

The
Nova Scotia
NINE



Remarkable Women,
Then and Now

Portraits by Jo Napier
Stories by Joanne Wise

Many remarkable women contributed to this project. Thanks especially to **Etta Moffatt** at Communications Nova Scotia for her vision and guidance, and to **Crystal Sutherland** at the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women for the magic that librarians do.

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About the Nova Scotia Nine

Halifax painter Jo Napier created the *Nova Scotia Nine* portrait series that inspired this book. The *Nova Scotia Nine* is a collection of large-scale, contemporary paintings of women who lived extraordinary lives and made a difference here in Nova Scotia.

“The *Nova Scotia Nine* portraits grew out of a desire to teach my young daughter, Julia, what women can do,” says Jo. “When I tried to think of stories about great women of Nova Scotia, not many came to mind. No great stories bubbled up.”

Jo wanted her daughter—and any young woman—to be able to “look up at a large, beautiful painting and discover a female face” and a powerful story. “The idea was pretty simple: paint women who made a difference in the world. And show other young women they could do the same.”

“Until I started researching them, I never knew what Aileen Meagher, or Rita Joe, or Viola Desmond, or Margaret Marshall Saunders did. What I found were stories of very different women who followed their hearts, stepped beyond boundaries, and ultimately did some good in the world. And they did it here in Nova Scotia.”

Jo is a Halifax native who studied at Vancouver’s Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. A former columnist for *The Globe and Mail*, *The Halifax Herald*, and *The Ottawa Citizen*, her paintings can now be found in private and corporate collections on Canada’s East Coast. She is co-author of *Technology With Curves: Women reshaping the digital landscape*; writer of an award-winning documentary, *Bronwyn and Yaffa*, for the National Film Board (NFB); and associate producer of shows and documentaries on digital life for the Public Broadcasting System (PBS).

Jo lives in Halifax with her husband, Greg, and daughter Julia. The paintings are now owned by the RBC Art Collection and live in the 14th-floor boardroom of RBC Dominion Securities at Purdy’s Wharf, Halifax.



Remarkable women, then and now

The nine women featured in this collection have passed into history, but their legacies continue. In the stories gathered here, you will meet a current generation of women who are, in various ways, following in the footsteps of the *Nova Scotia Nine* and blazing their own remarkable trails.

Timeline

1760 1770 1780 1790 1800 1810 1820 1830 1840 1850 1860 1870 1880 1890



Marie-Henriette LeJeune Ross



Anna Leonowens



Edith Jessie Archibald



Mabel Bell



Margaret Marshall Saunders

1900 1910 1920 1930 1940 1950 1960 1970 1980 1990 2000 2010



Muriel Duckworth



Aileen Meagher



Viola Desmond



Rita Joe

“My own grandfather was at her funeral,
and it was from his lips that I first heard the
tremendous story of his great-grandmother.”¹



Marie-Henriette LeJeune (Granny) Ross

1762-1860

More than a century and a half after her fabled life and final breath, Granny Ross inspires admiration and competition for bragging rights. Midwife, healer, fierce homesteading pioneer—she’s the kind of woman you want your great-great-great-grandmother to be.

Most of what we know about this medical trailblazer has been passed down through family stories and Cape Breton folklore. The facts are fuzzy and some tall tales have been told. We know that her parents were Acadian. Her ancestors were probably both French and Mi’kmaq.² For a time, she was thought to have been born on Acadian soil (now Nova Scotia) before the legendary fall of Louisbourg, making her 117 years old when she died.

In fact, she was born in Rochefort, France, in 1762—a tiny political refugee. Her ancestors had been among the first French colonists to inhabit the new world in the turbulent century before her birth. Her Acadian parents were deported back to France after the Fortress of Louisbourg fell to the British in 1758, four years before she was born.

The LeJeune family longed for the life they had loved in Acadia. They returned when Marie-Henriette was a child, only to be deported back to France a few years later. Undaunted, they made the transatlantic journey again in 1784 when Marie-Henriette was a young married woman.

According to legend, she brought with her from France a sharp knife and a vial containing a serum she would later use to save her community from an epidemic of smallpox. Whether or not this is true, she undoubtedly carried an instinct for survival and a capacity for healing.

Marie-Henriette was twice widowed before the age of 26. Her first husband, a much older widower with children, died in a drowning accident. Her second husband, a cousin, drowned as well. Her third marriage was to James Ross, a sturdy Irish-Scotsman. It was an improbable union of opposing forces: Marie-Henriette LeJeune was devoutly Catholic and proudly Acadian; James Ross was an English-speaking Protestant who had served in the British army. Remarkably the marriage worked. They agreed that their sons would be

1 \ Local historian Elva E. Jackson, in *Cape Breton’s Magazine*, Issue 37, 1984, 41.

2 \ For a history of the LeJeunes in Acadia, see Roland F. Surette’s *Métis/Acadian Heritage 1604 to 2004*, Nova Scotia: Eastern Woodland Métis Nation, 2004.

According to legend, she brought with her from France a sharp knife and a vial containing a serum she would later use to save her community from an epidemic of smallpox.



The roots and leaves of the pitcher plant have been used in traditional medicine for centuries.

raised Protestant and their daughters Roman Catholic. Marie-Henriette may have given birth to as many as 11 children. Some sources name only four. Two children are known to have survived; a son and a daughter.

The LeJeune-Ross family lived on 200 acres of land at Little Bras d'Or for several years, farming and trading with their French, Gaelic, English, and Mi'kmaw neighbours. This is where Marie-Henriette first distinguished herself as a medical miracle-worker. It is thought that she learned many of her healing skills from a Mi'kmaw grandmother, and that she combined traditional medicine with European practices. But she went further—experimenting with what she found in the fields and forests. She gathered natural ingredients to make teas, poultices, and other cures—sometimes walking dozens of kilometres on rough trails to find what she needed.

A smallpox outbreak tested her skills and the trust of her patients. Smallpox is almost unheard of today, thanks to modern vaccines. But in centuries past it was a highly feared disease. Victims would become tired and feverish, then break out in blisters over their entire body. The clear fluid of the blisters would turn to pus, a grim warning to those who were not yet infected. People were often too frightened to tend to the sick.

Marie-Henriette rose to the challenge. She swiftly organized a tight community program, isolating victims in a log cabin and vaccinating the healthy. She might have used the serum she is said to have carried from France; or she might have made her own, taking a scraping of pus from a victim then transferring it into a healthy person through a scratch lanced into an arm or shoulder. It is likely that she was immune to the smallpox virus, possibly because of earlier exposure to a milder strain of cowpox. But Marie-Henriette had only faith for reassurance, and keen observation to guide her. The science of disease transmission was unknown at the time.



Around 1800, the family relocated to a large tract of land in the Margaree Valley and built a homestead that still stands today. James's three brothers established farms nearby, and relatives of Marie-Henriette followed in time. It was an eclectic community of diverse cultures. Marie-Henriette became the community's most trusted medical practitioner for childbirth, end-of-life care, and all points in between. As the years passed and the babies of the valley had babies of their own, Marie-Henriette became "Harriet" the midwife, and then Granny Ross, the folk hero.

Granny Ross, it seems, was as fearless outdoors as she was in the sick room. She is said to have killed two menacing bears in her lifetime, dispatching one with a shotgun and another with a four-foot shovel. When she travelled in the woods at night, she carried a pine-pitch torch to light her way and a loaded musket for protection. She delighted in long walks, trekking up to 100 kilometres across snow and ice with her husband to fetch supplies from Little Bras d'Or.

We have no record of the ingredients that Marie-Henriette used, but we can make some reasonable guesses. They probably included pitcher plant for smallpox; arnica for boils, bruises, rashes, and sprains; wild ginger to bring on menstruation; sumac to prevent scurvy; purple coneflower (echinacea) to reduce fever and boost the immune system; and many other flowers, roots, grasses, barks, and mosses.

James Ross died in 1825, leaving Marie-Henriette a widow for the third time. He was buried on their land. She remained on the homestead, continuing to walk long distances to attend births, heal the sick, and comfort the dying. In later years, she grew blind and could no longer travel on her own. Ever resourceful, she recruited family members to carry her to her patients—using a sled in winter and an adapted wheelbarrow when the snow melted. Or so it is said.

She died in 1860 at the age of 98 and is buried on the grounds of St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church in North East Margaree.

Separating facts from fiction in the Granny Ross legend may be impossible now. What is certain is that the legend itself serves up a powerful tonic for many proud descendants. If you have roots in Cape Breton, you may have ancestors who were brought into this world by her steady hands. Regardless of your bloodlines, you can claim Marie-Henriette as a granny in spirit if you strive to live as she did, with spunk and compassion.

And now ...

Dr. Noni MacDonald is a modern-day medical pioneer, the first pediatrician in Canada to be certified in pediatric infectious diseases, the first female dean of a Canadian medical school, and now an internationally respected teacher and consultant, based in Halifax. Noni and Granny Ross have a lot in common.

"Her story is truly remarkable," says Noni. "She actually understood viral disease transmission at a time when viruses weren't even identified. She would have had no idea that microbes even existed. But she applied principles that we now use every day to control outbreaks of infectious diseases."

Noni points out that Granny Ross succeeded by building trust. "She was really very good at community engagement, which is now one of the fundamental things we recognize we need if we're going to improve health in a community. She did it beautifully—and this was 200 years ago!"

Granny Ross contributed admirably in her time, and left a legacy that keeps on giving. "Nova Scotia has the highest percentage of people over 100 by population in Canada," Noni adds. "So Granny Ross dying at 98 so many years ago—that suggests her gene pool helped to set the conditions."

Thanks, Marie-Henriette, for the genes and for the story of a long life well lived.

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“The most important thing in life
is to choose your parents.”¹



Anna Leonowens

1831-1915

Anna Leonowens blurred the lines between truth and fiction to create an extraordinary life story. To Victorian readers, she was the real-life English gentlewoman in a travel memoir about harem life in the royal court of Siam (now Thailand). To a feisty group of Halifax feminists, she was a sister in the struggle for women's rights, and a champion for women artists and artisans.

