

## A LIFE IN EDUCATION HISTOIRE DE VIE SCOLAIRE

### “An educator of modern views”: The (Auto)biography of Margaret Ross, 1862-1943<sup>1</sup>

J.I. Little and Jean Barman

Margaret Ross is intriguing as a late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Canadian woman who all her life fended for herself as an educator. Like so many other women of her generation, her dream was to be recognized as a writer.<sup>2</sup> It was her literary ambitions, rather than pride in her teaching experiences, that caused her to put her experiences on paper. For that reason her memoir is more honest than it might otherwise be, pointing to the difficulties faced by women drawing on their own resources. Ross survived as a single woman because she was capable and resourceful, but also because she was able to access cross-country networks of influence based on her Scots-Presbyterian heritage.

Margaret Maria Ross was born in the Scots-Canadian village of Gould, Canada East, in 1862. Her father, James Ross, a native of Fearn, Rosshire, Scotland, had begun work in a Quebec City mercantile house at the age of fifteen in 1830. He later became the captain of a vessel trading to the West Indies. Four years after, he married the Irish-Canadian Maria Ann Brown and in 1838 they moved to the village of Cookshire, east of Sherbrooke in the Eastern Townships, and, finally, in 1845 to the nearby village of Gould. Situated in the British American Land Company's St. Francis Tract, Gould had been established to serve the sixty Gaelic-speaking families who arrived from the Hebridean Isle of Lewis in 1838. They were joined by another forty destitute families

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1 We are grateful to Margaret Ross's relatives, Andrew Cunningham, June O'Brien, and Jean Johnston, for their assistance and support. We also wish to thank Elise Chenier for her helpful comments on the introduction.

2 See Carol Gerson, "Canadian Women Writers and American Markets, 1880-1940," in *Context North America: Canadian/US Literary Relations*, ed. Camille LaBossiere (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 107-18; for a contemporary Canadian woman similarly fired by literary ambitions, see Jean Barman, *Constance Lindsay Skinner: Writing on the Frontier* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

from the west coast of Lewis in 1841, and the settlement attracted considerable chain migration during the following decades.<sup>3</sup>

No one among the first generation of these impoverished Highlanders, who were fleeing the potato famine, had the capital or experience to become a merchant, leaving the field open to outsiders such as James Ross, who operated a pearl-ashery and general store in Gould as well as a farm.<sup>4</sup> The local Highlanders became devout members of the Free Church of Scotland after the schism of 1843, and Ross was temporarily suspended by the local kirk session in 1853 when he was warned that the “opening of a house for drinking ardent spirits and the attendance on excited convivial entertainments are not...safe or suitable for a professing Christian.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, he served at various times as mayor, secretary for the schools council and municipal council, and lieutenant-colonel of the local militia unit.

Ross became Compton County's first member of the Quebec Legislative Assembly in 1867. A long-time ally of John Henry Pope, the county's Conservative representative for whom he had named his youngest son in 1860, Ross became a political victim of the rivalry between Pope and Sherbrooke's Conservative member of the provincial legislature, Joseph Gibb Robertson. To take advantage of the province's colonization railway subsidy programme, Pope launched a project to build a line from Sherbrooke through Compton County to Lake Megantic, while Robertson planned to build a railway running further north from Sherbrooke to Quebec City.<sup>6</sup> Given that Pope was a member of the federal government and that Robertson was provincial treasurer, Ross may have felt he had little choice but to support the latter (though he later denied doing so), but he thereby backed a project that would by-pass most of his own county and alienate the most powerful man in that county. As a result, Pope's hand-picked ally, William Sawyer, defeated him by 300 votes in the 1871 election.<sup>7</sup> According to Margaret Ross's

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3 See J.I. Little, *Nationalism, Capitalism, and Colonization in Nineteenth-Century Quebec: The Upper St. Francis District* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), chap. 2; and J.I. Little, *Crofters and Habitants: Settler Society, Economy, and Culture in a Quebec Township, 1848-1881* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), chap. 2.

4 The Ross building is now operated by a Francophone family as a bed-and-breakfast inn and restaurant with a Scottish theme. For an illustration, see Ray and Diane Baillie, *Imprints II: Discovering the Historic Face of English Quebec, the Eastern Townships* (Montreal: Price-Patterson, 2002), 187.

5 Quoted in Little, *Crofters and Habitants*, 187.

6 Pope's line would become the St. Francis and Megantic International Railway, which would eventually link to the CPR's Short Line through Maine to Saint John, New Brunswick, while Robertson's company was the Sherbrooke, Eastern Townships, and Kennebec. It would eventually become the Quebec Central Railway Company. For details, see Little, *Nationalism, Capitalism, and Colonization*, chap. 7.

