

## **Prairie Farm Women Organizing: A Faithful Commitment**

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I own a video titled, *Prairie Women*, which portrays the organizing efforts of farm women on the prairies from 1913 through 1939.<sup>1</sup> As a daughter and granddaughter of prairie women, I find these stories of struggle, courage and commitment deeply inspiring – part of the legacy of “critical memories,”<sup>2</sup> which can nurture today’s work for justice and social transformation. In the images of women driving miles through mud and snow with petitions on suffrage or world peace, and in voices describing isolation, hardship and the strength found in community, I am reminded at what cost our now-threatened assurance of basic levels of social welfare and the right to participate in defining them, was achieved.

Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau have suggested that the shape of the Canadian welfare state is a result of an alliance of “Protestant churches, middle-class women and agrarian organizations,”<sup>3</sup> and have discussed the intersection of these interests in the farm women’s movement.<sup>4</sup> Yet neither Christie and Gauvreau, nor most histories of prairie women,<sup>5</sup> provide much sense of how the women who participated in these movements related issues, actions and religious convictions. In what way were these prairie women informed by faith as they struggled to name their reality and transform their lives?

I sought answers to this question in one of the sources in which prairie women were given a voice: the women’s pages of the prairie farm press. For various periods in the history of these journals, these pages came under the editorship of activist women who invited their readers to contribute to a

discussion of social issues as well as the problems and joys of daily life. The pages, and often the individual letters, were thus an eclectic mixture of concerns about the farm economy, world peace, women's rights, raising children and getting rid of bedbugs – with plenty of recipes sprinkled throughout. Space was also given to reports from the organized women's movement. It seemed likely that if faith was acknowledged as an influence, it would be apparent in this writing. Although several such sources exist, I have limited my investigations primarily to the *Grain Growers' Guide*, a weekly paper published by the United Farmers of Alberta and the Grain Growers Associations of Saskatchewan and Manitoba. I have focussed on the period from June 1912 to June 1917, when the women's pages were edited by Francis Marion Beynon, a feminist with links to the Social Gospel, and a catalyst for some of the early organizing work of prairie women.

Prior to Beynon's editorship, the women's pages of the *Grain Growers' Guide*, like those of many other farm papers,<sup>6</sup> were not without discussions of social and political issues, or reflections of an assumed Christian context. Indeed, Isobel Graham, who "conducted" the page from 1909 to 1911 initiated a lively correspondence and petition campaign towards homesteads for women, and Beynon's immediate predecessor, Mary Ford, began with a column promoting the value of eugenics.<sup>7</sup> However, Beynon brought a unique blend of activism, Christian commitment, and skill at inviting women to exercise their voices, not only by writing, but by organizing as farm women – an activity she promoted both through the pages of the *Guide* and through speaking engagements across the prairie provinces. Beynon drew on strong Methodist roots and an affinity with the tenets of the Social Gospel, influenced by such figures as Salem Bland, W.F. Osborne, and J.S. Woodsworth. Ramsay Cook assesses Beynon's views as being "close to those of Woodsworth," and suggests that she "doubtless participated in the endless discussions of reform politics, the social application of Christianity, and the plight of the "foreigner," which were part of the intellectual diet of J. S. Woodsworth and his associates."<sup>8</sup>

Beynon taught in rural schools and worked in advertising before becoming the first full-time women's editor of the *Grain Growers' Guide* in 1912. She remained in this position until 1917, when her pacifism and public opposition to conscription ended her employment with the *Guide*, and forced a move to New York where she joined sister Lillian (former women's editor of the *Manitoba Free Press*) and her husband A.V. Thomas (former *Free Press* editor), who had left Canada for the same reason. She remained in

New York for most of her life, and there wrote *Aleta Dey*, a semi-autobiographical novel reflecting her feminist commitments and her search for a faith which would promote human dignity and freedom.<sup>9</sup>

The main section edited by Beynon in the *Grain Growers' Guide* was titled "The Country Homemakers." She was also briefly in charge of a page called "The Sunshine Guild" through which women offered each other material and moral support, and she soon began editing "Farm Women's Clubs," a regular page of reports from the growing number of women's organizations being established on the prairies.

### ***The Organizational Context***

Farmers in the west began organizing to gain a stronger voice in decisions affecting agriculture early in the century. Although strongly focused on economic questions, the Manitoba Grain Growers, the Saskatchewan Grain Growers and the United Farmers of Alberta also took stands on social and political issues. Encouraged by the growers' leadership, and a number of activist women, including Beynon, the Women Grain Growers' Association (WGGA) was established at a women's meeting held in conjunction with the 1913 Grain Growers convention in Saskatoon.<sup>10</sup> This was followed by the United Farm Women of Alberta in 1915.<sup>11</sup> In Manitoba women participated in the annual Grain Growers convention, and a few clubs were formed, but a Women's Section was not formally organized until 1918.<sup>12</sup>

Although there are initially some references to these women's sections as auxiliaries, these were soon dropped, and women expressed a clear self-understanding of their organizations as having an equal standing and particular mandate within the broader organization. Members of the women's sections were considered members of the general organizations; however, women affirmed the importance of bringing a united women's voice to farm issues, of attending to issues which particularly affected women, and of having places to meet for education and mutual support.