Years after her death, Anna's early memoirs were rediscovered and transformed into a Broadway musical (*The King and I*) and a grand procession of Hollywood movies and television adaptations.

Anna was a real woman. But who was she, really?

The real Anna began life in Poona, India, in the unglamorous barracks of the British East India Company. Her father was a sergeant who died before Anna was born. Her 16-year-old mother married another company man when Anna was six weeks old.

What Anna lacked in social advantages early in life, she made up for with ambition. She was an avid reader with a photographic memory, a keen intellect, and a gift for languages.

Anna married Thomas Louis Leon Owens when she was 18 years old. They lived in India, then Australia, and later Malaysia where Thomas managed a hotel. It was a modest existence. Thomas died suddenly in 1859, leaving Anna with two small children and no means of support. Sizing up her limited options, Anna chose to reinvent herself.

Six weeks after Tom's death, the 27-year-old widow and her children arrived in Singapore with a freshly scripted past and a more elegant compound surname. She presented herself as 24-year-old Mrs. Leonowens; born in Wales to a prominent family; educated in British boarding schools; disinherited by an evil stepfather; romantically wed to a high-ranking British officer who had died tragically at her feet, of heat stroke, following a tiger hunt. She had lost her fortune, she said, and all contact with her birth family. She stuck to that fantastic story for the rest of her life. Her children grew up believing it was true, and her readers and friends believed it, too.

1 \ Reputedly one of Anna Leonowens favourite quotations, reported by her granddaughter Avis Fyshe. (*Bombay Anna*, 79)

In 1862, she seized the opportunity of a lifetime, teaching the 67 children and many wives of King Mongkut in the royal court of Siam.

With these improved credentials, Anna found work in Singapore as a private teacher to the children of British military officers. In 1862, she seized the opportunity of a lifetime, teaching the 67 children and many wives of King Mongkut in the royal court of Siam. Anna served the king and his family for five-and-a-half years. Her income enabled her to live comfortably with her young son Louis and provided her daughter Avis with a boarding-school education in England. But the long hours, the complex culture, and the separation from Avis wore on Anna's nerves. She left Siam in 1867 and never returned. She retrieved Avis from England, deposited Louis in Ireland for his turn at boarding school, and headed to the United States.²

2 \ Anna's son Louis went on to live his own adventurous life, eventually returning to Siam and becoming a wealthy businessman.

Anna and Avis settled in New York where Anna opened a school for kindergarten teachers before launching her writing career. Her first two books, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870) and *Romance of the Harem* (1873), blended eyewitness journalism, social criticism, and sensational gossip. The *New York Times* called her stories a guilty pleasure. "Your judgment is charmed to sleep," a reviewer said.

Anna bolstered sales of her books with lecture tours in the U.S. and Canada. She had an encyclopedic knowledge of Asian history and culture, and a gift for storytelling. She took elocution lessons to improve her delivery. To expand her reputation, she wrote articles for *Youth's Companion*, a popular magazine for young people.

When daughter Avis married in 1878, it was with Anna's full approval. Thomas Fyshe met every qualification for a son-in-law. He was smart, ambitious, well-connected, and willing to make room in his household for Anna. The newlyweds and Anna settled in Halifax, where Thomas worked as the respected "head cashier" (general manager) of the Bank of Nova Scotia.

The adjustment from literary celebrity to tea-pouring matron was difficult for the spirited Anna. In 1882, she wrote to an American friend: "I felt, when in the midst of a grand party of all the grandees here, like giving a wild war whoop, and running amuck ... I was burning to do something desperate, to stir up the cold vapid formalism and the empty minutiae of a still more empty life."

Anna did stir things up in Halifax. Starting gently, she founded a literary club and a Shakespeare club. She seized on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee³ to mastermind a more ambitious project, the Victoria School of Art, later to become the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). Anna and others envisioned the school as a centre for excellence, a training ground for skilled artisans, and an economic engine for the region. She was particularly interested in improving the employability of women. Anna lectured, cajoled, and organized fundraising events, and was a central figure at the school's grand opening in 1887.

Anna also immersed herself in feminist causes. She was a founding member of the Local Council of Women of Halifax, along with **Edith Jessie Archibald** and other influential citizens; and she was the first president of the Women's Suffrage Association. Through these organizations, she lobbied fiercely for women's rights, including the right to vote in municipal and provincial elections and to serve on public school boards. She and her council

colleagues fought to improve conditions for women in prisons and for immigrant women. She also led a council campaign to open a home for truant boys, reasoning that children who missed too much school would be better off removed from their families. The idea gained some traction, but the facility was never built.

Even while calling Halifax home, Anna travelled extensively. After Emperor Alexander II of Russia was assassinated in 1881, Anna travelled to Russia as a correspondent for *Youth's Companion*, reporting on conditions in that country. Her vivid stories grabbed attention, and she was offered a job in Boston as one of the magazine's editors, a position she declined. Her home was with the Fyshe family, she said; and her true vocation was the education of her grandchildren. To that end, she organized extended study trips to Europe for herself, Avis, and Avis's children, based mostly in Germany. Thomas stayed behind in Halifax. Anna and Thomas wrote to each other frequently, mainly to confer about the children's education. Avis, it is said, deferred to their wishes in all matters.



Anna in 1903.

³ \ Queen Victoria ruled the British Empire for 64 years, from 1837 to 1901. Her Golden Jubilee Year, marking 50 years on the throne, was a major celebration in Canada.

Somehow in the slim spaces between duties and adventures, Anna found time to write two more books. *Life and Travel in India* (1884) was not a commercial success, but it gave her a forum to restate the backstory of her childhood and marriage. Her fourth and final book, *Our Asiatic Cousins* (1889), was a progressive plea for cross-cultural understanding. “The Hindoos are our nearest of kin,” she wrote. She never did reveal that she had East Indian kin on her mother’s side.

Boris Karloff, the star of *Frankenstein* (1930) and other Hollywood movies, was Anna’s grandnephew. He was born William Henry Pratt in England in 1887, a grandson to Anna’s sister Eliza. When a member of the Pratt family tracked Anna to Halifax in 1899, she refused any contact. There were no Pratts in her invented past, and she was determined to keep it that way.

In 1897, Thomas and Avis relocated to Montreal. Anna joined them there in 1901. Anna continued to give lectures and to lobby for good causes. She died in Montreal in 1915, taking to her grave the truth about her own origins.

Anna’s lasting legacy to Nova Scotians is the school of art and design we now call NSCAD University. Who but Anna could have imagined a more fitting monument? Her whole life was a bold work of art and design.

And now ...

Jessica Scott Kerrin is an artist, arts administrator, and award-winning author of children’s books, including the Martin Bridge adventure series for boys. She is a proud graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and a former director of the Anna Leonowens Gallery at NSCAD. She now works within government to raise public awareness about Nova Scotia’s culture and heritage.

Jessica knows the joys of a creative life, and the gritty challenges. She admires Anna’s can-do attitude and self-discipline. “Here was someone who started off with limited options,” says Jessica. “But she decided that she was not going to be a victim.”

Jessica is philosophical about Anna’s invented past. “Everyone should get the opportunity for a do-over at least once in their life,” she reasons. “Why not?”

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“There is work to be done; shall we do it
or shall we sink into oblivion?”¹



Edith Jessie Archibald

1854-1936

Edith Jessie Archibald was a Maritime leader in Canada's first wave of feminism, in the late 19th and early 20th century. She rallied Nova Scotians to fight for better healthcare, safer communities, and more responsible government. She is remembered today as a crusader for women's suffrage—the right to vote in political elections and to hold public office.

Edith was born in St. John's, Newfoundland, into a life of wealth and privilege. The Archibalds were nation builders—politicians, lawyers, judges, and business leaders—with roots in Nova Scotia and staunch loyalty to the British Empire. Her father, Sir Edward Mortimer Archibald, was Newfoundland's attorney general at the time of Edith's birth, and soon after became British Consul to New York. Edith was educated in private schools in New York and London, England.

At the age of 20, Edith married another Archibald—her second cousin Charles. They settled in Cow Bay (now Port Morien), a coastal community in eastern Cape Breton, where Charles ran a prosperous coal mine. It was a world away from the cosmopolitan life

Edith had known. Her Cape Breton home was elegant, but even with four children to raise she felt isolated and under-utilized. She read, dabbled in good works for the church and community, and travelled when she could, but she was restless. Her salvation was the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).

To believers, temperance was much more than a campaign against alcohol—that “coiled serpent of drunkenness.” It was a war on sin and suffering; a strike against domestic violence, child neglect, poverty, prostitution, and moral decay. Prohibition was the pathway to a new heaven on earth.² Women were the torchbearers who could guide their families and communities to the light. The WCTU began in the United States in the 1870s and spread to Canada in the early 1880s. It quickly became the largest and most active women's organization of the 19th century. The watchwords were—and still are—*Agitate, Educate, Legislate*. Members learned “how to think on their feet, speak in public, and run an organization.”

1 \ Halifax Local Council of Women (LCW) Minutes, 19 February 1903.

2 \ *Prohibition* means the act of prohibiting or banning something—in this case, the manufacture, transportation, sale, and consumption of liquor.

Edith became active at the local, regional, and national levels of the WCTU. She was a capable writer and public speaker with a flair for the dramatic. Intelligent, strong willed, and supremely confident, she welcomed a righteous fight. Her social status gave her authority, and her wealth enabled her to travel and connect with other activists.