7 Ross was on the board of governors of Pope's company when it was known as the St. Francis Valley and Kennebec and was projected to run to the lower Chaudière Valley via Lake St. Francis. Marcel Hamelin, *Les Premières Années du Parlementarisme*

memoir, the indignant local Highlanders subsequently switched their support to the Liberals.<sup>8</sup>

Despite his lack of formal education, James Ross was said to be “one of the most widely read men of the Province,” and the only member of the legislature who could speak four languages – Gaelic, English, Spanish, and French. He published poems in the Quebec press as a youth, and, later, in the *Sherbrooke Gazette*.<sup>9</sup> Given the strong admiration Margaret felt for her father, who died in 1874 when she was only eleven years old, it is not surprising that she chose to be a French-language teacher, or that she had literary ambitions. Her memoir suggests that her beautiful and romantic mother, who lived until the age of seventy, was too preoccupied with the eleven other children, ten of whom reached adulthood, to have had the same degree of influence on her. But both parents presumably fostered their daughters' advancement, for Margaret's four older sisters were all well educated as well, Elizabeth being one of the first women to graduate from McGill University.<sup>10</sup>

As a child, Margaret Ross was a voracious reader, but a bored and rebellious student, with the result that she was sent, first to a private school,<sup>11</sup> then to a convent, where she finally felt she was in a compatible environment. After earning her teaching diploma at the McGill Normal School, she attended the college attached to the Ottawa Conservatory of Music for two years, living with her brother Crawford, the proprietor of a fashionable department store.<sup>12</sup>

Margaret Ross referred to herself in her memoir as “the most aggressive of the flock,” and she was the only daughter to reach adulthood who did not marry despite her good looks, cultural refinement, and high-society connections. She suggests that she was too proud and independent to be patronized by her wealthy suitor in Ottawa, who, according to family recollections, was the financier and industrialist, Charles (later Sir Charles) Blair Gordon, five years her junior, having

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*Québécois (1867-1878)* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1974), 106; “A Compton Man” to editor, *Quebec Daily Mercury*, 10 July 1871, p. 2; *Le Pionnier de Sherbrooke*, 1 Sept. 1871, p. 2.

8 Ross did continue to enjoy patronage support from the provincial government, being appointed to promote Lowland Scots immigration so that, in his words, they “might, by a better practical example of skill and industry, stimulate the Highlanders to further improvement.” L.S. Channell, *History of Compton County* (Cookshire: L.S. Channell, 1896), 258-60; Hamelin, *Les Premières Années*, 19, 126; Pierre Trépanier, *Siméon LeSage: Un Haut Fonctionnaire Québécois Face aux Défis de Son Temps* (Montréal: Les Éditions Bellarmin, 1979), 133. The quote is from Little, *Crofters and Habitants*, 179.

9 Channell, *History of Compton*, 259.

10 Conversation with Elizabeth's granddaughter, June O'Brien, 7 Oct. 2004.

11 Margaret's memoir states that the school's teaching staff was headed by her older sister, Malvina, and her obituary identifies it as Stanstead College. *Sherbrooke Daily Record*, 9 July 1943, p. 10.

12 Andrew Cunningham to J. Little, 17 Sept. 2003.

been born in 1867.<sup>13</sup> Gordon would become president of the Dominion Textile Company in 1909, vice-chairman of the Imperial Munitions Board of Canada in 1915, director-general of war supplies for Great Britain in 1917-18, and president of the Bank of Montreal in 1927.<sup>14</sup> In mentioning this very eligible suitor, and dismissing him as “a little dense,” Ross was presumably legitimizing her choice not to marry while establishing her character as a “strong” woman.

The path Ross chose instead on the eve of her thirtieth birthday in 1891 was to take a position in the junior department of the Montreal High School for Boys. A distinctly Scottish institution that maintained close ties with McGill University,<sup>15</sup> this school was then going through a troubled transition. The long-serving headmaster, seventy-six-year-old Aspinall Howe, opposed the decision by the Montreal Protestant School Board to respond to parental and student pressure by excluding Latin from the first two forms (equivalent to grades six and seven) and restricting Greek, Algebra, and Geometry to the final two forms. The board was supported by the assistant headmaster, F.W. Kelley, but the staff was bitterly divided, one teacher was dismissed, and disgruntled students finally burned the school to the ground in November 1890. Howe was succeeded in 1891 by the Reverend Elson I. Rexford, whom Ross refers to as “one of Canada's finest men and greatest educators.” Rexford had been assistant headmaster of the school from 1879 to 1882, when he had resigned to become the English-language secretary of the provincial Department of Public Instruction.<sup>16</sup>

