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Nellie McClung a Canadian hero by Ralph Milton

A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to work with Carol Hancock as she researched and wrote the book [No Small Legacy](#), a biography of Nellie McClung.

I had some vague memories of my mother and father going to hear Nellie McClung, and I certainly remembered the books she wrote.

Working with Carol on the biography of this Canadian hero, I realized that my mother was not a person under Canadian law when she was born. Nor could she vote. McClung was one of a group of five women who fought the legal battle all the way to London to change that.

Nellie was also very active in the church, and among many other things, fought for the ordination of women. That fact became very important in our lives when Bev, my life partner, was one of the pioneer women to be ordained as a minister.

This little story was written as part of a sermon on justice and liberation.

It was a very risky thing to do. Nellie Mooney was only 15 years old and she was going off to Normal School, and a year later she would be teaching. A teacher, a woman – at age 16.

But the day before she had gone to church with her family, as she did every week, and she heard in the lesson of the day the words, “Be not afraid. I will be with you.”

Still, in one part of her the fear remained, but in the deepest reaches of her soul she knew she could teach, and be a very good teacher at that.

Twenty years later, the fear returned. The nameless, hopeless fear that told her she was unworthy and incapable. Now her name was no longer Nellie Mooney, it was Nellie McClung and she had published her first book, *Sowing Seeds in Danny*.

This was a public reading, of which she had done many. And she did them well, and people flocked to hear her. But now, there was something different. Again, she remembered those words. “Be not afraid. I will be with you.”

Nellie McClung moved to take one more bow from the applauding audience, then motioned for quiet.

“My friends,” she said. “The readings from my book are concluded. If you will bear with me for a few more moments, there are some other matters of great urgency I wish to discuss with you.”

Then Nellie McClung did the unthinkable. She, a woman, began to talk politics. Yes politics.

The year was 1913, and women were not even legally “persons” under the law of Canada – they were not permitted to vote. They were expected to remain quiet, do their household chores and obey their husbands. But here was Nellie, with skill and courage and passion, talking politics.

Secular politics. And church politics. Why are women not allowed to vote? Why are there no women in our pulpits? And so Nellie entertained the audiences across Canada with the readings from her hugely popular novels, then kept them in their seats discussing politics and religion, which to her were all one thing.

And through all the years, until she died in 1951, Nellie McClung, suffragette, church leader, charismatic author, faced hostility, fear, anger, hate and misunderstanding. But she remembered those words. “Be not afraid, Nellie. Be not afraid. God is calling you. Go!”

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
all of them available through Wood Lake Publishing.**

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