During her years in Cow Bay, Edith famously led raids on three illegal saloons. Charles bought the largest of the three saloons and turned it into a temperance hotel. Edith hosted parlour meetings to promote temperance; wrote campaign literature; and became Maritime Superintendent of the Parlour Meetings Department, encouraging women to gather in members' homes and community halls to spread the temperance message. In 1892, she was elected president of the Maritime WCTU. This put her at the forefront of an organization with more than 80 local groups and almost 2,000 members. Through the WCTU, Edith worked with like-minded women to lobby for prohibition and to establish libraries, orphanages, and other community services aimed at improving the lives of women and children.

Edith's temperance work thrust her into the debate over women's suffrage. The WCTU was the first major women's organization in Canada to endorse women's suffrage. Prohibitionists hoped that women voters would elect lawmakers willing to stand up to the liquor trade. In 1893, Edith and others



lobbied the Nova Scotia legislature to give voting rights to women who owned property. The bill passed, but was derailed by the attorney general, J.W. Longley. Arguments for and against women's suffrage grew louder and more bitter. Edith remained steadfast in her support for the cause.

Around this time, the Cow Bay coal mine was sold, the Archibalds' elegant house was dismantled, and the family moved to Halifax.³

³ \ Charles Archibald became a bank director and eventually president of the Bank of Nova Scotia. In that role he worked with Thomas Fyshe, the son-in-law of Anna Leonowens, who was "head cashier" (general manager) until 1897.

She was a capable writer and public speaker with a flair for the dramatic. Intelligent, strong willed, and supremely confident, she welcomed a righteous fight.

The timing was splendid. In August 1894, Edith attended the founding meeting of the Halifax Local Council of Women (LCW), an umbrella organization formed to link local women's groups with each other and with the recently formed National Council of Women. At the first meeting of the Local Council of Women, Edith represented the Women's Christian Temperance Union. **Anna Leonowens** represented the Victoria School of Art and Design. They were joined by women involved in more than 40 other religious, social, cultural, and charitable groups. It was an historic meeting of minds and wide-ranging interests.

Edith was elected vice-president of the Halifax Local Council of Women in 1895, and president in 1896. She was an enthusiastic booster for the council, but not always an effective leader. The politics were complex: national leaders of the WCTU supported the idea of working with other women's groups, but only on their strict evangelical terms. That might be why Edith insisted on reciting the Lord's Prayer at council meetings—a move that pleased some members, offended others, and seriously undermined the non-

The National Council of Women and affiliated local councils were started by the remarkable **Lady Ishbel, Countess of Aberdeen**. Lady Ishbel was the Viceregal consort of Canada (wife of the Governor General of Canada) from 1893 to 1898. A dedicated feminist and social reformer, Lady Ishbel also founded the Victorian Order of Nurses in Canada.

denominational spirit of the council movement. During Edith's nine years as president, the council lost members but did support some groundbreaking causes, including the establishment of the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) in Halifax.

By the time Canada entered World War I in 1914, Edith was a seasoned organizer and lobbyist. She used her considerable influence to promote the war effort. Through her role as vice-president of the Nova Scotia branch of the Red Cross, she helped to raise funds and organize shipments of medical supplies to Europe. She also coordinated communications and relief packages for prisoners of war. It was a monumental voluntary undertaking.



Women's Council House, Halifax.



Edith Archibald plaque at Women's Council House.

4 \ Some women continued to be denied the right to vote: People of Asian heritage did not receive voting rights until 1948; First Nations people who wanted to keep their Indian status had to wait until 1960.

Meanwhile, the campaigns for prohibition and for women's suffrage continued. In 1917, Edith wrote another pamphlet supporting votes for women and had 2,000 copies printed and distributed. In 1918, partly in recognition of women's wartime efforts, the Nova Scotia legislature finally granted most women the right to vote and to run for elected office.⁴

In her later years, Edith continued to take on new challenges. Her writing projects included a history of the Nova Scotia Branch of the Red Cross, a biography of her father, a stage play set in Cape Breton, and a novel based on the play. She also composed patriotic music and supported the arts in Halifax.

Edith died at home at the age of 82. She was buried in the historic Camp Hill Cemetery in Halifax. More than 60 years later, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (Parks Canada) named Edith a "person of national historical interest." A commemorative plaque was installed in 2001 at the headquarters of the still-active Local Council of Women of Halifax.

Edith's story reminds us that heroes are human, with strengths and flaws. She was self-righteous and stubborn, but she was also generous with her time and fiercely committed to the causes she believed in. She stood up, spoke out, and dared a generation of women to do the same.

And now ...

Sandra MacLennan serves as president of the Local Council of Women of Halifax, more than a century after Edith Archibald ran the meetings. Sandra values the long tradition of the movement—bumps included. Speaking of the council's feisty foremother, Sandra smiles: "Edith taught us that it matters what women think."

Like Edith and many other council members over the years, Sandra has volunteered for a breathtaking range of good causes and has received awards for exceptional volunteer service from the province and from the Halifax Regional Municipality.

How does a busy woman choose her commitments? "They choose us," she says. "The causes come and find us."

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“What a man my husband is ...
Flying machines to which telephones and
torpedoes are to be attached occupy
the first place just now.”¹



1857-1923

Miss Mabel Hubbard knew she was accepting a challenge when she agreed to marry the brilliant and quirky inventor, Alexander Graham Bell. He became her life's work—and what a body of work it was.

The romance and lifelong partnership began in Massachusetts in 1873. He was a Scottish emigrant, teaching elocution to deaf students in Boston. She was one of his pupils. Mabel had lost her hearing at the age of five because of scarlet fever. Isolated by silence, she would have eventually lost her speech as well, if not for her determined parents. Gardiner and Gertrude Hubbard were wealthy and willing to go to great lengths to keep their daughter integrated in the hearing world.

At 16, Mabel was an accomplished lip reader and a creative listener, recently back from studies in Germany. She was not instantly impressed with her new teacher, thinking him old (at 26) and unkempt. But she paid attention and came to enjoy his ideas and his company. He found her captivating and became a frequent visitor to the Hubbard home.

Gardiner Hubbard was a patent lawyer and financier with a keen interest in the telegraph business. Coincidentally, Alec was experimenting in his spare time with ways to improve telegraph transmission, an offshoot of his fascination with sound and hearing. Gardiner Hubbard offered to co-finance Alec's experiments in exchange for a business interest in any new patents. It made perfect sense: If Alec were to woo Mabel, he would need more than a teacher's salary and an interesting hobby. He agreed to the partnership, but struggled to balance his priorities. Alec's first love was his work with the deaf, and the telegraph experiments threatened to interfere with that. He might well have abandoned the patent race if not for Mabel. He needed to know if she would have him. Mindful of her youth, he waited a year then threw himself at her mercy. Mabel wasn't sure about the match, but agreed to let him court her, which he did with fervor.

1 \ Newlywed Mabel writing to her mother in 1877. Quoted by Liliias Toward in *Mabel Bell: Alexander's Silent Partner*, 45.

Mabel and Alec with Elsie (left) and Daisy, in 1885.



Mabel accepted his marriage proposal on her 18th birthday. Soon after, she wrote to Alec: “My darling, I warned you before we were engaged that though I might love you very much, I could not do so in the passionate hot way you did ... I would give you more if I could but I cannot help my nature.”²

Nevertheless, Mabel got down to work, organizing Alec’s life and their future, and making a very successful go of it. Without Mabel to keep him on track, Alec might never have completed his prototype of the telephone in time for its triumphant debut at the Philadelphia Exhibition in 1876. With his first patent secured, Alec was on his way to becoming a wealthy man.

Mabel’s telephone stock gave her a 30 per cent stake in the company. Alec kept a token 10 shares (0.2 per cent).

Alec and Mabel were married in 1877. The gifts they exchanged were generous and meaningful. She gave him a piano and urged him to play, although she could not hear the music. He gave her a cross necklace—a symbol of her faith—and 1,497 shares of the newly formed Bell Telephone Company.

Soon Mabel and Alec had two daughters: Elsie (born 1878) and Daisy (born 1880). They were overjoyed with their growing family and hoped for more children. Sadly, they lost two sons at birth.

The Bell family travelled extensively, maintaining a home base in Washington, DC. In the summer of 1885, they planned a sailing vacation through the Bras d’Or Lake region of Cape Breton, with a stopover in Baddeck. They fell in love with the landscape and the rural Gaelic culture, which reminded Alec of his native Scotland. The family returned to Baddeck the following summer and began scouting for property. They set their sights on a point of land overlooking Baddeck Bay, opposite the village. It took time to convince the various landowners to sell, but the Bells

² \ Charlotte Gray. *Reluctant Genius*, 120.

Mabel loved ideas; but she wished to see them organized and put to good use. Her ability to focus balanced Alec's leaps of imagination.

eventually acquired 600 acres. Alec named the land Beinn Bhreagh (pronounced *ben vreeah*), meaning Beautiful Mountain in Scottish Gaelic. Their first home on the estate, the Lodge, was completed in 1889. A few years later, they settled into the homey-elegant Beinn Bhreagh Hall.

The Bells dreamed of making their summer estate agriculturally self-sufficient and intellectually vibrant. To that end, they added extensive gardens, livestock, barns, and homes for workers, as well as a playhouse for the children, boathouses, and a large laboratory for Alec.

The land itself was well suited for the wide-ranging experiments that interested Alec—from sheep breeding to mechanical flight. “You are a man of brilliant talents,” Mabel wrote. “But your mind is so fertile it is always drawn off by every new idea that comes up; you like to fly around like a butterfly sipping honey, more or less from a flower here or another flower there.”³ Mabel loved ideas; but she wished to see them organized and put to good use. Her ability to focus balanced Alec's leaps of imagination.



Mabel in her study at Beinn Bhreagh, 1922.

³ \ Gray, 117.