Margaret Ross, then, was beginning her teaching career under a new regime in a new building that for the first time combined the junior department and the High School itself under the same roof. To restore the tarnished reputation of the school, which had traditionally served the city's elite, Rexford's first report stated that special attention was to be placed on “character building” and physical development. The new building had “airy classrooms,” “spacious corridors,” and a well-equipped gymnasium, and teachers were to “strive to avoid over-pressure of work in school and at home.” But Rexford was not interested simply in promoting muscular Christianity, for he stressed that students were to be taught how to think. Outside speakers were invited and teachers were encouraged to give extra-curricular illustrated lectures and

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13 Conversation with June O'Brien, 7 Oct. 2004, drawing on stories passed on to her from her father, Gordon Odell.

14 W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *The Macmillan Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978), 303.

15 Roderick MacLeod, “‘In the Hallowed Name of Religion’: Scots and Public Education in Montreal, 1846-1902,” unpublished essay.

16 The title of headmaster was replaced by the revived title of rector at this time. E.I. Rexford, I. Gammell, and A.R. McBain, *The History of the High School of Montreal* (n.p., n.d.), 61, 69, 72-96.

demonstrations.<sup>17</sup> Ross's memoir also makes it clear that classroom methods conformed to the latest educational theories. Despite initial opposition from the staff, they met with considerable success.

The only comment about Margaret Ross in the school's official history is that she was “a lady of scholarly tastes.” She became First Lady Assistant in charge of the junior school in 1893. When Rexford resigned in 1903 to become principal of the Montreal Diocesan Theological College, he was succeeded by Dr. Wellington Dixon, who had been Assistant Master for twenty-one years. Ross claims that he was “unable to measure up to the job,” and the official High School history suggests that this was true (though Dixon remained Rector for nineteen years) by noting his unswerving devotion to duty and contempt for cant or pretence, but little else.<sup>18</sup> Ross may have identified with Rexford at more than a professional level: her journal states that she did not marry because she found no one to meet the standards of her father, her brother Crawford, or Rexford, though she also refers to the lack of money for a trousseau.

Ross's ambitions led her to take French courses at McGill, and in 1908, now in her mid-forties, she transferred to the Commercial and Technical High School to work as a French specialist.<sup>19</sup> Judging from the article she published in McGill's *University Magazine* in February 1911, she also fitted in a summer language course in France. Her somewhat overly descriptive account of a group excursion to a monastery known as “la grande Chartreuse” in the vicinity of Grenoble<sup>20</sup> reflected Ross's ambition to become a writer despite her increasingly successful career as a teacher. In 1911 she began to train French language teachers during McGill's summer session. Another sign of professional advancement was her appointment to the committee to examine and recommend French text books to the Council of Public Instruction. But Ross soon objected to the fact that the books selected were written by the committee chairman, and her resignation from the committee appears to have precipitated her rather bold decision to accept a job offer from the far-off west coast in 1912.

Leading Vancouver businessmen, principally of Scots Presbyterian background with their roots in eastern Canada, were organizing a girls' private school to compete with institutions whence they came and also with Vancouver's English-oriented Crofton House run by the indomitable

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17 Rexford et al., *History of the High School*, 98-105.

18 *Ibid.*, 104, 128, 130-31, 180-81.

19 *Ibid.*, 104.

20 For example, “Behind us Saint-Eymard rose perpendicularly three thousand feet; its grim fortress silhouetted against the yellowing sky seemed the very embodiment of the martial spirit of Grenoble, whose frontier regiments, officered by men of spare form and concentrated gaze, lack in the spectacular as much as they convey an impression of deadly effectiveness.” M. Ross, “An Excursion to la Grande Chartreuse,” *University Magazine* (Feb. 1911): 85.

Jessie Gordon.<sup>21</sup> Ross had precisely the kind of credentials needed to give comparable status to Braemar. She accepted an invitation to become its founding principal, a move she later regretted as a retreat to an isolated backwater. The indications are, however, that Ross threw herself wholeheartedly into making a success of what was billed as “the Girls’ School par excellence of all Canada.”<sup>22</sup>

Operated by a limited company called Western Residential Schools, Braemar and its counterpart for boys, Langara, opened with every advantage. The cheeky young city of Vancouver was on a financial roll, its population quadrupling to 100,000 during the first decade of the new century, of whom a good quarter were Presbyterian. The two schools were located next to the new upper-class residential suburb of Shaughnessy Heights. Braemar boasted on its opening in October 1912 “large grounds, magnificent buildings, with every modern appliance for health and comfort.”<sup>23</sup> By its second year forty-eight boarders and eighty-one girls were enrolled, Ross being commended for Braemar’s “fine record for thorough scholarship” and “an atmosphere of culture and high ideals among its students.”<sup>24</sup>

