

“There is work to be done; shall we do it
or shall we sink into oblivion?”¹



Edith Jessie Archibald

1854-1936

Edith Jessie Archibald was a Maritime leader in Canada's first wave of feminism, in the late 19th and early 20th century. She rallied Nova Scotians to fight for better healthcare, safer communities, and more responsible government. She is remembered today as a crusader for women's suffrage—the right to vote in political elections and to hold public office.

Edith was born in St. John's, Newfoundland, into a life of wealth and privilege. The Archibalds were nation builders—politicians, lawyers, judges, and business leaders—with roots in Nova Scotia and staunch loyalty to the British Empire. Her father, Sir Edward Mortimer Archibald, was Newfoundland's attorney general at the time of Edith's birth, and soon after became British Consul to New York. Edith was educated in private schools in New York and London, England.

At the age of 20, Edith married another Archibald—her second cousin Charles. They settled in Cow Bay (now Port Morien), a coastal community in eastern Cape Breton, where Charles ran a prosperous coal mine. It was a world away from the cosmopolitan life

Edith had known. Her Cape Breton home was elegant, but even with four children to raise she felt isolated and under-utilized. She read, dabbled in good works for the church and community, and travelled when she could, but she was restless. Her salvation was the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).

To believers, temperance was much more than a campaign against alcohol—that “coiled serpent of drunkenness.” It was a war on sin and suffering; a strike against domestic violence, child neglect, poverty, prostitution, and moral decay. Prohibition was the pathway to a new heaven on earth.² Women were the torchbearers who could guide their families and communities to the light. The WCTU began in the United States in the 1870s and spread to Canada in the early 1880s. It quickly became the largest and most active women's organization of the 19th century. The watchwords were—and still are—*Agitate, Educate, Legislate*. Members learned “how to think on their feet, speak in public, and run an organization.”

1 \ Halifax Local Council of Women (LCW) Minutes, 19 February 1903.

2 \ *Prohibition* means the act of prohibiting or banning something—in this case, the manufacture, transportation, sale, and consumption of liquor.

Edith became active at the local, regional, and national levels of the WCTU. She was a capable writer and public speaker with a flair for the dramatic. Intelligent, strong willed, and supremely confident, she welcomed a righteous fight. Her social status gave her authority, and her wealth enabled her to travel and connect with other activists.

During her years in Cow Bay, Edith famously led raids on three illegal saloons. Charles bought the largest of the three saloons and turned it into a temperance hotel. Edith hosted parlour meetings to promote temperance; wrote campaign literature; and became Maritime Superintendent of the Parlour Meetings Department, encouraging women to gather in members' homes and community halls to spread the temperance message. In 1892, she was elected president of the Maritime WCTU. This put her at the forefront of an organization with more than 80 local groups and almost 2,000 members. Through the WCTU, Edith worked with like-minded women to lobby for prohibition and to establish libraries, orphanages, and other community services aimed at improving the lives of women and children.

Edith's temperance work thrust her into the debate over women's suffrage. The WCTU was the first major women's organization in Canada to endorse women's suffrage. Prohibitionists hoped that women voters would elect lawmakers willing to stand up to the liquor trade. In 1893, Edith and others



lobbied the Nova Scotia legislature to give voting rights to women who owned property. The bill passed, but was derailed by the attorney general, J.W. Longley. Arguments for and against women's suffrage grew louder and more bitter. Edith remained steadfast in her support for the cause.

Around this time, the Cow Bay coal mine was sold, the Archibalds' elegant house was dismantled, and the family moved to Halifax.³

³ \ Charles Archibald became a bank director and eventually president of the Bank of Nova Scotia. In that role he worked with Thomas Fyshe, the son-in-law of Anna Leonowens, who was "head cashier" (general manager) until 1897.

She was a capable writer and public speaker with a flair for the dramatic. Intelligent, strong willed, and supremely confident, she welcomed a righteous fight.

The timing was splendid. In August 1894, Edith attended the founding meeting of the Halifax Local Council of Women (LCW), an umbrella organization formed to link local women's groups with each other and with the recently formed National Council of Women. At the first meeting of the Local Council of Women, Edith represented the Women's Christian Temperance Union. **Anna Leonowens** represented the Victoria School of Art and Design. They were joined by women involved in more than 40 other religious, social, cultural, and charitable groups. It was an historic meeting of minds and wide-ranging interests.