Mabel managed the estate and the family's finances. She also maintained an active interest in Alec's work—recruiting staff, reviewing records, translating technical articles from German to English, and developing photographs—all with an eye to her husband's scientific legacy. When it appeared that Alec might be losing confidence in his flight experiments, she devised a plan. In 1907, she organized the Aerial Experiment Association (AEA), a research group led by

Mabel is still admired in Baddeck for her community involvement. In 1891, she started the Young Ladies Club of Baddeck. The club continues today as the Alexander Graham Bell Club and is believed to be the oldest continuously operating women's club in Canada. Mabel and Alec are also credited with inspiring or sponsoring the first Home and School Association in Canada; the first lending library on Cape Breton Island; and Canada's first Montessori classroom, set up in a Beinn Bhreagh warehouse for their grandchildren and a few young friends from the community.

Alec and including four young engineering innovators: Douglas McCurdy, Casey Baldwin, Thomas Selfridge, and Glenn Curtiss. Mabel contributed \$35,000 of her own money (equivalent to almost \$1 million today) to finance their work for 18 months. In that time, the AEA built four working airplanes and made aviation history with the Silver Dart, the first piloted heavier-than-air machine to fly in Canada.

When the AEA disbanded, Alec and Casey Baldwin turned their attention to perfecting the hydrofoil hydrodome (the HD), a super-fast boat designed to skim or "fly" over the water. Mabel contributed funds and encouragement, and followed their progress in detail. The three of them hoped to secure a government contract to build a fleet of high-speed submarine chasers. The contract never came, but Casey Baldwin did succeed in setting a world water speed record of 114 kph (63 knots) on Bras d'Or Lake in 1919.

Alec died peacefully at Beinn Bhreagh Hall in 1922 from complications of diabetes, with Mabel at his side. He was buried at the top of his beautiful mountain. Mabel rallied her strength to ensure that Alec's work and his memory would endure. A month after the funeral, she wrote: "Mr. Baldwin and I have today signed a contract whereby we agree together that we will continue to carry on the work that Mr. Bell, Baldwin and I have been carrying on—so far as it is possible to do so without Mr. Bell. This agreement is to last for ten years and calls for an expenditure of \$10,000 a year for experimental work to be at Baldwin's sole discretion."⁴

Mabel measures the pull on a kite as it flies over Beinn Bhreagh. Kites were essential tools in Alec's flight experiments.



4 \ Toward, 204–05.

Casey Baldwin did continue their work, but Mabel could not. She died of cancer six months after Alec, at the Maryland home of her daughter Daisy. The following summer the family brought her ashes back to Beinn Bhreagh for burial in Alec's grave, under a simple marker. As she wished, "the real, the big and lasting memorial"⁶ lives on in the science, technology, community spirit, and family pride that Mabel cultivated throughout her life.

⁶ \ Toward, 198.

And now ...

Cassandra Dorrington and **Cynthia Dorrington** are modern-day champions for teamwork and innovation. Their company, Vale & Associates, has offered human resource management and consulting to small and medium-sized organizations in Canada, the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. The company name is a nod to Vale Road, the street in New Glasgow where they grew up.

Cassandra is the big-picture thinker; Cynthia sees the details. "Know your strengths," they advise, "and empower each other to succeed."

Cynthia admires Mabel Bell's positive outlook. "Mabel had an ability to bring people together, and she focused on that. She didn't let her hearing loss define her."

Cassandra points to the value of differences in building a strong team. "Where Alec's strengths waned, Mabel excelled," she notes. "Differences, if applied in the right way, can unite and strengthen a team."

Cynthia and Cassandra share a commitment to community service—a value they learned from their parents. They have served in mentoring and executive roles for more than a dozen organizations, including the Black Business Initiative; Techsploration (encouraging young women to pursue non-traditional roles in science, trades, and technologies); the Canadian Progress Club, Halifax Cornwallis (supporting women and children in need); and others.

For the Dorrington sisters, success is a family affair.

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Baddeck, and That Sort of Thing first appeared as a serial in *Atlantic Monthly*, from January to May, 1874, and was later published as a book. It inspired Alec and Mabel's first visit to Baddeck.

“Perhaps
it will help
a little if I tell
a story.”¹



Margaret Marshall Saunders

1861-1947

Margaret Marshall Saunders turned her ideals into compelling stories and became a celebrated writer, lecturer, and advocate for animal rights and social justice. Her novel about an abused dog, *Beautiful Joe: An Autobiography*, was the first book by a Canadian author to sell more than a million copies worldwide.

“Beautiful Joe is a real dog,” she wrote in the preface. “He belonged during the first part of his life to a cruel master, who mutilated him in the manner described in the story. He was rescued from him, and is now living in a happy home with pleasant surroundings, and enjoys a wide local celebrity.”

Beautiful Joe won the hearts of young readers in North America and Europe. The first American edition, published in 1893, sold out in 10 days. The story was eventually translated into 18 languages, including Esperanto and Braille. Today it is largely forgotten, except by literary historians and by fans in the town where the real Beautiful Joe once lived. But the story of the storyteller still has lessons to teach us.

Like most overnight sensations, Miss Marshall Saunders spent years learning her craft. Her success came from a combination of hard work, good market research, and the unfailing support of her family. Her father, Edward Manning Saunders, was a respected Baptist pastor, author, and historian. Her mother, Maria Freeman Saunders, worked tirelessly in the church and community, campaigning for temperance, women’s rights, and the protection of minors. The Saunders’ home in 19th-century Halifax bustled with seven children and a huge assortment of pets, including a garage full of rabbits and a white mouse that young Maggie carried up her sleeve.

At the age of 15, Maggie was sent to a boarding school in Edinburgh, Scotland, to study languages, history, and literature. Her letters back to Nova Scotia were filled with homesick longing, details of daily life, and characteristic wit. “I cry all the time when it does not interfere with my lessons,” she wrote. Drying her tears, she spent the following year perfecting her French in Orléans, France. She returned to Halifax at 17 and settled into an earnest routine—teaching, helping at home, and working with her mother on social causes, including a campaign against baby farming.²

1 \ *Beautiful Joe*, 14.

2 \ *Baby farming* referred to the unregulated foster care or boarding of babies for profit. Some babies were sold for adoption; some died mysteriously; some were raised as servants.

Her stories for children emphasized the humane treatment of animals. Her adult novels addressed social issues, including child welfare, poverty, and the legacies of colonialism.

Maggie wrote, but only for herself and in letters to family and friends. One family friend was Dr. Theodore Rand, a pioneering educator. He was delighted by a letter she had sent, and encouraged her to write more. “What shall I write?” she asked. Dr. Rand advised her to write about things that she knew (“the beauty of our wintery scenery ... the stillness of the woods, the rabbits’ track in the snow”). But like many novice writers, Maggie favoured more exotic themes. She wrote instead about “a man, his wife, and a robbery” set in Spain. She scribbled daily while her sister Rida did the housework for both of them, and completed the short story in three weeks. Maggie and Rida were delighted when it was accepted for publication by a popular magazine in New York. They shared the \$40 cheque. The year was 1884. Maggie was 23.

Encouraged by her family, she continued to write. Maggie became “Marshall Saunders” in print and in life. Her first short novel, *My Spanish Sailor*, was a shipboard romance. It was published in England in 1889, for distribution in England and Canada, and was a modest success.

In 1892, while visiting her brother in Meaford, Ontario, she heard about a local dog who had been mutilated by his cruel owner and then rescued and adopted by a kind family. Around the same time, she learned about a literary competition sponsored by the American Humane Education Society, focusing on “Kind and Cruel Treatment of Domestic Animals and Birds in the Northern States.” The contest called for a novel in the spirit of the English animal classic *Black Beauty*. It was a perfect match for Marshall, combining her love of animals with her passion for writing.

Marshall wrote her story from the point of view of the dog, relocating it from Meaford to Maine to appeal to the American sponsor. She wove in details that paid homage to the founder of the American Humane Education Society, George Angell, including a reference to his Bands of Mercy campaign. She named the dog's human companion Laura, after a sister who had died, and gave Laura a clergy family like her own. It took her six months to write the winning manuscript. The judges were charmed. Marshall accepted the praise and the publicity, but wisely declined the \$200 in prize money, opting instead to keep the copyright and find another publisher. *Beautiful Joe* was published the following year by the American Baptist Publication Society, to instant acclaim.

Now in her 30s and with an independent income, Marshall travelled frequently, lived for extended periods in Boston and California, and published an impressive range of short stories, newspaper articles, and novels for both adults and children. Her stories for

children emphasized the humane treatment of animals. Her adult novels addressed social issues, including child welfare, poverty, and the legacies of colonialism. Like **Anna Leonowens**, she was a regular contributor to *Youth's Companion*. She devoted herself to good causes and was active in dozens of voluntary organizations, including the Humane Society, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the Local Council of Women of Halifax, where she served along with **Edith Jessie Archibald**. She campaigned vigorously against child labour and in favour of supervised playgrounds in Halifax.



In 1901, Marshall delighted loyal readers with *Tilda Jane: An orphan in search of a home*. Her rambunctious orphan predated *Anne of Green Gables* by seven years. Marshall later co-founded the Maritime Branch of the Canadian Women's Press Club with *Green Gables* author **Lucy Maud Montgomery**. They hoped that networking would empower women writers to negotiate better treatment from publishers.

Marshall used some of her royalties to install an aviary in the Saunders' family home on Carleton Street in Halifax. This provided the setting for *My Pets: Real happenings in my aviary*, a collection of essays published in 1908.

In 1911, Marshall Saunders was awarded an honorary MA from Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. It was a rare distinction for a woman at that time. A few years later, following her mother's death, she moved with her father and sister Grace to Toronto to be closer to other family members and to the publishing world. When their father died,

Marshall and Grace moved again to a custom-built bungalow in north Toronto. It featured an expansive indoor aviary for dozens of birds, with a flight shaft connecting the basement to a bright sunroom. There was space for dogs and cats and other foundlings, and castles to shelter toads in the backyard. People routinely brought injured creatures to the door to be nursed back to health.