Braemar became the school of choice among both leading Vancouver families and new arrivals. Among the latter was Dorothy Somerset, who when enrolled there at age fifteen in 1915 had already attended girls’ boarding schools in London and Lausanne. Somerset recalled Braemar, which she pronounced Brae-M-A-A-R with a distinct touch of class, as “a marvelous school” where she met “lots of people” of the right kind.<sup>25</sup> Even though Ross professed herself in her memoir to be “desperately unhappy” having charge only of girls, they remembered her as “an educator of modern views and a unique and forceful personality.”<sup>26</sup>

Margaret Ross’s interest in the latest developments in education, or perhaps it was restlessness, led her to travel to England at the end of term in the spring of 1915. She described how, in London, “I was privileged to visit three of the best secondary schools, which close late in July” in order to observe “the new experiment of English phonetics.”<sup>27</sup> She was fortunate to survive the return journey when her ship was torpedoed by

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21 See Jean Barman, “Vancouver’s Forgotten Entrepreneurs: Women Who Ran Their Own Schools,” *British Columbia Historical News* 31, 4 (Fall 1998): 21-29. The impetus to Braemar is described more fully in Jean Barman, *Growing Up British in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1984), 28-31.

22 Advertisements, *Westminster Hall Magazine* 4, 6 (Jan. 1914): 33; 5, 3 (April 1914): 35.

23 Advertisement, *News-Advertiser*, 13 Sept. 1912; *Westminster Hall Magazine* 2, 1 (July 1912): preceding title page.

24 Annual report, 1914, Western Residential Schools, filed with Registrar of Companies, Victoria.

25 Dorothy Somerset, taped interview with Laurenda Daniels, 27 Feb. 1988, UBC Special Collections.

26 “Margaret Ross Dies in Quebec,” *Province*, 23 June 1943.

27 Margaret Ross, “The New Conception of Education,” *The British Columbia Monthly [BCM]* 14, 4 (Jan. 1919): 20.

the Germans and she had to be assisted into a lifeboat. Though the experience left her with a permanent limp, Ross's memoir rather curiously fails to mention it.<sup>28</sup>

Early the next year Ross resigned the headship of Braemar in order to learn more about the New Education, more commonly known as progressive education. The movement was distinguished by its focus on the needs of the child and on active learning as opposed to the traditional emphasis on rote learning and memorization. She headed to New York to study at Columbia University's Teachers College where she chose three courses that gave her continuous observation privileges of New York schools.<sup>29</sup> John Dewey, the leading proponent of progressive education, taught at Teachers College, and she may have taken classes with him, or at least encountered him, there.

In the interim Western Residential Schools was floundering. The project of two large private schools became too ambitious once the young city was hit by recession in late 1912 and then by the First World War. The limited company projected 100 each of boarders and day girls in order for Braemar to turn a modest profit for its shareholders, whereas it enrolled about 130 at its height. Langara lagged even further behind its target of 300 students. “The most rigid economy in all departments” could not prevent debts from piling up.<sup>30</sup> The schools' property had to be mortgaged and was in 1916 leased to the Dominion government for a military convalescent hospital.

Having temporarily satisfied her restlessness, Ross was enticed back to Vancouver at the end of the summer of 1916. She retook charge of Braemar in what were now rented facilities on West Broadway a few blocks north of Shaughnessy Heights. Instead of living in an institutional environment as in the past, Ross now began to live on her own.<sup>31</sup> Two years later, in early 1918, Western Residential Schools was liquidated, and for the next three years Ross ran Braemar as a private venture.

Margaret Ross now had an opportunity to put in place even more fully her ideas on schooling. In a five-part article entitled “The New Conception of Education” published in *British Columbia Magazine* over the winter of 1918-19, she explained her philosophy of education. First she made the case against “formal discipline,” the longstanding view that traditional subjects such as Latin were critical “for developing certain faculties that put the mind in fighting trim to meet all situations in life in which these faculties are needed.” Supporters of “the new education,”

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28 According to family lore, the ship was the *Aquitania*. Ross's obituary dates the experience as 1917, but there is no evidence that she went to London that year. Conversation with June O'Brien, 7 Oct. 2004; *Sherbrooke Daily Record*, 8 July 1943, p. 10.

29 Ross, “The New Conception of Education,” *BCM* 14, 4 (Jan. 1919): 20.

30 Annual Report, 1914, Western Residential Schools, filed with Registrar of Companies, Victoria; for more detail, see Jean Barman, *Growing Up British in British Columbia: Boys in Private School* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1984), 28-31.