Farm women also became involved in a number of other groups active in the prairies. The Women's Institutes (called Homemakers' Clubs in Saskatchewan) were important in both rural and urban areas, and received some government support. Some critique suggests that the Women's Institutes were viewed as at best a-political, and at worst an instrument of government policy, possibly intent on making women more satisfied with

their status as “homemakers.”<sup>13</sup> Certainly, the Institutes grew from the burgeoning Home Economics movement, with the stated intent of “improv[ing] the conditions surrounding rural life by disseminating a greater knowledge of domestic and sanitary science and household art.”<sup>14</sup> While there are reports of tensions between the Institutes and other farm women’s groups, the *Guide* often had reports from both and some local groups appear to have been interconnected. As Carbert suggests, at the local level the creation of more viable rural communities was a primary concern of both groups; while strategies sometimes differed, local activities were often similar.<sup>15</sup> Also important during this period was the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), with which organized farm women formed alliances in the struggles for suffrage and prohibition.

The *Grain Growers’ Guide* was established as the “official organ” of the farm associations in 1905. Its editorial policy leaves little doubt about its orientation towards reform:

The Guide is designed to give uncolored news from the world of thought and action and honest opinions thereon, with the object of aiding our people to form correct views upon economic, social and moral questions, so that the growth of society may continually be in the direction of more equitable, kinder and wiser relations between its members, resulting in the widest possible increase and diffusion of material prosperity, intellectual development, right living, health and happiness.<sup>16</sup>

The path toward these goals was stated succinctly on the masthead: “Organization - Education - Cooperation.”

It is clear from the pages of the *Guide* that a similar orientation shaped the women’s organizations from their inception. In an early editorial calling on women to form clubs Beynon wrote: “There is no reason why, if they choose, these organizations may not consider municipal, Provincial and Dominion questions – homesteads for women, Direct Legislation, suffrage or any other matter of great moment which interests them.”<sup>17</sup> As the organizations developed, their leaders demonstrated that they did indeed consider all such questions in their purview, and that they expected to contribute significantly to the transformation of their communities and their society. Addressing the 1915 Saskatchewan WGGGA convention, the vice-president, Mrs. S.V. Haight declared that “the whole idea of the Women

Grain Growers' Association . . . is organization and cooperation for the purpose of bettering financial conditions for farm men and women, bettering educational systems, bettering social conditions, and to help labor conditions."<sup>18</sup> In 1916 Alberta's Irene Parlby, as president of the UFWA, expressed an equally sweeping vision:

Let us not leave our ambitions at better butter, better produce of all kinds, better marketing, important tho' all these are. Let us hitch our wagons to the stars, and see if by aiming at the very highest, we may not thereby in co-operation with others add somewhat to the betterment of this old world of ours. Better produce and better marketing are badly needed, but better men, better women, better homes are still more needed. Let our United Farm Women make their homes a model for the whole land.<sup>19</sup>

Thus in local, district and provincial meetings, women studied issues and offered their opinions in resolutions and petitions to governments and other institutions. They sought changes in legislation affecting women, improvements in education, accessible health care, and an end to those vices that they perceived as a threat to the well-being of women and their families: liquor and prostitution. Most of all, they lobbied for the right to a say in these decisions, as voters and legislators.

Yet these broader political objectives cannot be separated from the vital role of the local groups in the creation of community. The WGGGA was characterized at one point as an alternative to going quietly crazy alone, and the stories of women cracking in the prairie's isolation were frequent enough to make this a real choice. Organizing social activities, fundraising for the Red Cross war effort or relief for local families, cooperative buying of fruit and marketing of eggs and butter and "rest rooms" where women could gather during trips to town all contributed to the sense of a shared life where interdependence could be valued and enhanced. These activities were integrated with education and political mobilization in a program that seemed to display little practical recognition of a public/private split.

We can discuss anything that we desire: prohibition, gardening, pickles, the best methods of washing, management of children, the improvement of our rural schools, the franchise, and through our women's sections we can get our trained nurses stationed just where we desire, establish rest rooms and work for better communities. As the franchise is

coming to us we must study political needs, not party needs, and as grain growers we must keep to principles.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Issues Debated***

This growing organization of women was the context for the letters and reports that appeared on those pages of the *Grain Growers' Guide* dedicated to women's concerns. While not all who wrote to "The Country Homemakers" were association members, their experiences were certainly the grist from which the policies and programs of the organizations were formed, and most writers appeared eager to debate the reforms the activists were promoting.