Although *Beautiful Joe* continued to sell well for many years, the book was not without controversy. Debates raged about the portrayal of "dumb" animals—dumb meaning speechless, not stupid—and about the morality of attributing human qualities to non-humans. Marshall's style of writing fell out of favour, and she found it increasingly difficult to publish new work and pay the bills. Her final book, a Victorian romance, came out in 1927 when Marshall was in her mid-60s. She and Grace turned to public speaking, touring Canada and the United States with illustrated lectures about animal welfare, their pets, and the rights of women and children.

In 1934, Marshall was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, the highest civilian honour for a Canadian at the time. In the same year, she also received a medal from the *Société Protectrice des Animaux* in Paris, France. But honours could not keep her from poverty or protect her from a long, misunderstood struggle with depression. Friends and admirers rallied, and she was sustained for a time by financial aid from the Canadian Writers' Foundation. The Local Council of Women of Halifax also sent money in gratitude for her years of service.

When Marshall died in 1947, *Saturday Night* magazine published a tender eulogy naming her "Canada's most revered author." She is buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto. Monuments honouring her life and work stand today in her birthplace of Milton, Nova Scotia, and in Beautiful Joe Park in Meaford, Ontario.

"I will stop just here," says Beautiful Joe at the end of his story, "though I would gladly go on, for I have enjoyed so much talking over old times, that I am very sorry to leave off."³



3 \ *Beautiful Joe*, 351.

Find out more about
wildlife rehabilitation at
hopeforwildlife.net.
To watch Hope in action,
visit **hopeforwildlifetv.com**.



4 \ In Ray MacLeod's *Hope for Wildlife: True Stories of Animal Rescue*. Foreword.

And now ...

Hope Swinimer mends broken wings, feeds hungry orphans, and works daily miracles at a remarkable wildlife rehabilitation centre in Seaforth, Nova Scotia. She is supported in her life's work by private donations, a small staff, and a large network of volunteers. The Hope for Wildlife Society rehabilitates thousands of animals each year from across the province. It does not discriminate: a common racoon receives the same quality of care as an injured osprey or endangered wood turtle. The goal is always to rehabilitate and release; but Hope for Wildlife will occasionally offer lifelong refuge to animals that can no longer survive in their natural habitat. These become teaching animals, helping visitors of all ages to understand more about living in harmony with the natural world.

"As much as our work is about healing wildlife, it is also about healing the human spirit," Hope says.⁴

Beautiful Joe would agree, and Margaret Marshall Saunders would approve.

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“War is stupid.”



Muriel Duckworth

1908-2009

Muriel Duckworth was gentle and fierce. An acclaimed peace activist and feminist, she taught generations of women to stand up, speak out, and work together for a better world. Her life spanned 100 years. Her influence shaped more than 17 organizations, from local Home and School Associations to the internationally recognized Voice of Women for Peace.

You may be lucky enough to have known her, or to know someone who loved her. Muriel's circle of friends and admirers was huge. On the occasion of her 100th birthday, an enthusiastic crowd filled the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium in Halifax to celebrate Muriel's passion for peace. They sang, shared stories, and ate 100 birthday cakes baked in her honour. When she died the following summer, memorial services were held across Canada. Tributes poured in from politicians, fellow activists, and ordinary Canadians.

Muriel's name was not always so honoured. When the world was at war in the 1940s, peacemakers like Muriel were shunned for being unpatriotic. During the Cold War years, anti-nuclear activists were dismissed as naïve or marked as dangerously pro-communist. Muriel feared the labels, with good reason, but she faced her fears. The older she got, the braver she grew.

Muriel's long and courageous life began in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. Her grandmother taught her to read. Her mother taught her to take a stand and make a difference. "The adults in my mother's family loved to talk politics," she once said. "They would argue at the top of their voices and got very mad at each other."¹ Muriel inherited their passion and wit, but learned to listen, to question, and to cultivate an open mind. She entered McGill University in Montreal at the age of 16 and soon joined the Student Christian Movement (SCM). The movement was progressive and sometimes controversial, challenging its members to think critically

1 \ Quoted by Marion Kerans in *Muriel Duckworth: A Very Active Pacifist*, 26.

Each issue broadened Muriel's awareness and deepened her commitment to radical social action.

and put their beliefs into action. In later years, Muriel described her experience in the SCM as the most formative part of her education at McGill. "This was the beginning of my adult search for truth and my sense that all things must be open to me. It was unsettling; it was painful. It was exciting."² The SCM was also where Muriel met her future husband, Jack.

Muriel and Jack married in 1929, soon after her graduation. They spent a year in New York City studying at Union Theological Seminary, immersed in the social gospel movement. To social gospellers, being Christian meant standing with the poor and the powerless. It meant actively working to turn the world right-side up; creating heaven on earth. Muriel worked part-time helping teenaged girls in the hardscrabble neighbourhood of Hell's Kitchen. She was a witness to history when the New York stock market crashed in October 1929, plunging North America into the Great Depression.

Muriel and Jack returned to Montreal in 1930 and raised three children there. They were outspoken advocates for social justice—promoting living wages, affordable housing, unemployment insurance, health care, pensions, education, and interfaith and intercultural dialogue. They joined a number of groundbreaking organizations, including the League for Social Reconstruction, a forerunner to both the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the New Democratic Party.

During her years in Montreal, Muriel helped to organize a nursery school at the YMCA where Jack worked. She also contributed to the development of Quebec's first legislation to regulate nursery schools. She was a founding member of three Home and School Associations. Believing in the strength of coalitions, she envisioned a French-English, Catholic-Protestant affiliation of Home and School groups—a radical and unrealized dream.

2 \ Kerans, 32.

In 1947 the Duckworth family moved to Halifax. Jack became general secretary of the new family YMCA on South Park Street. Muriel continued her volunteer work for the Home and School Association and, from there, branched into paid part-time work as a parent education advisor for the Nova Scotia Department of Education. Her paid and volunteer roles often overlapped. Through the 1950s, her volunteer responsibilities grew. She was a founding member of the Halifax branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association, the Canadian Conference on Education, and the Nova Scotia Education Association. She also served as president of the Nova Scotia Federation of Home and School Associations. In her own middle years, she was becoming the go-to woman for community activism.

It was through her work for the Department of Education that she became aware of Nova Scotia's deeply entrenched racism. She advocated for change and joined the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NSAACP).

Each issue broadened Muriel's awareness and deepened her commitment to radical social action. When the call came in 1960 to help form a national women's organization committed to global peace, Muriel was ready. The stakes were high. The United States and Soviet Union were armed and poised for nuclear war. International peace talks had broken down. Citizens were being advised to build their own bomb shelters. The first meeting of the Halifax branch of Voice of Women (VOW) drew about 20 women to Muriel's living room. They booked a school gym and organized a successful public meeting to protest the dumping of American nuclear waste off the coast of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia.



Muriel and Alexa McDonough (right) at Muriel's 92nd birthday celebration, October 2000.

VOW members learned to dig for facts, challenge arguments, prepare briefs, lobby politicians, and issue press releases. They struggled to find common ground over complex issues, sometimes losing members for being too bold or not bold enough. Muriel agonized over the conflicts. She found strength in the practice of deep listening and inner silence, taught to her by Quaker friends.

She served on the VOW board from 1960 to 1975, and as national president from 1967 to 1971. Reflecting on her presidency, she said: “It was probably the hardest thing I’ve ever done and the one from which I learned the most—from just having to do it and feeling overwhelmed by it from the beginning.”³

In 1974, three weeks before the provincial election, Muriel was asked to run as a New Democratic Party (NDP) candidate in her south-end Halifax riding. It was the longest of long shots. She did it because it needed to be done. She was the first woman in Halifax to run in a provincial or federal election. Alexa

3 \ Kerans, 97.

McDonough, then a rookie member of the party, accompanied Muriel as she campaigned door to door. Muriel ended third in the polls, but she boosted her party's share of votes in that riding to 19 per cent, an increase of more than 11 percentage points. She ran again in 1978, raising the NDP share to almost 23 per cent.

Jack died in 1975. Muriel was 66. They had been married 46 years. Muriel coped by continuing the activism that had shaped their lives together. She travelled to peace events around the world, always inspiring, unsettling, and connecting people. In 1980 she moved to a house owned by her son John. She invited her friend and fellow activist **Betty Peterson** to live with her. They welcomed student tenants, including **Elizabeth May** who was at the time a first-year law student and who went on to lead the Green Party of Canada. The house was a community hub, like a wellspring of fresh water for a thirsty village.

Raging Grannies singing out for women's rights at Province House in Halifax, December 6, 2011.

The Raging Grannies use humour and music to draw attention to critical issues of ecological, economic, and social justice. The movement began in 1987 in Victoria, British Columbia, and quickly spread across Canada. There are now gaggles of grannies in countries around the world.

Here is how they describe their philosophy: "We are totally non-violent, believe in only peaceful protest (with lots of laughter), work for the 'many not the few' ... and see our work as the spreading green branches of a great tree, rising up to provide shelter and nourishment for those who will come after us." (raginggrannies.org/philosophy)

Muriel was an active granny in the Halifax gaggle.





Muriel at 100 in 2008.

4 \ *Muriel's Song*,
written by Rose
Vaughan and Cheryl
Gaudet, 2008.

Muriel continued to do what prophets do—comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable—throughout her life. She received many honours and awards, including the Order of Canada, the Pearson Medal of Peace, ten honorary degrees, and more. In 2005, Muriel was one of 1000 women worldwide to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize (www.1000peacewomen.org). The one prize that would have meant everything—lasting peace—remained elusive. But there was, and is, always hope. At her wonderful final birthday party, a choir of children sang this promise: *In your name we'll carry on, speaking out for everyone, and honour all that you have done with passion and with grace.*⁴

And now ...

Alexa McDonough remembers the phone calls. “When Muriel called, you knew she had a plan, and you knew you’d be part of it.”

Alexa worked with Muriel on many campaigns. “Muriel was a natural mentor,” she says.

