

[62] *BC Federationist*, 19 September 1913.

[63] As the Pinkerton agent complained, the women in Nanaimo were "continually baiting these men and jeering them, also making scurrilous remarks to be overheard by the specials, then when they reply to the women the latter become abusive." He also blamed the specials because they sought to "prolong the conversation and ridicule the women," GR0429, box 19, Pinkerton Reports, 26 August 1913, BCARS.

When the Pinkerton agent left Nanaimo for Ladysmith towards the end of August, he was confronted with a situation entirely different from the one to which he was accustomed. In contrast to Nanaimo, where the strikers considered him to be a union sympathizer, the people of Ladysmith were suspicious of him and extremely reluctant to talk to strangers. The town, it was said, was full of "male and female spies." The spy's attitude towards the residents of Ladysmith was exceedingly hostile. "The Ladysmith men," he reported, "are a distinctly lower order of people and display the traits employed by the ignorant and savage. Foreigners seem to predominate." He reserved his harshest criticism, however, for the women of Ladysmith and Extension, whose actions so brazenly violated every conceivable norm of "civilized," "feminine" behaviour. "One can readily see that no act is too mean or contemptible for them to stoop to." At one point, they attacked a female witness for the Crown in a "sickening display of savagery," and later, when another witness described the property damage at Extension, the women in the courtroom were "particularly exuberant" and "chattered and laughed like Amazons" while "their men folks seated in the rear tried to quiet them."[64] Clearly, the trials did not intimidate the women but, rather, awakened in them a sharp awareness of social injustice, of their own weakened position, and of the need to continue fighting. Indeed, the authorities feared the women. Unable to visit their husbands and sons who were in prison awaiting trial, the women petitioned, and vociferously protested to, the attorney general for visiting rights. This request was refused on the grounds that "plots for further disturbance may be concerted during those visits." The authorities, mused a writer for the *Vancouver Sun*, "have cause to fear the women."[65]

No doubt this fear was partly caused by the increased politicization of the working-class women of Vancouver Island, which found expression not just in their support for the union cause and socialist MLA Parker Williams, but in their renewed demand for the vote. Early in the strike, many women began to associate the coal miners' labour protest with

[64] *Ibid.*, 29 August 1913 and 3 September 1913. The agent's language is significant. Women who dared to break middle-class codes of female conduct were invariably refered to as "Amazons." See also Bowen, *Three Dollar Dreams*, 165, which records a reporter's impression of an eviction from the 1877 strike: "No sooner had he [a deputy] made an entry, than he was pitchforked out of the house and kicked and cuffed through a line of indignant Amazons, when he quickly beat a retreat ... None of the parties were hurt, although they received considerable cuffing from the women who vigorously assaulted them."

[65] *Vancouver Sun*, 25 August 1913.

reform of the suffrage laws. Suffrage had long been on the political agenda in Ladysmith and in the Nanaimo District: in 1906 and again in 1909 the Socialist member for Nanaimo, J.H. Hawthornthwaite, had introduced bills to the legislature to enfranchise women.[66] Similarly, suffrage had been an important issue for women in earlier coal strikes. During the 1891 strike, a group of eighteen women, one of whom (Naomi Poulet) was assaulted by a young strikebreaker, led a "March for Female Suffrage" along the road from Nanaimo to Wellington.[67] A few years later, female suffrage became the first item on the agenda of a coalition of opposition groups in Nanaimo.[68]

Women's demand for the vote received widespread support from working-class organizations: it was endorsed by the socialist parties; the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council; and, in early 1912, by the BC Federation of Labour.[69] However, apart from some reform groups, mainstream middle-class society, epitomized best by Premier Richard McBride, remained fundamentally opposed to female suffrage. Indeed, a reporter for the *Vancouver Sun* appeared to be at a loss to account for women's apparently sudden and new interest in "such an abstract question as votes for women." This was evidently the result, he thought, of the overabundance of "leisure" time in the striking miners' households.[70] For many miners' wives this was neither an abstract question nor simply an unforeseen consequence of idle chitchat; the demand for suffrage was inextricably linked to the broader questions of social justice raised by the strike — issues that went to the heart of the community and the family.

Social justice was not an abstract concept for the wives of coal miners. As they repeatedly emphasized, their primary concern was with the work conditions in the mines or, more precisely, with the safety of their husbands, sons, and brothers, not with union recognition as such. The nightmare of the explosion at Extension on 5 October 1909 remained especially vivid: within a matter of seconds thirty-two men had lost their lives, thirteen women had become

[66] Irene Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice in British Columbia: Helena Gutteridge, the Unknown Reformer* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), 60.

