

REVIEW OF**HEIDI MACDONALD, *WE SHALL PERSIST: WOMEN AND THE VOTE IN THE ATLANTIC PROVINCES*.
VANCOUVER: UBC PRESS, 2023.****Lisa Pasolli**

Heidi MacDonald's *We Shall Persist: Women and the Vote in the Atlantic Provinces* is the latest addition to the UBC Press series "Women's Suffrage and the Struggle for Democracy", edited by Veronica Strong-Boag. Like the other volumes in this series – which examine the Prairies, Quebec, Ontario, British Columbia, and the national story – *We Shall Persist* is a concise and fast-paced book, written to appeal to a general audience. But readers should not be fooled by the lack of references: MacDonald has synthesized and condensed a remarkable amount of historiography and, especially, archival research into this slim book, while also doing justice to four separate provincial stories. It focuses in particular on suffrage campaigns and partial victories in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, though MacDonald follows the story of women's enfranchisement through to the 1960s, when Indigenous women living on reserves were granted the right to vote.

We Shall Persist has a clear goal: to confront the longstanding stereotype of Atlantic conservatism in the historiography on suffrage. In her 1950 book *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*, Catherine Cleverdon characterized the Maritime provinces and Newfoundland as less interested in women's suffrage than elsewhere in the country, a claim that was then repeated in both scholarly and popular treatments of suffrage in the decades that followed. As MacDonald points out, this stereotype has often "substituted for research when non-Atlantic Canadian historians write about the area" (2). MacDonald's research challenges this conventional image of the region. Digging through legislative debates, newspapers, statutes, and organizational records at thirteen different archives, MacDonald has pieced together evidence of a persistent suffrage movement that ebbed and flowed for decades before voting legislation was passed (in Nova Scotia in 1918, New Brunswick in 1919, Prince Edward Island in 1922, and Newfoundland in 1925).

The links between temperance and women's suffrage, represented in groups including Local Councils of Women, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and Women's Institutes, will be familiar to women's historians. There are also hints of more radical and "edgier" stories (203). The Saint John Women's Enfranchisement Association, for example, included members who were committed socialist activists and supported the interests of union and female factory workers. In Newfoundland, a temperance newspaper founded in 1892, *Water Lily*, promoted female suffrage by derisively highlighting the hypocrisies of male politicians. Émilie LeBlanc, a New Brunswick woman who wrote under the name "Marichette", published satirical letters in the newspaper *L'Évangeline* in the 1890s expressing Acadian women's desire for the vote, a move that "spoke volumes" given the Catholic Church's opposition to suffrage (60).

Widening the lens to include broader campaigns for women's legal and political rights also allows MacDonald to make the case for the vibrancy of Atlantic Canada's suffrage movement. The struggle for property rights, access to higher education, and admission to the professions provide crucial context for understanding women's voting demands, particularly because of the close links between

property holding and enfranchisement. For MacDonald, this is another aspect of Atlantic Canadian women's history that has been given short shrift. Take PEI, for example. A lack of records from suffrage campaigns in that province should not automatically be taken as evidence of women's indifference, she suggests – not in a province where “people used pitchforks to protest nineteenth-century absentee landlords” (211). New Brunswick was the first British North American colony to introduce married women's property law (1851) and the first in the British Commonwealth to award a bachelor's degree to a woman (1875); both achievements helped to set the stage for women's enfranchisement.

For all the signs of progressive energy in the movement, though, campaigns for women's equality in all four provinces were still overwhelmingly led by and served the interests of white, middle-class, urban, English-speaking, Protestant, and educated women. MacDonald found no evidence that suffrage leaders had any interest in winning the vote for Indigenous women, nor that any Black women participated in the Atlantic Canadian suffrage movement (though she certainly does not close off the possibility that such histories exist). She underscores the significance of suffragists' achievements, especially given the powerful opposition of misogynistic anti-suffrage politicians, but she also makes it clear that suffragists helped to reinforce the oppression of women who did not fit into their model of a “mother of the race.” The evidence of that is not just in the partial victories of suffrage legislation between 1918 and 1925, but in the systemic discrimination against Indigenous, Black, and Acadian women in the decades that followed, which MacDonald documents in the final chapter of the book. *We Shall Persist* joins the other volumes in the series in insisting that we see histories of suffrage not as an opportunity to put some women on pedestals, but as a way to understand why women's equality is “a yet unfinished project” (3).

On its own, *We Shall Persist* is a hugely significant contribution to Atlantic Canadian and women's historiography. It should convince historians that not only was Atlantic Canada not a backwater when it came to suffrage, but that the history of the long, contentious, and ultimately limited struggles for women's political, legal, and social rights deserve more study. As part of the series, MacDonald's book helps set the standard for accessible histories written with a deliberate eye to the present. As we grapple with political upheavals today, it is worth remembering that even women's suffrage “victories” were not necessarily a victory for democracy.

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