In 1980, Alexa was elected leader of the Nova Scotia New Democratic Party, becoming the first woman to lead a recognized political party in Canada. She went on to lead the federal NDP from 1995 to 2003, and continued to represent Halifax in the Parliament of Canada until her retirement in 2008. She was succeeded in the 2008 federal election by **Megan Leslie**. In 2013, Mount Saint Vincent University renamed an important feminist institute in Alexa’s honour. The Alexa McDonough Institute for Women, Gender, and Social Justice provides a focus for feminist energy, action, and research aimed at building a better world.

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“I just liked to run.”



Aileen Meagher

1910-1987

Back in the day when “a lady did not run,” Aileen Meagher cut off her brother’s trousers to make running shorts and turned herself into an international track star. How did she do it? “I just went out and ran around the track as fast as I could go,” she said.

The adventure began in 1931 in Halifax. Fresh from convent school and newly enrolled at Dalhousie University, Aileen entered a track meet for new students and won every foot race. The track coach was impressed and mentioned the upcoming Olympic trials. Aileen had never heard of the Olympics. Soon she would be racing her way into Canadian sporting history.

The idea of women competing in public was still novel and hotly debated. “Impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic, and incorrect,” said Baron de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic movement. Women had gained a toehold in a few events in the early 20th century—starting with tennis and golf—but

Aileen is pronounced *i-leen*.
Meagher rhymes with *jar*.

many of the star-power sports remained out of the question. The first track and field events for women debuted in 1928 at the Amsterdam Summer Olympics. The Canadian women’s team won gold in the 4x100-metre relay. It was an under-reported triumph.

Nova Scotian **Gertrude Phinney** qualified handily for the 1928 Olympics but was talked out of the trip by her concerned father. Read about Gertrude’s record-breaking sporting life at the Acadia Athletics Hall of Fame (acadiahof.ca/gertrude-phinney-young-beattie).

Aileen’s new enthusiasm for running shocked some people. “The nuns were ashamed of me and my parents not too sure,” she recalled years later. Politely ignoring her naysayers, Aileen joined the Dalhousie track team and began training in earnest. With plenty of passion, grit, and natural talent, she quickly became Canada’s record holder for the 100- and 220-yard events. By 1932 she was part of Canada’s Olympic team. She travelled to Los Angeles for the games, but a leg injury kept her out of competition. Undaunted, she kept on training.

With four Candian sprint records to her credit, Aileen was named Canadian Woman Athlete of the Year and Canadian Athlete of the Year in 1935.

Aileen graduated from Dalhousie in 1933 and started teaching at St. Patrick's Boy's School in 1934. She continued to live in her childhood home on Seymour Street, which was close to the Dalhousie track. "There was nobody to run with me," she said. "So, I ran around the track. I wouldn't have dared run on city streets the way people do today."

Every morning, Aileen would walk from Seymour Street as far as Camp Hill Cemetery, then run through the cemetery on her way to her teaching job on Brunswick Street. "I had the choice of spending 7 cents on the tramway or 7 cents for a couple of doughnuts. So I'd run and have the doughnuts," she reasoned. Reporters nicknamed her The Flying Schoolmarm.

Aileen went on to win three medals at the 1934 British Empire Games in London, bringing home gold for the 660-yard relay and silver for both the 440-yard relay and the 220-yard sprint. With four Candian sprint records to her credit, Aileen was named Canadian Woman Athlete of the Year *and* Canadian Athlete of the Year in 1935.



Her next major trip was to the Berlin Summer Olympics in 1936. War was brewing in Europe, and these games were a controversial showcase for Hitler's vision of a "peaceful, tolerant" Nazi empire. Writing about it for the Christmas edition of *The Bluenose*, she described the pomp and politics:

“ ... the strange solemnity ... the half-conscious twinge of fear evoked by the guard of honor ... the oneness of the crowd that rises like a huge wave as the competitors near the finish line ... the pale smiles and courageous joking of athletes tensely waiting to be called for their events ... the wall of black-shirted guards that holds back the pushing throng of spectators as Herr Hitler steps into his car ... the rays of searchlights ... and most impressive and stirring of all, the solemn hush as the crowd stands and the flags of the laurel-wreathed victors slowly rise, wave a brief moment against the sky—then down again. ”



Aileen won a bronze medal in the 4x100-metre relay [Time: 47.8]. Forty years later, she described the team's 1936 homecoming in an interview for *The Chronicle-Herald*: "There wasn't much of a welcoming. I was met at the station by my friends. The Herald and Mail gave me a bouquet of flowers ... but that was about it. No fanfare."¹

Nova Scotia's Flying Schoolmarm finished her running career with distinction at the 1938 British Empire Games in Sydney, Australia, where she won a silver medal in the 400-yard relay and bronze in the 660-yard relay. She asked for her return fare in cash and used that, plus her savings, to travel through South Asia, Europe, and the Suez, on an east-west journey that lasted several months.



Aileen at the 1936 Olympics, standing with her Canadian teammates, awaiting the presentation of their medals.

¹ \ Hugh Townsend. "Memories of Berlin" in *The Chronicle-Herald*, 21 June 1976.



Aileen with her
sketchbook.

When Aileen returned to Halifax, she settled into a rhythm of school teaching and travel. A major trip required two years' savings, so she planned her adventures for every alternate summer holiday.

In 1949, approaching her milestone 40th birthday, Aileen enrolled in her first art class at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. She began showing her work almost immediately, and soon became an award-winning artist. She sketched and painted with characteristic ease, discipline, and enthusiasm. Art became an integral part of Aileen's life, and her circle of friends expanded to include many artists.

2 \ Gemey Kelly.
Aileen Meagher:
A retrospective.

Travelling and lifelong learning kept Aileen's art fresh and lively. She carried small black diaries that she filled with sketches and notes, bringing these back to her studio to transform them into larger works.²

Track star, world traveller, lyrical storyteller—Miss Meagher was the kind of teacher who could capture the attention of a roomful of fidgety students. She used art to spark their interest, and added competition to inspire their best efforts. For many years her students sent their artwork to the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto, and every year they won a prize. She kept her own prize—the Olympic bronze medal—on her desk at school, and was seemingly unperturbed when it went missing. “I really can't find it,” she once said. “But I know I did it, so why worry?”

Aileen Meagher continued to receive sports honours throughout her lifetime. She was inducted into the Nova Scotia Sport Hall of Fame, the Canadian Olympic Hall of Fame, and the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada Hall of Fame, a forerunner to Athletics Canada. She retired from teaching in 1969. Ever curious, she revisited old destinations and travelled to new ones around the world. She died in Halifax in 1987 at the age of 76.

Today her Irish name lives on in the Aileen Meagher International Track Classic, an annual meet hosted by Saint Mary's University (www.aileenmeagher.com).

East Jeddore, a small fishing community on the Atlantic coast, has its own homegrown Olympian. In 2008, **Adrienne Power** travelled to Beijing with Team Canada, becoming the second track athlete from Nova Scotia to compete in the Olympics—72 years after Aileen Meagher’s triumph in Berlin. Adrienne ran in the 200-metre event, placing fifth in the first qualifying round and sixth in the second round. She went on to win two bronze medals at the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, India, for the 200-metre event and the 4x400-metre relay.

Like Aileen, Adrienne was a track star at Dalhousie University and is a Dal graduate. She credits the Aileen Meagher International Track Classic for raising the profile of track and field sports and bringing nationally ranked competitors to Nova Scotia. “Track is a tough business,” she says. “Our athletes need the public support and they need to run with the best to reach their potential.”

Adrienne continues to train and serves as a coach and mentor to young athletes.

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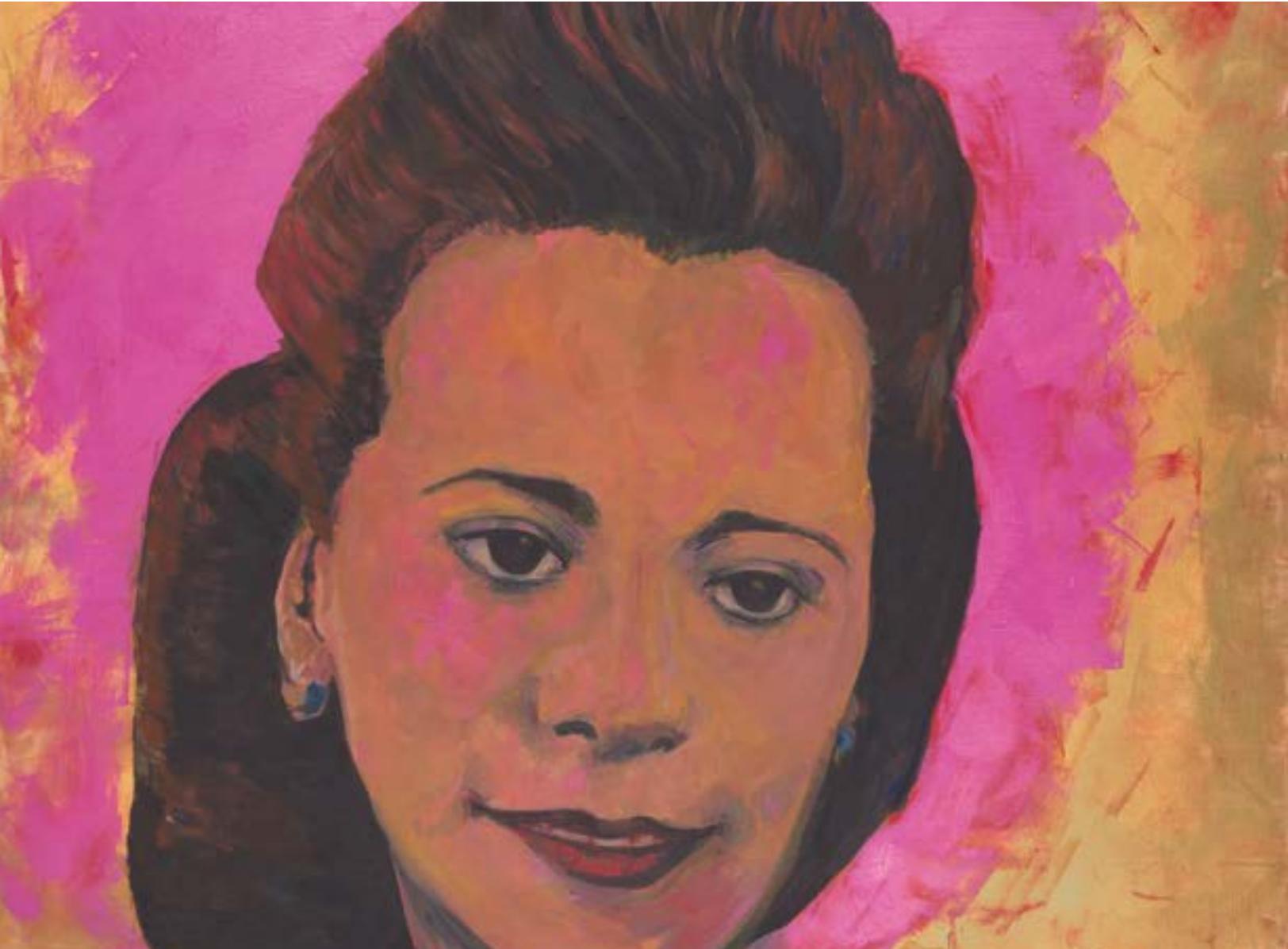
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“I didn’t realize a thing like this
could happen in Nova Scotia.”¹