Discussions during this period were framed by the debate about suffrage. Women wrote of the need to carry the values of motherhood and home into the public realm, but also of their equal humanity and capabilities, insisting that women's business included every sphere of life. For many, suffrage was seen as a defense against laws, institutions and activities that harmed women and children. There were those – both women and men – who continued to contend that involvement in public life would undermine women's responsibilities in the home. But most, like "Norma," insisted that the ballot would give people "the weapon of power, the right to decide what shall be done," and heard her question, "Is a woman a person, a human being?" answered four years later when "Elizabeth" reported on her first voting experience: "You see I have a feeling of power because I am not now an onlooker but an actor."<sup>21</sup>

Underlying farm women's desire for suffrage was a complex of issues unique to their situation. A major one was entitlement to land; although the gradual passage of dower laws gave some assurance that a woman would not wake to find herself homeless – an experience several wrote about in the early years – this protection was generally limited to the home quarter. Women were guaranteed no say or title in the rest of the property, and many shared the despair of the woman who wrote "Is life worth living when it is only hell on earth and wives are to have nothing when they are old, after years of toil and deprivations?"<sup>22</sup> A related issue was that of homesteads for women: with the exception of widows with children, single women were generally prohibited from homesteading.

Women also desired recognition for the value of their farm labour, and a measure of financial independence and equality in return for the drudgery

of their days. While some could boast of partnership in decision-making or a joint chequing account, others shared the experience of “A Northwest Woman” who wrote:

As, of course, he makes all the money because he has the handling of it, he thinks it is all his hard earning. When a woman raises a family of children, does all the sewing, knitting, washing, ironing, baking, churning, scrubbing, sweeping, making beds, cleaning dishes, dusting, cleaning stoves, making quilts, putting up fruits and pickles, put in a garden, raise chickens, weed a garden, and take care of the vegetables in the fall, pack butter for winter and have a couple of hundred dollars’ worth to sell, don’t you think she is earning her board and a couple of print dresses in a year?<sup>23</sup>

Together with a number of her correspondents, Beynon urged her readers to reconceive “earning her board” as “add[ing] to the wealth of the nation” and declared that “the position of the wife on the farm . . . should be a partner . . . his wife is paying for his land and his barns and his stock with good red blood.”<sup>24</sup> Women who did view their work as a contribution to the total farm economy had little question about entering into debates about free trade, tariffs and cooperation. Some writers brought to these discussions a cogent economic analysis that sought nothing less than the establishment of a new social order.

Women protested the system of child guardianship which made men the sole guardian of children unless illegitimate, yet also made it possible for men to deny children any support or inheritance. They told stories of children being sent away to school without the mother’s agreement. A motion sent to the provincial government by the Wiseton and Dinsmore WGGa reflected these concerns:

That the present law of parental control is unjust to the mothers of this land and, further, that we demand that a law giving the mother equal rights with the father in regard to the educational, religious and general upbringing of their children be immediately brought forward by the legislature.<sup>25</sup>

There were also demands for improvements in education, and a greater say in the school system; the possibility of women becoming school trustees was one frequently cited benefit expected from the franchise.<sup>26</sup>

Access to health care was also a leading issue. It no doubt contributed to the steady stream of home remedies discussed, as well as to more pointed commentary on the effects of an inadequate system:

“A Canadian prisoner in Germany,” said Mrs. John McNaughton [at a Saskatchewan Homemakers’ Convention] “could say of his country that, for so young a country, our roads and bridges and public buildings are truly remarkable, but that on the prairies we leave our mothers to die in childbirth.”<sup>27</sup>

There were strong connections made between the struggle for suffrage and the campaign for prohibition. Indeed, a prohibition referendum provided Saskatchewan women with the first opportunity to exercise their franchise, and its success brought closer the goal of “stamping out that monster Drink.”<sup>28</sup> It has been suggested that the struggle for prohibition represented a response to violence against women.<sup>29</sup> Certainly the spectre of violence haunts a number of these letters. “I wish that every woman had her rights in this country too, for so many of us are servants or mistresses and without pay; we must obey because the law says so yet we are helpless to defend ourselves on the farm,” says one, while another mourns “the fight has been too hard and long, and I look and feel as if I’d been married twenty years instead of seven.”<sup>30</sup>

Although women’s clubs contributed to the war effort, most of the commentary on the war was provided by Beynon, whose pacifism intensified together with her critique of the political machinations and economic interests which she saw as the real beneficiaries of the war. A few correspondents agreed, while others focussed on the economic sacrifices being asked of farmers. Eventually a number of writers entered the conscription debate, especially in relation to whether single and married men should be conscripted at the same time.

These represent some of the lively, articulate and often poignant discussions which took place in the “women’s” pages of the *Grain Growers’ Guide*, reflecting the factors which impelled women to organize, to study and to act. The culmination of their work during this period was symbolized by the presentation of petitions containing over 43,000 signatures to the Manitoba legislature in December 1915,<sup>31</sup> and the granting of the franchise in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta in quick succession early in 1916.

Many of these letters and reports also reveal a deeply-held faith which informed this movement and its debates in a variety of ways.

### ***Connecting Faith and Reform***

There are several strands apparent in the way that farm women expressed religious convictions in relation to their reform work. One strand is the claiming of scriptural warrant for the stand taken on a particular issue. A second strand frames arguments in terms of social purity. A third strand emphasizes a personal relationship with Christ, while a fourth constitutes an embrace of the social gospel. A related view perceives the organized farm movement as religious in character.