[67] Allen Seager and Adele Perry, "Mining the Connections," 2; see also Lynne Bowen, *Three Dollar Dreams*, 346.

[68] The first article of the Nanaimo Workingman's Platform, 1894, declared: "That all women, resident within the Province and being British subjects of the full age of twenty-one years, be entitled to vote at the Provincial elections upon the same terms and conditions that men are so entitled." *Nanaimo Free* Press, 7 March 1894, and quoted in Thomas Robert Loosmore, "The British Columbia Labour Movement and Political Action, 1879-1906," (Master's Thesis, Department of History, University of British Columbia, 1954), xi.

[69] Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice*, 65.

[70] *Vancouver Sun*, 12 February 1913.

widows, and thirty-eight children, only two of whom were of an age to provide for themselves, had lost their fathers.[71] "Up there," indicated one woman in early 1913, "is the burying ground watching and waiting, saying ... who's coming next. And you never know who it's going to be. Maybe it's my boy she is waiting for. She got my husband."[72] The company seemed more concerned with preserving its profit margins and control of the workplace, both of which were threatened by the gas committee, than with the safety of its employees. Parker Williams, the local MLA, articulated the concern of many women when he claimed that the strike was "a fight not primarily for a living, but for the right to live. This is a fight against the undertaker and the morgue."[73]

Although Williams denied that the strike was a fight against capital, the issue of safety was still linked to the question of class and, for the women at least, to gender. For the workers, safety management was part of a general struggle for workplace control; participating in gas and safety committees, negotiating with the company or the state, and setting the terms for workplace organization empowered them and fostered a strong sense of class consciousness.[74] Likewise, women linked safety and class solidarity to their broader political demands. One woman, "whose enemies call her the suffragette," claimed: "who wouldn't fight if there were laws made for the safety of the miner and they were not enforced, how'd you like to go to the bowels of the earth if you wasn't sure at what minute an explosion might come?"[75] Similar sentiments were expressed by an unnamed miner's wife and mother of ten children who claimed in February 1913, a few months after the outbreak of the strike: "Do you think if the women of the province had the vote and elected representatives to the house that they would allow those men not to care whether the law was not enforced and our menfolks had to work where they were risking their lives every minute? No they wouldn't. Women are different. They wouldn't ask how much will it cost to make the mine safe. They would say those men who toil way below the earth's surface must be protected."[76]

[71] *Ladysmith Chronicle*, 9 October 1909.
[72] *Vancouver Sun*, 12 February 1913.
[73] *Ibid.*
[74] On the importance of safety, skill, workplace authority, and autonomy, and their relationship to industrial conflict, see Belshaw, "The British Collier in British Columbia." See also Donald Reid, "The Role of Mine Safety in the Development of Working-Class Consciousness and Organization: The Case of the Aubin Coal Basin, 1867-1914," *French Historical Studies* 13 (1981): 98-119.
[75] *Vancouver Sun*, 12 February 1913.
[76] *Ibid.*

Whereas miners saw safety primarily as an issue of working conditions and workplace control, women viewed mine safety from the perspective of the continued health and well-being of the family and community. "You don't forget when you see 30 graves all new dug in a row waiting to be filled with men you've known all your life," one woman remarked. "Wouldn't you fight, and starve if need be, if when your man left the house you didn't know how he was coming back?"[77] Their motivation for supporting the strike and confronting strikebreakers was not political revolution but, rather, the continued "viability of the working class family," which was now under siege.

Although the women suffered as much as, if not more than, the men, they were forced, according to Laura Jacobs from Nanaimo, to mind their own business, forced to "stay at home and let the rotten law courts finish their detestable work; stay at home until existing conditions ruthlessly destroy their children; stay at home until the dishonest, objectionable laws destroy that home forever." In the aftermath of the riots and trials their determination to win the strike and the vote appeared to be stronger than ever. They "have awakened and the women of Vancouver Island are going to do something. The honorable gentlemen of the law courts are mistaken in thinking the agitation at an end. The strike on Vancouver Island and the disgraceful treatment of the miners and their families has kindled such a fire of agitation and revolt in BC ... The march of progress is ever onward and the women too are going to fight for emancipation at the ballot box." At least, she continued, "the miners have one great consolation which their wives are denied, for the result of the strike on Vancouver Island will unmistakably show at the ballot box."[78] This sentiment was echoed a few weeks later by Helena Gutteridge of Vancouver, a founder of the British Columbia Woman's Suffrage League, in her weekly column on suffrage in the *BC Federationist*. "The women," she reported, "as a result of the action taken by the government during the recent strike and the excessive sentences passed on the miners now in prison, realize how valuable will be the possession of the franchise to them at the next general election."[79]

While the women of Ladysmith and Vancouver Island were becoming politicized, they were not following a radical feminist agenda. Although they were demanding political equality, like middle-class suffragists, they accepted separate spheres for men and women.