Viola Desmond

1914-1965

It was not the kind of history Viola Davis Desmond set out to make. Forcibly removed from a Nova Scotia movie theatre for sitting in the “white” section, she was suddenly pushed past the limit of her own tolerance. She resolved to challenge the racism. Her courageous stand drew public attention to racial segregation and systemic injustice in the province, and helped to spark the civil rights movement in Canada.

The year was 1946. The Second World War was over and a new era of prosperity was beginning. Times were promising. Viola was in her prime: 32 years old; a successful business owner with ambitious plans to build a beauty empire in Nova Scotia and eventually across Canada. She was poised, confident, and capable. Her beauty parlor was thriving in north-end Halifax. Her beauty school, the Desmond School of Beauty Culture, was training a new generation of African Nova Scotian women to start their own businesses. Step by step, Viola was building a distribution network for a line of beauty care products bearing her name and image. She and her husband Jack were respected members of their community, living a hard-earned middle-class life.

It was November 8th. Viola was making the long drive from Halifax to Sydney—travelling alone in a car she had bought with money she had earned—defying the odds set by her gender, racial identity, and era. Her goal was to deliver beauty products to customers in Cape Breton and to return home with new orders. But her four-door sedan broke down along the way. She found a garage in New Glasgow and arranged for the repair. The mechanic told her the car would be ready the next day. Making the best of the delay, Viola decided to see a movie. *The Dark Mirror*, a psychological thriller, was playing at the Roseland Theatre. Viola arrived at the box office in time for the 7 pm show. She bought what she thought was a main floor ticket. Settling into her seat,

1 \ Viola Desmond, quoted in the *Halifax Chronicle*, shortly after her conviction. Recounted by Constance Backhouse in *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950*, 245.

Viola’s business plans were inspired by stories she had first read in high school about the legendary **Madam C. J. Walker** (1867–1919), an African-American entrepreneur and philanthropist who rose from poverty to become America’s first female self-made millionaire.

she was surprised when an usher told her to move to the balcony. Thinking it must be a mistake, she returned to the box office to pay the 10-cent difference for a seat on the main floor, closer to the screen. The cashier refused her money. “I’m not permitted to sell downstairs tickets to you people,” the woman said. Only then did Viola realize that the theatre was racially segregated. Indignant but composed, Viola returned to her seat. She was, after all, a visitor in town, well dressed

Viola Desmond was not the first African-Canadian woman to challenge the Roseland Theatre in court. In 1942, **Carrie M. Best** launched a civil lawsuit against the theatre, aiming to bring attention to its racist seating policy. She lost the case and was forced to pay costs to the defendant totalling \$156.07 (*Best v. Mason and Roseland Theatre*, 1942). A few years later, Carrie Best founded *The Clarion*, the first newspaper in Nova Scotia owned and published by an African Canadian. She wrote passionately about Viola’s story and urged readers to donate generously to the Viola Desmond Court Fund.

and well mannered; there were no signs barring her from the main floor; and she had paid for her ticket. The manager stepped in and called the police. Viola was dragged from the theatre, dropping a shoe and her handbag in the struggle, and suffering bruises to her body. She was taken to jail and spent a long, frightening 12 hours in a locked cell, taunted by male prisoners. She kept her white gloves on and her hat in place to maintain whatever dignity she could muster.

The following morning, Viola appeared before a judge, charged with defrauding the Province of Nova Scotia. The theatre manager, cashier, and usher testified against her. Mrs. Desmond had bought a 30-cent ticket, they said, but had insisted on occupying a 40-cent seat. The difference in tax between the two tickets was one cent and it was on this penny that the theatre manager made his case. Viola tried to speak on her own behalf but she was exhausted and unaware of her rights, limited as they were.

Newspapers in Nova Scotia and across Canada followed the story, sparking debates both for and against Viola's stand. She was praised as a hero and scorned as an uppity troublemaker.

No mention was made during the trial or in the court record of Viola's skin colour or of the theatre's discriminatory seating policy. Viola was convicted of tax evasion and given a choice: a \$26 fine, including court costs, or 30 days in jail. Viola paid the fine. The white theatre manager was compensated for his troubles.

Viola retrieved her car and headed back to Halifax, injured in body and spirit. Urged by her family doctor and by supportive friends, Viola launched an appeal in the district court. **Pearleen Oliver**, a noted activist and community leader, convinced the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NSAACP) to take up Viola's cause and provide financial support for her legal fees. Newspapers in Nova Scotia and across Canada followed the story, sparking debates both for and against Viola's stand. She was praised as a hero and scorned as an uppity troublemaker. Her husband urged her to drop the matter. He did not attend the appeal hearings.

Viola lost her case in district court and her subsequent appeal to the provincial court, not on principles upholding segregation, but on legal technicalities. The justice system failed Viola at all levels. But the failure was a public story that forced Nova Scotians into a dialogue about human rights. The stage was set for reforms.

Viola tried to return to business as usual, but her beauty shop was not the cheerful community hub it had been. Her marriage ended in divorce. Viola closed her businesses and left Nova Scotia, moving first to Montreal and then to New York City to start over. She lost her taste for beauty culture, but envisioned new opportunities. "I'm going to make a go of it," she told her family.² She reset her sights on the entertainment industry, aiming to work as an agent.

² \ Wanda Robson. *Sister to Courage*, 161.

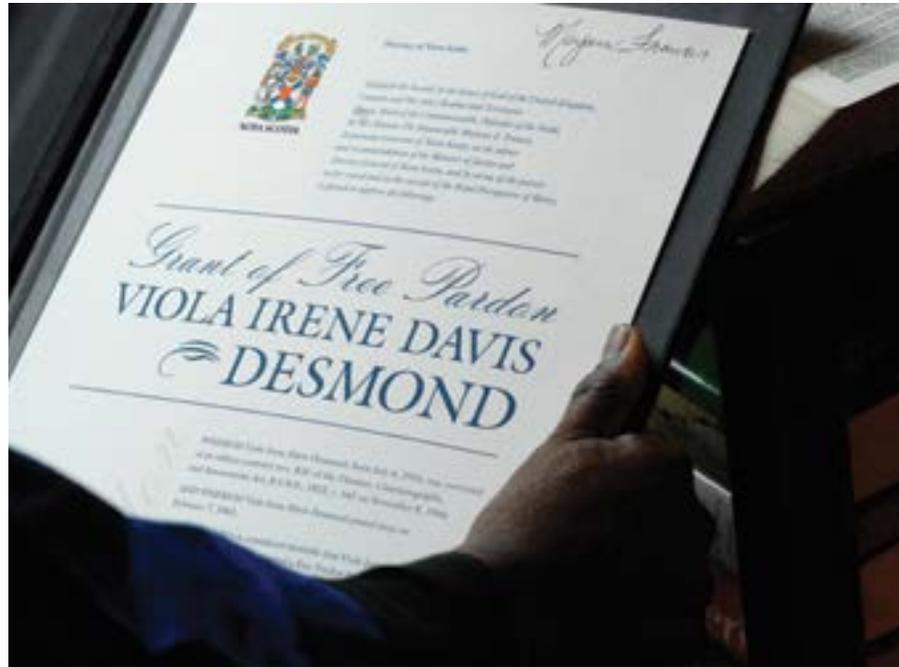
Viola resisted calls to become a spokesperson for the civil rights movement. She was not comfortable making formal public speeches. But she continued to stand up for her rights and for the rights of others. She learned, for example, that her mother had been defrauded many years before by an unscrupulous lawyer. She sued the lawyer's estate on her mother's behalf and won a substantial settlement, easing the financial hardships her parents were suffering. She also came to the aid of other family members, lending money and moral support, visiting the sick, and petitioning uncaring bureaucracies. After her mother's death in 1963, Viola returned to Halifax for a time to help care for her father. He died in 1964. Weary and afflicted with an unspecified illness, Viola returned to New York, promising her brothers and sisters that she would come back to Halifax soon. She never did. Viola suffered gastrointestinal bleeding and died alone in her small apartment in 1965. She was 50 years old.

Decades passed and Viola's story faded from public memory. It was revived by legal and civil rights scholars in the 1990s, but remained on the edges of popular consciousness until a fateful moment in a classroom at Cape Breton University. Viola's youngest sister, Wanda Robson, was attending a lecture about racial segregation. Viola's picture flashed on the screen. "That's my sister!" Wanda said. Wanda and the professor began working together to bring Viola's story alive for a new generation of students.