Claims of scriptural warrant for opinions were especially prominent in the debate around suffrage, and were used to argue both sides of the issue (often from the same passage). The creation story was the basis for some women to argue their humanity and equality, often quite creatively: “The very fact that God placed Eve outside in this big world, not inside the four walls of a kitchen, ought to prove that she was intended to be a companion for her husband, and to see and understand whatever interests him.”<sup>32</sup> The fifth chapter of Ephesians was also a favourite, with interpretations ranging from submission to mutuality, and some willingness to question Paul’s authority, with the suggestion that his advice “can be taken too literally” and that “there are times when it would be a sin for the wife to submit to her own husband . . .” Others cited Jesus’ attitudes to women in support of the suffrage cause: “He always showed himself to be their friend and our hearts glow with the thought that Christ never condemned a woman.”<sup>33</sup>

Scriptural and religious arguments were also put forward in relation to the war. Beynon raised questions about the peace Christ was meant to bring, and in 1914 declared that she did not have the heart to write a Christmas editorial while war denied belief in “Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men.”<sup>34</sup> At least one writer, however, declared her opposition to ministers who preached peace, insisting that Canada’s soldiers were “honourable . . . glorious . . . noble” and that “we don’t want peace agitators, because a world lasting peace cannot be secured until we knock Germany to her knees.” Opposed to this view was “an Englishwoman,” who declared that it was wicked to pray for victory and that if clergy thought this was a holy war, then they should go to fight.<sup>35</sup>

Beynon also claimed a scriptural warrant for her opposition to ethnic and racial prejudice, an issue on which she differed from the stated opinions of a number of her readers.<sup>36</sup> Suggesting that distrust of what is different represents “the spirit that crucified Christ,” she concludes with a statement that interestingly foreshadows much feminist discussion today. “It may even be that in that dim and shadowy future the world will have sense enough to value people just because they are different, because they have a new way of looking at things.”<sup>37</sup> When she applied this attitude to her stance on the relation of suffrage to conscription, it brought her into conflict with others in the suffrage movement, notably Nellie McClung.<sup>38</sup>

The notion of purity as a goal to be embodied by women has been identified as a Victorian ideology which “assaulted” people from many directions.<sup>39</sup> Evidence of its interpretation as a Christian ideal can be found in a resolution of the 1911 Manitoba WCTU convention, reported in the *Guide*:

Divine revelation, enlightened science and individual experience all declare that the highest mental, moral and physical development is dependent upon a pure life . . . We urge the inculcation through our educational institutions of the principles of pure thinking, pure speaking and pure living, as binding upon both sexes alike, and we plead with the Church of Christ, by whatever name it may be known, to declare more earnestly than ever the gospel of a pure manhood as also a pure womanhood.<sup>40</sup>

The turn to arguments based in a vision of social purity can be seen in the connection drawn between suffrage and the values assumed to belong to motherhood. “A Suffragist Mother” characterized suffrage as “the first step to bringing the mother spirit freely and fully into politics,” and declared that “my heart is in the effort to make life brighter, better, holier on this old world of ours . . .”<sup>41</sup> Beynon offered an expansive vision of this argument, resisting the privatized view of motherhood that opposed women’s active involvement in society.

We have too long been contented with the kind of motherhood that can look out of the window and see little children toiling incredible hours in factories or canning sheds over the way, until their small heads grow dizzy and their little fingers are bruised and bleeding, and say calmly, “Thank God, it isn’t my children” . . .

I tell you sisters, this kind of motherhood isn't good enough for the present day. We want a new spirit of national motherhood – mothers whose love for their own children teaches them love for all children . . .

<sup>42</sup>

One writer acknowledges the unique contribution of feminine values from those who, like Florence Nightingale, are not mothers, but serve society in other ways, “who . . . pour out their love upon a suffering, sorrowing world, and shed joy and gladness from the crushing of the ‘alabaster box’ of their own sweet-fragrant souls.” She asks, “Are these less womanly than the mothers so greatly extolled?” and urges “Then let all women fight for truth . . .”<sup>43</sup>

For other writers, purity was gained in the application of “Biblical truth” in their day-to-day life and relationships: “If, by some miracle every mother and sister and wife and daughter could become intensely interested in all the wonderful truth contained in the Bible I think at once a great saving wave of happiness would cover all the land,” wrote “Homelover.” Concerns for purity also informed campaigns against alcohol and the “White Slave Trade”; “Progressive” complaints about laws which allowed the “Evil One” to tempt children into “impurity” and the expectation that women would “furnish the moral capital with which to keep humanity from sinking into utter degradation.”<sup>44</sup>

In some cases a strong individual faith was cited as a source of the strength to endure the struggles of overwork, poverty and neglect, even while declaring belief in the importance of gaining the vote.