[77] *Ibid.*
[78] *BC Federationist*, 7 November 1913.
[79] *Ibid.*, 21 November 1913. On Gutteridge see Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice*.

They saw the vote as a means of protecting their immediate interests (the family and the home) and not as a way of subverting the "natural" order. On the contrary, their demands related specifically to the domestic sphere. As Carol Lee Bacchi has pointed out, "home protection required a wider sphere of action for women, the home's natural protectors."[80] Although the actions of the women indicate that they were assuming a broader role in the public sphere, they still subscribed to an ideology that reinforced their nurturing and submissive position in society, and they did not challenge men's dominant role in the economy and in politics. The vote would naturally expand women's role in the public sphere, but the anonymous mother of ten neither considered the issue of female representation in Parliament nor revealed any desire to restructure existing sex roles. She did not see the vote as a prerequisite for destroying the sexual division of labour. Rather than stressing sexual equality, she emphasized the importance of distinctly "female" qualities — qualities she believed would set politics on an improved course. Women would use the vote to enforce safety regulations and to enact other reforms. In other words, the vote was important to women as a means of defending, not of escaping, the "domestic sphere." Her statement mirrored the social reform agenda of "maternal feminism," which was clearly not the preserve of bourgeois reformers but had deep roots in the coal-mining districts of British Columbia, where the daily grind of work, poverty, and political repression reinforced inequality. Consequently, miners' wives sought to exploit common ground with middle-class women and reformers in the belief that workplace safety and the protection of the home were issues with which "other women, the well-cared-for class," could also identify.[81]

Despite the fact that women were fighting to protect, not to destroy, their role within the domestic sphere, the strike did serve to undermine traditional notions of domesticity and to challenge gender roles. Many women were forced for the first time to seek employment outside the home and to assume a new burden of responsibility within the domestic economy. Men also had little choice but to accept this new reality. Moreover, women's recource to direct action threatened the security of male dominance within the working-class family and the patriarchal norms of middle-class society. Men faced not just a radical decline of economic power and the possibility of continued

[80] Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), viii.
[81] *Vancouver Sun*, 12 February 1913.

repression once the strike ended (e.g. in the form of blacklisting), but, as their position as sole breadwinner was eroded, so their "manhood" was exposed. Whether this influenced some strikers to break solidarity and return to work cannot be determined.

The stakes, of course, were just as high for the women as they were for the men. While their aggressive stance against the state, company, and strikebreakers facilitated their entry into the public sphere and the articulation of their own political goals, their new role in the economy and society hastened the erosion of barriers between the domestic and public spheres, blurred perceptions of gender, and accentuated the realities of gender inequality. In effect, they entered a new, highly ambivalent social space in which they had no clearly defined role; moreover, it was a space in which they were not entirely welcome. To a limited extent at least, their collective action was inspired not just by the desire to express their political voice, but also by the desire to break the oppressive structures that regulated behaviour in the public sphere. The women may correctly be called "maternal feminists," but they were clearly unsatisfied with their rights as "proto-citizens." Consequently, their involvement in the strike represented a vital moment in the politicization of working-class women in British Columbia. It is no surprise that the women used the opportunity of the strike to press their demand for the vote. The working-class women of Ladysmith were involved in a process of renegotiating the parameters of community power, social, and gender relations through their direct and often violent activities during the strike, the ensuing riots, and the trials. Through violence, the traditional power dynamic of society was being transformed in concrete and symbolic ways. On the one hand, the activities of the women signified a rejection of the dominance and authority of the state and patriarchy; on the other hand, it signified an attempt to claim and establish authority where none had previously existed. By redefining the space of authority, women were seeking to forge new relations and roles for themselves. This was not acceptable to the middle-class public or to many of the women's husbands (who tried to silence them). The reluctance of the authorities to charge and convict the women, and their decision instead to punish the men more severely, indicates that they were unwilling to admit that the women were acting independently or that their participation could be motivated by ideological or political concerns. It was a clear statement that women were not judged to be responsible or accountable political citizens.