Encouraged by a CBC reporter and others, Wanda wrote to the mayor of New Glasgow seeking a public apology for Viola's mistreatment. The initiative took on a life of its own, becoming a provincial matter that led to a formal apology from the premier and a free pardon from the Crown. The pardon itself was not without controversy.

Some argued that seeking a pardon was like asking for forgiveness. But proponents saw it differently. This was a *free* pardon, signaling that the trial was a miscarriage of justice—a travesty. The Royal Prerogative of Mercy Free Pardon was officially declared in 2010 in a ceremony at Province House. That same year, a monument honouring Viola Desmond was unveiled in the Africentric Heritage Park on Vale Road in New Glasgow. In 2012, Canada Post issued a stamp commemorating Viola Desmond’s struggle for justice.

The tributes and storytelling continue, begetting more stories and fresh ways to explore the lessons of history. In a new century, Viola Desmond has become the face of a different kind of beauty industry, celebrating the beautiful courage of African Canadian trailblazers.





Wanda Robson at the unveiling of a Canada Post stamp featuring her sister, Viola Desmond, in February 2012.

And now ...

Wanda Robson knows from a lifetime of experience that her sister's story is not unique. "Discrimination happened all the time to many, many people," she says. "Not always big things, but small, daily injustices ... It's still happening," she adds. The point in retelling Viola's story is not to set one woman apart, but to draw people together to learn from each other.

Wanda is a superb storyteller. She understands how to weave small things into a big picture. Read her book, *Sister to Courage*. If you are lucky enough to meet Wanda, pay attention. Ask questions. Like Wanda and Viola, you may find yourself inspired to make history of your own.

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“I know
who I am,
and my
people are
the prize.”¹



1932-2007

Rita JOE was a poet, a storyteller, a warrior for Mi'kmaw dignity and women's rights. Her words mark a trail through dark places, pointing the way to healing and grace.

She was born Rita Bernard in Whycomagh, Cape Breton, into a Native community rich in tradition and scarred by colonialism. Her people were Mi'kmaq, which means *The Family*. Her mother, Annie, wove intricate baskets. Her father, Joseph, carved axe handles. Annie died in childbirth when Rita was five years old; Joseph died when she was ten. From the age of five, Rita lived mostly in a succession of foster homes. "I would stay for six months, maybe three months, maybe a year, two months, a month, two weeks," she wrote in her autobiography.²

Humility was a survival strategy; a way to get bread when she was hungry and a bed to sleep in. "I learned very early in life that humility is how you earn your way into the heart of the person who's looking after you. I had to work hard for that affection—very hard."³ Writing helped her to make sense of the incomprehensible. She wrote her first poem on a scrap of paper when she was seven.

At 12, frightened by the alcohol abuse around her and wanting to learn how to cook and sew, Rita wrote to the Indian Agent and asked to be placed in the Schubacadie Indian Residential School. She thought the school looked like a castle. What she found inside was a numbing routine of lineups, locked doors, and "mind mistreatment."⁴ The students lived, worked, and worshipped in English, and learned their place. They were forbidden to speak their Mi'kmaw language. The message was clear: "I was brainwashed. 'You're no good,' I was told every day at Shubie."⁵

- 1 \ *For the Children*, 44.
- 2 \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 15.
- 3 \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 16.
- 4 \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 41.
- 5 \ Quoted by Morgan O'Neal in *First Nations Drum*, April 28, 2007.

Writing was her therapy.
It was also her tool to teach and heal others.

Rita remained at the school for four years. At 16, she headed to Halifax with a grade 8 education and one change of clothes. She embraced her freedom, or as much freedom as she could hope for in 1948, working 12-hour days at the Halifax Infirmary. With her first paycheque, she bought red shoes.

Rita moved forward with determination. She worked hard, loved generously, and learned from her losses. A single mother at 17, she gave her first child to her sister Annabel to raise. Pregnant again, she took a train to Boston to find better work and start a new life. She met and married Frank Joe. His family was from Eskasoni, the largest reserve in Atlantic Canada. Rita had heard of Eskasoni but had never been there. Within a few years it was her home.

6 \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 86.

7 \ From a videotaped interview in the possession of Frances Silliboy.

The marriage began tenderly, but for years Rita endured Frank's infidelity, drinking, and beatings. At first she hid the bruises, but she eventually found her voice. "I began to run away from home for periods of time. I would live with friends and relatives and tell my story to anyone who would listen."⁶

Writing was her therapy. It was also her tool to teach and heal others. She began writing for the *Micmac News* in 1969. It started with one poem about Eskasoni and evolved into a monthly column, "Here and There in Eskasoni." She would talk to the elderly people in the community and scribble down their stories. Her writing inspired a flood of feedback, some negative but most of it uplifting. The more she wrote, the more confident she grew.

Meanwhile, Rita's children were experiencing in school what their mother knew all too well: the negative stereotypes, biased histories, belittlement, and discrimination. She listened to their stories, read their textbooks, and resolved to rewrite history.

"I began to write beautiful stories using poetry. I don't know why poetry because I was not a poet. But in poetry you have to use beautiful words sometimes. And that's what I did. I tried to write beautiful stuff about Native culture."⁷

She taught her children to stand up for their truth—to tell the story of their people as they knew it, in school and in the world. "One of the important things I kept telling them is that

we are the ones who know about ourselves. ‘Don’t fear declaring anything,’ I said, ‘because you are the ones who know. You might not be an expert, but you do know.’”⁸ She described her strategy as peaceful confrontation.

Her first book, *Poems of Rita Joe*, was published in 1978. Rita’s daughter Ann tells this story:

“One of her early poems in her first book is ‘Aye! No monuments.’ They were translating my mother’s work [from English] and the linguist said there’s no Mi’kmaw word for monument. So my mother was trying to think, what were our monuments? She went to her mother-in-law and she asked her, ‘*Kiju*’ [Mother], what was that thing they did a long time ago when they went hunting in the woods and they had to mark their trails so they wouldn’t get lost?’ And she told her, ‘That’s *knu’kaqann*.’ So she said, ‘Oh thank you, *Kijinu* [Grandmother].’ And she hugged her, and my grandmother didn’t know why. And my mother went to the linguist, Bernie Francis, and she gave Bernie that word for the translation.”

Rita’s first book inspired an outpouring of gratitude, affection, and critical acclaim. The poems sang to people who were touched by Rita’s honest telling of her experiences as a Mi’kmaw woman.

“I’m just stating the facts of life,” she said.⁹

Rita Joe received many awards and honorary degrees—Member of the Order of Canada; Member of the Queen’s Privy Council for Canada; honorary doctorates from Dalhousie University, University College of Cape Breton, and Mount Saint Vincent University; and a cherished Aboriginal Achievement Award. She accepted each one with grace, always on behalf of her people. The recognition inspired her to learn more, share more, write more.



Governor General
Ramon Hynatyshn
congratulates Rita on
receiving the Order of
Canada, 1990.

⁸ \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 91.

⁹ \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 120.

Her husband Frank stopped drinking, returned to school, and earned degrees in teaching and sociology. The abuse ended; the marriage survived. “In the last years of our life together, there was so much love given and expressed between us,” she said.¹⁰ Frank died in 1989 when Rita was 57.

A year after Frank’s death, Rita developed Parkinson’s disease, a degenerative illness that causes violent shaking and difficulty with coordination. “I tremble like an aspen leaf,” she wrote. She continued writing to the end of her life, finally typing with one finger of one hand. She lived to 75, and died with a poem in the typewriter.

10 \ *Song of Rita Joe*, 122.

And now ...

Four of Rita Joe’s daughters gather at a kitchen table in Eskasoni to share memories of their amazing mom. “She was a humble woman,” they say. “A gentle warrior ... A genius.”

Phyllis Denny, the eldest daughter, recalls one of Rita’s most-quoted poems, “I Lost My Talk.” Like Rita, Phyllis lost her talk at the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School. And like Rita, she found it again.

Evelyn Toney (called Step by the family) remembers the high school textbooks that sparked their mother to take on colonial history and tell a richer story. Step once wanted to quit school; now she teaches the Mi’kmaq language.

Frances Silliboy (Bonches) brings food to the table, and copies of the books that Rita wrote. “Mom would not let anyone go hungry,” she says.

Ann Joe, the youngest, remembers her mother searching for a Mi’kmaq word for monument, and choosing *knu’kaqann* (trail). To Ann, that choice captures the spirit of Rita Joe: she blazed a trail of words so that we could find our way. *Ta’ ho’* (So be it).

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Kiptu Aboriginal Drummers at Province House, December 6, 2011.

Aye! No monuments,
No literature,
No scrolls or canvas-drawn pictures
Relate the wonders of our yesterday.

...

These are our monuments

Breathtaking views—
Waterfalls on a mountain,
Fast flowing rivers.
These are our sketches
Committed to our memory.

...

Excerpts from *Poems of Rita Joe*. Abanaki Press, 1978, 10.

And now ...

And now it's your turn. Who are some of the amazing women—past and present—who inspire you? Is there a Granny Ross in your family history? A Viola Desmond who gives you courage? A mentor like Muriel Duckworth?

Great stories inspire greatness. Our stories matter.
Your story matters. Pick up your paint brush. Make your mark.

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Meet nine trailblazers—daring, passionate women who climbed obstacles, broke barriers, and made a difference here in Nova Scotia.

The *Nova Scotia Nine* invites you up close and into the stories of some remarkable women who made the most of their time in history. You may recognize a few; others will surprise you. Activists, peacemakers, storytellers, entrepreneurs, a medical pioneer, an Olympian—it's a lively, diverse gathering.

Who inspires you? Who would you add?
How will you make history?



Nova Scotia
Advisory Council on
the Status of Women


NOVA SCOTIA