

## Henrietta Muir Edwards

Henrietta Muir Edwards was a square-jawed, stubborn redhead not to be trifled with.

Although she was not a lawyer, she became a self-taught expert who framed dozens of legal briefs intended to reform the status of women. Muir Edwards could handle a baby with one hand, paint fine china (a respected art form) with another and still argue for suffrage, temperance, and political change. Her knowledge of the law combined with her belief in women's equality made Henrietta Muir Edwards a formidable force.

Her most important battle, the Persons Case, was the capstone of her lifelong fight for justice for women. Through the 1920s she was a familiar figure, clutching her battered valise on the train to Edmonton. One of the Famous Five with Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Irene Parlby and Louise McKinney, Muir Edwards framed the brief for that appeal. In 1929, when the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, England, declared that women were considered persons under the law, Henrietta Muir Edwards' political influence reached its pinnacle.



Henrietta Muir Edwards, 1849-1931  
Glenbow Archives NA-2607-1

### The Artist

At a time when women artists were seen as amateurs rather than professionals, simply because of their gender, Henrietta Muir Edwards aspired to be recognized as a professional artist.

A skilled china painter, Edwards' artistic practice grew beyond the decorative and "feminine" arts considered acceptable for women artists. Her paintings were included in the 1881 Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (RCA) exhibition and shown at the Ottawa National Gallery in 1882.

In 1883, Edwards became an honorary member of the RCA, as women were not eligible for full membership. By the late 1890s, she was painting portrait miniatures of wealthy and influential Canadians like Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Sir Donald Smith, president of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

## **Temperance Crusader**

Henrietta Muir Edwards' campaign against the ills of alcohol began at an early age. She was just 11 years old when she marched in Montréal with the Bands of Hope, a temperance group of children. Edwards later became an active member of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).

Edwards believed the social costs of the liquor trade, especially among poor women and children, were too great to be ignored. Many temperance crusaders were also suffragists, seeing women's right to vote as a way to ensure prohibition laws were passed.

Years of speeches, campaigns, parades, and petitions were finally successful. In July 1915 Alberta voted against the "evil drink" and prohibited alcohol. A year later, in 1916, Alberta women were granted the right to vote and hold provincial office.

## **The Person's Case**

On August 27, 1927, Henrietta Muir Edwards joined Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Irene Parlby, and Emily Murphy for tea. The five women, known for their advocacy of women's rights, gathered to sign a petition directed to the Supreme Court of Canada.

The petition asked the Court to examine the meaning of the word persons in Section 24 of the British North America Act to determine whether it included female persons.

Edwards, who was 77 at the time, conducted most of the legal research for the case. The legal challenge dragged on for another two years before the Privy Council of England (then Canada's highest court) ruled on October 18, 1929, that Canadian women were persons under the law.

The Person's Case is filed under Henrietta Muir Edwards' name because alphabetically her name comes first. It is a fitting outcome for Edwards, who made lifelong efforts to improve the legal status of women in Canada.

Born: December 18, 1849 – Died: November 10, 1931

## Additional Resources

- **The Canadian Encyclopedia**  
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/henrietta-louise-edwards>

## Our Collections

### **Glenbow Museum**

<https://www.glenbow.org>

### **Glenbow Western Research Centre | Glenbow Library and Archives**

<https://libguides.ucalgary.ca/glenbowlibraryandarchives>

### **Glenbow Library and Archives | Digital Collection**

<https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/asset-management/2R340826N9XM?WS=PackagePres&Flat=1>