But I must tell you I have found a Friend who will all our sorrows share, if we let Him. I thank Him every day that He gives me strength to perform my material duties and I know He'll give me strength to perform my spiritual duties also. I pray that He'll take away my pride and independence, make me humble and lowly and willing to bear my cross . . . if we are faithful and prayerful, we will someday get our reward, both here and hereafter.<sup>45</sup>

A woman who had signed herself “Discouraged” was counseled: “Has she ever asked God to help her thru [sic] her trials? I know He will help her if she will only ask him in faith . . .”<sup>46</sup>

However, a more dominant view expressed commitment to a social faith which mandated active work for reform. This was a perspective that

was well-represented in the *Guide* and in the farm organizations as a whole. Both J.S. Woodsworth and Salem Bland were regular contributors. Woodsworth was also a speaker at Grain Growers' conventions, including those of the women's associations. The *Guide* promoted Grain Grower or Farm Association Sundays, and published a selection of letters (apparently initiated on the "Country Homemakers" page) dealing with the relationship of church and community. Responses to this topic ran the gamut from those who saw denominationalism as a major problem, and described local church union initiatives, through calls for a church more spiritual and focused on "inner transformation." There was also support for active involvement in ensuring that the economic and social needs facing the community would be met.<sup>47</sup> Beynon also initiated a discussion of the "superannuation" of retiring clergy, which led to considerable debate about the clergy's role. Some critique accused clergy of a bias toward "the moneyed class" or of being captive to those who paid their salaries, constituting a "bulwark of established prerogative and special privilege."<sup>48</sup> A challenge to preach a social gospel was strongly voiced:

Had the clergy been free men and preached the gospel of love and brotherhood, salary or no salary, the world today would not be plunged into wholesale murder . . . If [study] were devoted to finding out the basic cause of strife and poverty, and the remedy to be applied, and then firmly and unyieldingly standing for the remedy being applied, I grant the preacher's life would not be "easy" for a time anyway . . . I . . . only desire to further real Christianity instead of churchianity.<sup>49</sup>

Women wrote of this vision of social Christianity in relation to their work and to their expectations of the church. UFWA member Leona Barrett reported her experience of a Rural Leadership conference, where "the cooperative effort, the struggle against the present economic situation was lifted into the realm of spiritual struggle, and . . . shown to be . . . a plea for the coming of the brotherhood of man, when the Father's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven." Writing of her first experience voting "Jessica" adds: "I do believe with Rev. Dr. Bland, that the church must not only preach the Gospel, but also expose and rebuke sin wherever it is found, for in a sense we are our brothers' keepers." And Beynon spoke of the rise of "a body of social workers . . . teaching the old Christ doctrine, that whoso would be the greatest among us must be the least – the one who serves," and who saw their

role as “education of the people to see the economic conditions which cause poverty and remove them.”<sup>50</sup>

There was some resistance to this vision. A male correspondent asked “Why do so-called ministers of the Gospel preach politics etc. from their pulpits?” Another declared “it does make one wrathful to think that by co-operation, organization, women’s franchise, referendum and recall, etc. we will accomplish the evangelization of our race . . . be patient and wait until He appears to judge the world in righteousness.” Such views would not have surprised Beynon, who had noted the uneasiness of those who wanted to keep Sundays and week days strictly separated, and had urged that “the church, having put her hand to the plow, cannot turn back. She must continue to preach a religion that will endure the test of good citizenship.”<sup>51</sup>

For some correspondents, the social gospel was linked to a conviction that Socialism was the appropriate form for a new social order. Jesus was declared to be “the greatest socialist that ever lived, the one who levelled all class distinctions” and Socialism, in WCTU president Frances Willard’s words, “God’s way out of the wilderness and into the promised land.” Jesus’ concern was with this world, and Socialism would lead to the “co-operative commonwealth.”<sup>52</sup>

Another dimension of this adoption of a social gospel vision was reflected in the self-understanding of leaders in the WGGGA and the UFWA, who saw their work very much as a religious venture. At some points this was expressed quite directly, as when Erma Stocking, WGGGA secretary, asserted that “in its appeal to the intellectual and moral as well as the practical side of life, the association acts as, and is, a broad religious movement.”<sup>53</sup> Other statements were more subtle, and more eloquent.

In a few years all our restless and angry hearts will be quiet in death, but those who come after us will live in the world which our sins have blighted or which our love of right has redeemed. Let us do our thinking on these great questions, not with our eyes on our bank book, but with a wise outlook on the fields of the future and with the consciousness that the spirit of the Eternal is seeking to distill from our lives some essence of righteousness before they pass away.

