

MULLER Mrs. Mary

Mrs. Mary Muller  
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# The Right To Vote: Nelson Woman Began Successful Fight

On November 28, 1893, the women of New Zealand voted in a parliamentary election for the first time, and the occasion marked the culmination of a long, and often bitter fight which had gone on intermittently for 50 years.

In sparking off the movement which eventually won the female franchise against considerable male opposition, a Nelson woman played a decisive part—but she had to do it anonymously.

To Mrs Mary Muller must go the credit of keeping alive the agitation for women's right to vote in the years before sufficient opposition was organised by the Women's Christian Temperance Union to force the politicians finally to widen the franchise.

As a young widow, Mrs Mary Griffiths arrived in Nelson in January 1850 as a passenger on the ship Pekin, of which Stephen Lunn Muller was the surgeon superintendent for the voyage. His wife died soon after their arrival, and in 1852 he married Mrs Griffiths.

For some time before leaving England the second Mrs Muller had been troubled by the injustice of the law that prevented women from taking part in the framing of the laws of the land.

Now, in a new country, associating with such men as Sir William Fox, Mr Alfred Saunders, Sir David Monro and Mr Alfred Donnett, she unobtrusively introduced the subject of women's suffrage into many a conversation.

Some, including Sir David, were deeply shocked by the idea, as was her husband. Pacing his own drawing room, Dr. Muller would declaim vehemently against this new, unwomanly interest in politics.

Mrs Muller had no wish to hurt her husband's feelings, but "the cause" had languished for lack of new champions since Sir William Fox and Mr Saunders—afterwards a member of the Nelson Provincial Council—had failed in the forties to convince Parliament that women should have the vote.

## NEWSPAPER SUPPORT

Secretly, Mrs Muller expressed her enthusiasm and hopes on paper, but then had to find a way to have her ideas published. Very guardedly she approached Mr Charles Elliot M.P., a relation by marriage, and, most important of all, proprietor of the "Nelson Examiner," which was then one

of the most influential papers in the colony.

Mr Elliott not only published Mrs Muller's articles in his own paper but also arranged for other journals to print them. These writings were anonymous, and though husbands, including Dr. Muller, might rage, they continued in a steady flow to mould public opinion in favour of women's franchise.

The climax of Mrs Muller's propaganda efforts—which undoubtedly did much to make women's franchise a live political issue—came in 1869, when she issued a widely-read pamphlet, under the nom de plume "Femina," entitled "An Appeal to the Men of New Zealand."

But advancing age, and the strain of conducting a secret campaign compelled her to cease active operations shortly afterwards. However, she lived to see her dreams come true and voted at the election of 1893. Mrs Muller died in Blenheim in July 1902 at the age of 82.

## W.C.T.U. TAKES OVER

One effort was made in Parliament to get votes for women before the final campaign was started in 1886 by the Women's Christian Temperance Union. In 1878 Dr. James Walls, of Auckland, brought a motion before the House of Representatives to end the electoral disabilities of women. It was rejected decisively, although supported by such influential politicians as Sir John Hall, Sir Robert Stout, Sir William Fox and Mr Alfred Saunders.

When Mrs M. C. Leavitt, of the original American W.C.T.U. came to New Zealand in 1885, branches were formed in the main centres, and Mrs Leavitt urged them to work for the female franchise as a first step in getting reforms which could only be made by Parliament.

The first New Zealand convention of the W.C.T.U. in 1886 decided to adopt this plan and immediately appointed Mrs K. W. Sheppard as Franchise Superintendent. She was young and attractive, and gifted with a great talent for organisation, so that in a very short time the male politicians of the time were being plagued by the activities of Franchise Leagues all over the country.

Members of Parliament were pressed before each election to declare themselves on the issue of the female franchise, and were promptly denounced if they tried any shifty tactics.

## M.P. GIVEN LESSON

It is recorded that one of the bitter-tongued opponents of votes for women, Mr H. S. Fish, M.P., was shown the power of the suffrage movement when he stood as a mayoral candidate in Dunedin, where women had the municipal franchise. They organised opposition to him so effectively that he was crushingly defeated. This led a local paper to editorialise in verse:—

"When lovely woman wants to vote,  
And finds too late that men betray,  
She doesn't die—she makes a note  
For reference on a future day."

Several times bills to extend the suffrage to women were defeated, but as the W.C.T.U. organisation became more effective politicians—not then bound, as now, by close party ties—began to comprehend the dangers of resisting the claims of "the shrieking sisterhood," as they were ungallantly called.

Various subterfuges were tried to delay the franchise, such as a proposal that only women with a property or university qualification should have the vote, or another—designed to antagonise the Legislative Council—that women should also be eligible to sit in Parliament.

## SEDDON READS SIGNS

Three petitions were presented to Parliament. The first, in 1891, had 10,085 signatures, the second 20,275, and the third, in 1893, 31,874. That astute politician, Richard John Seddon, although at

heart opposed to the female suffrage, realised that he must now, honour the promise made by the former leader of the Liberals, John Ballance.

Although many women had not taken an active part in the fight for the franchise, which had been opposed by some, the election of November 28, 1893, proved that feminine interest in having a vote was widespread—82 per cent of the women eligible voted compared with 70 per cent of the men.

It was not until 1919 that women were given the right to sit in Parliament, and 1933 before Mrs Elizabeth McCombs, former Dominion Treasurer of the W.C.T.U., became the first woman M.P. when she succeeded her late husband in the Lyttelton seat.

None of the pessimistic predictions of its opponents were realised when the franchise was granted to women in 1893. Homes were not split asunder because of political arguments between husbands and wives; women did not neglect their homes for politics; the finances of the colony were not endangered; and women did not lose their essential femininity.



SECRET PROPAGANDIST: Mrs Mary Muller, who arrived in Nelson in 1851, began a lone campaign for women's suffrage by writing newspaper articles and pamphlets under a nom de plume to avoid upsetting her husband, who was opposed to women being given the vote.



("Mail" Photo)

VOTED FIRST IN 1893: Mrs J. S. Walker (left), of Bronte street, and Mrs E. G. Snodgrass, Collingwood street, two Nelson women who voted at the first general election after the granting of the franchise to women. The picture was taken at a recent meeting of the W.C.T.U., of which Mrs Walker and Mrs Snodgrass are still keen members. The W.C.T.U. organised the campaign which finally forced the politicians of the time to give women the vote.