Edith was elected vice-president of the Halifax Local Council of Women in 1895, and president in 1896. She was an enthusiastic booster for the council, but not always an effective leader. The politics were complex: national leaders of the WCTU supported the idea of working with other women's groups, but only on their strict evangelical terms. That might be why Edith insisted on reciting the Lord's Prayer at council meetings—a move that pleased some members, offended others, and seriously undermined the non-

The National Council of Women and affiliated local councils were started by the remarkable **Lady Ishbel, Countess of Aberdeen**. Lady Ishbel was the Viceregal consort of Canada (wife of the Governor General of Canada) from 1893 to 1898. A dedicated feminist and social reformer, Lady Ishbel also founded the Victorian Order of Nurses in Canada.

denominational spirit of the council movement. During Edith's nine years as president, the council lost members but did support some groundbreaking causes, including the establishment of the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) in Halifax.

By the time Canada entered World War I in 1914, Edith was a seasoned organizer and lobbyist. She used her considerable influence to promote the war effort. Through her role as vice-president of the Nova Scotia branch of the Red Cross, she helped to raise funds and organize shipments of medical supplies to Europe. She also coordinated communications and relief packages for prisoners of war. It was a monumental voluntary undertaking.



Women's Council House, Halifax.



Edith Archibald plaque at Women's Council House.

4 \ Some women continued to be denied the right to vote: People of Asian heritage did not receive voting rights until 1948; First Nations people who wanted to keep their Indian status had to wait until 1960.

Meanwhile, the campaigns for prohibition and for women's suffrage continued. In 1917, Edith wrote another pamphlet supporting votes for women and had 2,000 copies printed and distributed. In 1918, partly in recognition of women's wartime efforts, the Nova Scotia legislature finally granted most women the right to vote and to run for elected office.⁴

In her later years, Edith continued to take on new challenges. Her writing projects included a history of the Nova Scotia Branch of the Red Cross, a biography of her father, a stage play set in Cape Breton, and a novel based on the play. She also composed patriotic music and supported the arts in Halifax.

Edith died at home at the age of 82. She was buried in the historic Camp Hill Cemetery in Halifax. More than 60 years later, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (Parks Canada) named Edith a "person of national historical interest." A commemorative plaque was installed in 2001 at the headquarters of the still-active Local Council of Women of Halifax.

Edith's story reminds us that heroes are human, with strengths and flaws. She was self-righteous and stubborn, but she was also generous with her time and fiercely committed to the causes she believed in. She stood up, spoke out, and dared a generation of women to do the same.

And now ...

Sandra MacLennan serves as president of the Local Council of Women of Halifax, more than a century after Edith Archibald ran the meetings. Sandra values the long tradition of the movement—bumps included. Speaking of the council's feisty foremother, Sandra smiles: "Edith taught us that it matters what women think."

Like Edith and many other council members over the years, Sandra has volunteered for a breathtaking range of good causes and has received awards for exceptional volunteer service from the province and from the Halifax Regional Municipality.

How does a busy woman choose her commitments? "They choose us," she says. "The causes come and find us."

SOURCES

Local Council of Women, Halifax. *The Local Council of Women, Halifax: The First 100 Years, 1894–1994*. Halifax: Oxford Street Press, 1995.

Burrill, Clayton. “Temperance and Tea Socials: Discerning the Significance of the Sackville Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, 1894–1895.” In *We Were Here: Exploratory Essays on Women’s History at Mount Allison*. Sackville, NB: Mount Allison University, 2007.

Forbes, Ernest R. “Battles in Another War: Edith Archibald and the Halifax Feminist Movement.” In *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes*. Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1989.

Guildford, Janet. “Edith Jessie Archibald: Ardent Feminist and Conservative Reformer.” In *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society*, vol. 11, 2008, 110–33.

Guildford, Janet. *The Magnificent Services of Women: The Halifax Local Council of Women, 1894–2002*. Halifax Local Council of Women, 2002.

IMAGE CREDITS

p. 18 / The Cape Breton Miners’ Museum

p. 19 / Provided by the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women

p. 20 / Provided by the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women