Let us, this coming year, through our organization, show the world what we women of the West stand for.<sup>54</sup>

That this religious dimension permeated the organizations could also be seen in the reports of local groups, which described meetings interspersed with hymns and prayers, conducting Sunday worship and planning for a church building, and support for scripture reading and prayer in schools. Attempts to influence church policy were also described: of particular note was a presentation by members of Saskatchewan's Provincial Equal Franchise Board to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist conference concerning the need for women to have a voice in church courts.<sup>55</sup>

In part, the ease with which women blended their faith and their reform work represented an assurance that they were building a Christian society, and that every improvement would only make it more possible to live a truly Christian life. These activist women were confident in their role as community leaders, contributing to the Canadian project of nation-building, even while maintaining a critical perspective on the character of the society being created. In her first annual report as president of the United Farm Women of Alberta Irene Parlby declared, "We are building the structure of our nation from the foundation stone . . . Each one of us is getting some stone in place. Are we laying them true and straight, good, honest, rock moulded and chiselled with our best endeavour . . .?"<sup>56</sup>

***Conclusion: "To Fulfill the Command of Love"***<sup>57</sup>

In their writing women gave voice not only to struggle, but also to the joy and hope that they could feel in the beauty of the prairie and the new life that they were creating: "And best of all it is our home, and when we see it all our hearts are glad that we can live, and love, and know that God is good."<sup>58</sup> One dimension of the relationship of faith and action as viewed through these letters encompasses the role of the women's pages themselves in the development of what today might be recognized as women's spirituality. Women discovered their own voices, raised difficult questions, and gained a sense of solidarity, competence and value to society. They joined a desire for "comfort and beauty" with a willingness to engage in political struggles for survival and justice. Many found in these pages a source of strength, courage and friendship in times of isolation.<sup>59</sup> It seems clear that for many writers a part of this process was an opportunity to give expression to faith, to name sources of hope in scripture, tradition and community, and to identify values and convictions leading to action.

The qualities demonstrated and nurtured by women through this correspondence were given greater scope in the work of farm women's organizations. Considerable effort has been directed towards discerning the ways in which this work represents either "maternal" or "equal rights" feminism, and in distinguishing its relationship to various political agendas, particularly those of suffrage and post-suffrage feminism and of the broader agrarian reform movement. Were women's commitments to home or work, social order or justice, other women or other farmers? From the perspective of this sample of women's writing, these dichotomies seem misplaced. As Strong-Boag argues, all of these issues are effectively dimensions of women's work; they were not disconnected in women's lives.<sup>60</sup> Women demanded acknowledgment of the values, knowledge and skills they possessed, and the right to use them in whatever sphere of life they chose. At the same time, most were open to new possibilities, and not a few were willing to contest barriers to equal access to the opportunities and privilege that society afforded men. Farm women also well understood the economic and political pressures affecting prairie agriculture and farm life. Thus their letters show women for whom issues of trade, tariffs and grain prices, land rights, war and peace, could be integrated with "maternal" concerns for adequate schooling, health care, prohibition and child welfare.

The "maternal" versus "equal rights" debate can be seen as part of a discourse which insists on the existence of a public/private split, with the home distinguished from the political realm. An analysis which recognizes the interstructured nature of women's oppression seems more fruitful for understanding the writing and action of these women. Such an analysis will also notice the complex interplay of struggle, resistance and hope in the daily lived reality of women's lives, where "politics, pitchforks and pickle jars"<sup>61</sup> were indeed quilted together in a pattern which would create the society they envisioned. Most women were clear that access to national and provincial political life was indeed a requirement for creating that society, but as Christie and Gauvreau have noted, an understanding of women's role in Canadian political life requires an examination of "the wider grass-roots and non-electoral dimensions of agrarian reform, which revolved around local community issues of improved education, public health, the creation of community centres, and the general uplifting of farm housing and working conditions."<sup>62</sup>

For many women settling on the prairie at this point, to view this public engagement<sup>63</sup> through the eyes of faith was no doubt a quite natural

move—the evidence of the letters suggests that these were not yet communities where faith had become privatized and secularism had won out (though some writers clearly had concerns about this possibility). These were women for whom faith was a force interwoven through the fabric of daily life. As a result, many appear to braid with ease the strands I have identified. Women for whom the social gospel offered a vision of a world which could be made better, and a call to work for its improvement in all of life's endeavours, could still acknowledge a need for an image of God as strength and comfort in a context of isolation and spirit-destroying labour. Some heard the social gospel as encouragement to ensure that the values intended to instill “purity” in the home would be inculcated into society as a whole. Women claimed with assurance scriptural warrant for all of these stances, some demonstrating considerable depth of biblical knowledge.

While some historians have downplayed the role of religion in prairie women's lives,<sup>64</sup> the evidence in these *Grain Growers' Guide* pages seems to suggest otherwise. Although organized religion and denominational loyalties became less vital where population was sparse and in transition, for significant numbers of women faith was clearly a motivating factor in reform activities. Richard Allen has suggested that the social gospel provided a necessary framework for “ideas and hopes . . . not reducible to economics or even politics.” The challenges of faith represent a deeper motivation for efforts to transform society. Allen concludes that:

Patterns of behaviour, individually and collectively, emerge which sometimes owe more to religious concerns of alienation and reconciliation, of guilt, justification, redemption, and ultimate hope than to the cold rationalities of economic interest. The two impulses meet in a framework of ideas, or an ideology, combining self-interest and ultimate aspirations by which a group, class, section or nation, explains to itself and to the world, what its problems are, how it is approaching them, where it is going and why. To a remarkable degree, the social gospel and the ideology of the agrarian revolt coincided.<sup>65</sup>

