



In
Loving Memory
of
MARY ANN MARION
WIFE OF JOSEPH HATTON
WHO RESTS ASLEEP
AT HOLKING ROAD,
HURDEN.
OCT. JUNE 1865.
IN HER 70th YEAR

Workers for Votes for Women

Lying within a few metres of each other in the Southern cemetery are two women, Helen Nicol and Marion Hatton, who worked together in the early 1890s on the campaign for women's suffrage. The debate on whether women should be permitted to vote for members of parliament was particularly intense in Dunedin. One reason for this was the energy and effectiveness of organisers such as Helen Nicol and Marion Hatton who, together with and Harriet Morison of the Tailoresses' Union, publicised the issue of women's suffrage and gathered local signatures for the nation-wide petitions to parliament in 1891 and 1892. Their effectiveness can be gauged by the fact that the names of Dunedin women made up more than a third on both the petitions of 1891 and 1892. The other reason for the intensity of the debate was Henry Smith Fish. Fish, who was a strong advocate of working men, with a loyal following, led a virulent attack on the suffrage movement. He operated both in Dunedin, where he would serve six terms as mayor before his death in 1897, and in Wellington, where he had been a Member of Parliament with only a brief break since 1881 and from 1890 to 1893, at the height of the debate, represented Dunedin in the House. Leading the liquor lobby, which feared women's votes would be used to bring in prohibition, he was the very incarnation of boorish anti-feminism, the perfect opponent, someone women could love to hate.

Helen Nicol, whose grave is pictured, was born in Edinburgh in 1854, the sixth of ten children of David Nicol and his wife. They moved to Dunedin when Helen was a small child and her father, a skilled and experienced professional gardener, first worked for some prominent families, and then bought property himself. Helen taught in the ragged Sunday school and seeing the misery alcohol was inflicting on many impoverished families, became a strict prohibitionist. Like many of the women who worked for the vote, she was active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Women's votes, she believed, would get the 'right sort of men' into parliament and thus reform society. It was as superintendent of the franchise department of the WCTU that she began the campaign in Dunedin, writing letters to the press, and organising canvassers for the first petition to parliament in 1891.

Marion Hatton, born in Somerset in 1835, was almost twenty years older. She and her husband Joseph, who was an accountant, had already been involved in Sunday school and temperance work before coming to New Zealand. Marion Hatton first came to public notice when she presided over a large suffrage meeting in Dunedin in April 1892. In the aftermath of this meeting, and fearful of the impact of the campaign on the liquor trade, Fish threw all his considerable influence against the women. This included circulating an anti-suffrage petition in public houses, but he lost credibility when the rumour spread that he was paying for signatures and when a number of the signatures were found to be fraudulent. Helen Nicol and Marion Hatton decided to remove the prohibition issue from the campaign. They founded a new body, the Women's Franchise League, with Marion Hatton as executive president (the highly respected philanthropist Mrs Rachel Reynolds accepted the nominal presidency) and Helen Nicol as secretary. The two women travelled together to townships in South Canterbury, Otago and Southland to hold

suffrage meetings , with Marion Hatton the principal speaker. The League also reached out to working class women, who signed the petition in impressive numbers. It made women's suffrage the key issue in the Dunedin mayoral election of 1892. Marion Hatton urged women property owners to 'vote for the candidate most likely to defeat Mr Fish' and (as he himself acknowledged) they voted him out.

Women achieved the right to vote in parliamentary elections on 19th September 1893. Marion Hatton continued to work in the WFL for a time, for equal rights for women, but was restricted by poor health. She died in 1905, survived by her husband and five children. Helen Nicol resumed her work for temperance and was involved with the National Council of Women when it was set up in 1896. She said years later that she never regretted spending the best years of her life to secure the enfranchisement of the women of New Zealand. She left public life about 1897 and she and her sister brought up two nephews. She died in 1932.

Kate Sheppard is deservedly honoured as the leader of the suffrage campaign in New Zealand, but the tireless work of these two Dunedin women deserves greater acknowledgment than it has generally received.