For women with visions of justice and well-being for themselves, their communities and their nation, the social gospel created a religious mandate for their efforts, and an assurance that there could be grace and blessing in petition campaigns, speeches and discussions, and the persistent refusal to back down in the face of political resistance, paternalism and the exhausting

work of wresting a living from the prairie. The joys and sorrows, fears and dreams shared in editorials, letters and reports, communicate an awareness of the presence of the Spirit in the community being created as women worked together. Thus women who as individuals addressed their struggles and dreams in the light of faith, celebrated that faith through their movements for reform, and would surely have welcomed Leona Barrett's joyful declaration that "the line between secular and sacred had vanished."<sup>66</sup>

### ***Endnotes***

1. Barbara Evans, *Prairie Women*, prod. Caryl Brandt (National Film Board of Canada, 1994).
2. See Gregory Baum, "Afterward," in *Faith That Transforms: Essays in Honour of Gregory Baum*, ed. Mary Jo Leddy and Mary Ann Hinsdale (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 176.
3. Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada 1900-1940* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 77.
4. Christie and Gauvreau, *Full-Orbed Christianity*, 117-120.
5. See for example, Susan Jackel, *Canadian Prairie Women's History: A Bibliographic Survey* (Ottawa: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 1987); Alison Prentice, et al., *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Canada, 1996), 214-242; Linda Rasmussen, et al., *A Harvest Yet to Reap: A History of Prairie Women* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1976); Veronica Strong-Boag, "Pulling in Double Harness or Hauling a Double Load: Women, Work and Feminism on the Canadian Prairie," in *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, 2nd ed., ed. R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer (Edmonton: Pica Pica Press, 1992), 401-423. Somewhat of an exception is Eliane Leslau Silverman's *The Last Best West: Women on the Alberta Frontier 1880-1930*, rev. ed. (Calgary: Fifth House Publishers, 1998), which contains a chapter dealing with religion and ethnicity, but finds only vague links to women's reform work.
6. An interesting selection of women's letters to seven papers serving western rural people has been compiled by Norah L. Lewis in *Dear Editor and Friends: Letters from Rural Women of the North-West, 1900-1920* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1998).

7. While Graham and Ford did encourage women to write letters, after Beynon's successor Mary McCallum took over, the page became largely her commentary, reports and extracts from other sources, with only an occasional letter. Reports from women's clubs, however, continued to be given their own section (sometimes running to two pages).
8. Ramsay Cook, "Francis Marion Beynon and the Crisis of Christian Reformism," in *The West and the Nation: Essays in Honour of W.L. Morton*, ed. Carl Berger and Ramsay Cook (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1976), 191-192.
9. Francis Marion Beynon, *Aleta Dey* (London: Virago Press, 1988; first published by C.W. Daniel Ltd., 1919).
10. *Grain Growers' Guide* (hereafter *GGG*), 22 January 1913, 10. Nellie McClung and Lillian Beynon Thomas were also present.
11. *GGG*, 18 March 1914; and 27 January 1915, 5, 10.
12. Rasmussen, et al., *Harvest Yet to Reap*, 123.
13. Carol Bacchi, "Divided Allegiances: The Response of Farm and Labour Women to Suffrage," in *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada 1880s-1920s*, ed. Linda Kealey (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979), 103-104; Louise I. Carbert, *Agrarian Feminism: The Politics of Ontario Farm Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 11-13.
14. *GGG*, 25 January 1911, 35.
15. Carbert, *Agrarian Feminism*, 12; and Rasmussen, et al., *Harvest Yet to Reap*, 122-123, 132, 138. A hint of this critique entered the *Guide*, when one writer declared her view of the Institutes as "kitchen, kitchen, and again kitchen" (*GGG*, 16 September 1914, 8).
16. *GGG*, 19 June 1912, 3.
17. *GGG*, 24 July 1912, 9.
18. *GGG*, 17 February 1915, 17.
19. *GGG*, 9 February 1916, 41.
20. *GGG*, 19 April 1916, 39.
21. *GGG*, 29 January 1913, 10; and 31 January 1917, 15. Both the Grain Growers and UFA had pro-franchise policies, reflected in the editorial stance of the *Guide*.

22. *GGG*, 27 November 1912, 10. An excellent overview of the dower issue is provided by Margaret E. McCallum, "Prairie Women and the Struggle for a Dower Law, 1905-1920," *Prairie Forum* 18, No. 1 (Spring 1993): 19-34. McCallum notes that through the stipulations of territorial entry into confederation, dower rights that existed in eastern Canada had been abolished in the prairie provinces, leading to this particular struggle as women discovered how little assurance they had of protection from loss of the land and its income.
23. *GGG*, 13 November 1912, 10.
24. *GGG*, 3 September 1913, 9; and 9 October 1912, 9.
25. *GGG*, 15 September 1915, 19.
26. In fact, municipal and school board participation required further action, since that franchise was defined in terms of ratepayers, and women who had not formally arranged joint title were not considered ratepayers.
27. *GGG*, 12 July 1916, 10.
28. *GGG*, 04 June 1913, 9.
29. Strong-Boag, "Pulling in Double Harness," 404.
30. *GGG*, 23 October 1912, 10; and 08 January 1913, 10.
31. *GGG*, 05 January 1916, 8. These included 4,250 names all collected by Mrs. Amelia Burritt, aged 93.
32. *GGG*, 12 August 1914, 8.
33. *GGG*, 17 December 1913, 10; and 5 November 1913, 22.
34. *GGG*, 5 January 1916, 8; and 9 December 1914, 16.
35. *GGG*, 1 September 1915, 10; and 04 August 1915, 10.
36. Beynon's views contrasted strongly not only with the ethnocentrism of many readers (directed most often towards East European immigrants), but also with her predecessor, whose homesteads for women campaign had explicitly excluded those who were not British citizens, referred to as "a heterogeneous mass of foreign femininity" and also raised the spectre of "the horrors of a Negro attack" (*GGG*, 16 August 1911, 20; and 3 May 1911, 24).
37. *GGG*, 7 March 1917, 10.
38. *GGG*, 27 December 1916, 10; and 24 January 1917, 10.

39. Prentice, et al., *Canadian Women*, 156.
40. *GGG*, 17 May 1911, 25. Clearly, the emphasis here on purity as a shared responsibility is a contrast to the frequent assertions that maintaining purity was a particular responsibility of women.
41. *GGG*, 1 September 1915, 10.
42. *GGG*, 1 October 1913, 10.
43. *GGG*, 22 October 1913, 10.
44. *GGG*, 2 July 1913, 9; and 26 November 1913, 10.
45. *GGG*, 4 June 1913, 9.
46. *GGG*, 14 July 1915, 10.
47. *GGG*, 20 December 1916, 8; and 18 April 1917, 24.
48. *GGG*, 4 August 1915, 10; and 15 September 1915, 10.
49. *GGG*, 14 July 1915, 10.
50. *GGG*, 6 September 1916, 23; 31 January 1917, 15; and 26 November 1913, 10.
51. *GGG*, 16 June 1915, 10; 26 November 1913, 10; and 11 August 1915, 10.
52. *GGG*, 16 February 1916, 10; 1 March 1916, 10; and 21 July 1915, 10.
53. *GGG*, 16 May 1917, 25.
54. Letter from Violet McNaughton, President of the WGGA, *GGG*, 17 March 1915, 31.
55. *GGG*, 13 December 1916, 23.
56. *GGG*, 31 January 1917, 38.
57. Jean Reed, speaking to the Alberta Women's Convention as UFWA president, ascribed this responsibility to the farm women's organizations.
58. *GGG*, 17 July 1912, 9.
59. See Strong-Boag, "Pulling in Double Harness," 407, 412; Lewis, *Dear Editor*, 7-12, 152; Rasmussen, et al., *Harvest Yet to Reap*, 88-89; and Angela E. Davis, "'Country Homemakers': The Daily Lives of Prairie Women as Seen through the Women's Page of the *Grain Growers' Guide*, 1908-1928," *Canadian Papers in Rural History* 8, ed. Donald H. Akenson (Gananoque, ON: Langdale Press, 1992), 163-174. It does need to be acknowledged that voices were left out

of this correspondence. Lewis notes among the missing (or unidentified) voices “First Nations or Metis women . . . those not yet literate in English, many non-subscribers, the very poor, and those not motivated to write” (*Dear Editor*, 5). Although Anglo-Saxon voices appear to dominate, there were some notable exceptions. A frequent contributor was Mary Nicolaeff, a Russian immigrant who expressed in strong words a well-integrated gender and economic analysis (“Under this [capitalist] system . . . how can sincere love be combined with the economical, social and political dependence?” 22 September 1915, 10), occasionally illustrated with biblical allusions.

60. Strong-Boag, “Pulling in Double Harness,” 403.
61. Nanci Langford, *Politics, Pitchforks and Pickle Jars: 75 Years of Organized Farm Women in Alberta* (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 1997).
62. Christie and Gauvreau, *Full-Orbed Christianity*, 108-130, 119.
63. I would argue that letters written to the women’s pages concerning “private” matters were in fact a way of bringing the “private” into public purview – a process that clearly did not begin with second wave feminism.
64. Silverman, *Last Best West*, 191-204. A very different view is taken by Prentice, et al., who identify religion as a “major focus” which “gave meaning to [many women’s] existence and was the foundation for their work in the larger world” (*Canadian Women*, 164).
65. Richard Allen, “The Social Gospel as the Religion of the Agrarian Revolt,” in *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, 2nd ed., ed. R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer (Edmonton: Pica Pica Press, 1992), 562. Allen notes the importance of the prairie press for connecting the social gospel to the agrarian reform movement, 564-565.
66. *GGG*, 6 September 1916, 23.