31 Vancouver City Directories, 1915-25, in City of Vancouver Archives.

such as she considered herself, encouraged self-reliance. Subjects were to be studied for their own sake, out of interest, rather than for their capacity “to discipline the mind for some other subject or for situations in life.”<sup>32</sup> Acknowledging “much is yet at the try-out stage,” Ross commended the schools she had visited in London and New York for “a mental alertness, a spirit of self-reliance, of co-operation, of sympathy; an atmosphere of busyness, happiness and confidence I have nowhere seen equaled.”<sup>33</sup> She emphasized how “the new education regards native capacities and instincts as the capital with which education works.”<sup>34</sup> In her view and also that of John Dewey who she cited, “initiative, selective judgment, self-direction, come through opportunity to practice—to learn as do all humans by trial and error.”<sup>35</sup> Among the practical changes Ross proposed were classrooms arranged so that “children can work together in groups,”<sup>36</sup> and physical education classes emphasizing “dancing and rhythmic movements to good music.”<sup>37</sup>

Braemar clearly thrived as a site of the New Education. Much more so than in the British Columbia public school system, where these ideas were only beginning to attract attention, Ross was able to put her progressive views into practice. No records survive from the school, but glimpses give a sense of what was happening. One newspaper photo shows a dozen girls modern dancing in swirling white dresses, another photo half a dozen girls dancing with tambourines in gypsy costumes.<sup>38</sup> And these were not just any young girls. The program for “la soirée dramatique et musicale des élèves des classes françaises” held in May 1921 listed among its fifty participants many daughters of leading Vancouver families.<sup>39</sup> According to Ross in her memoir, she ran Braemar at a profit. Her ideas found a ready clientele among parents also looking for a change.

Nonetheless, Ross closed Braemar in the spring of 1921. In her memoir she gave as the reason the death of her beloved older brother Crawford. As well, she may have found, at age fifty-nine, running her own school was becoming too demanding. Whatever the factors were, she was able to do so because a new opportunity presented itself. Her French language credentials were sufficient for her to be recruited by the fledging University of British Columbia as an Instructor in the Department of Modern Languages. Opening its doors in 1908, UBC's enrolment had doubled to a thousand in the aftermath of war. There was a desperate need for both staff and short-term accommodations until its

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32 Ross, “The New Conception of Education,” *BCM* 13, 5 (Aug. 1918): 17-18.

33 *Ibid.*, 14, 4 (Jan. 1919): 10.

34 *Ibid.*, 14, 1 (Oct. 1918): 28.

35 *Ibid.*, 14, 2 (Nov. 1918): 16.

36 *Ibid.*, 13, 5 (Aug. 1918): 17-18.

37 *Ibid.*, 14, 2 (Nov. 1918): 17.

38 Stuart Thompson photos, 1917, City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 99-357.

39 “Braemar: Département de Langues Modernes,” City of Vancouver Archives, PAM 1920-20.



promised Point Grey campus was constructed. Temporarily housed at the site of today’s Vancouver General Hospital, UBC was located virtually next door to Braemar, whose facilities it rented just a month after Ross’s Board of Governors appointment was confirmed at an annual salary of \$1,800. A year later, in 1922, her salary was raised to \$2,000, where it stuck during her four years there.

Perhaps because of her new locale, Ross’s literary ambitions were rekindled. In the summer of 1923 she enrolled in an intersession course on the short story at the University of California. The purpose, her memoir explained, was “largely to get a better narrative style into my article writing.” Ross may have been encouraged to study writing by the publication of her article on “Lewis Settlers of the Eastern Townships” in Toronto’s long-established *Canadian Magazine*, where it appeared in June 1923. She states in her memoir that four sketches of life in her native community that she produced for the University of California course were published by a Montreal journal, but they have not been located. A family member recalls an article on French Canadian women in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Quebec appearing in a Vancouver newspaper, but it too has not been found.<sup>40</sup>

Ross’s six-page *Canadian Magazine* article hearkened back to her childhood. She began by noting that, in contrast to the Highland communities of the Ottawa Valley, the lower St. Lawrence, and the Maritime provinces, the Scots settlers of the Eastern Townships had been almost entirely ignored by historians: “Yet these are probably the most essentially Gaelic of the Highland groups in Canada; to a greater extent they are a repository of Gaelic lore; more nearly than that of any other group their speech approaches the ancient Goidelic.”

While her memoir claims that her family knew Highlanders too well to have much interest in Sir Walter Scott’s stories, Ross also resorted to romantic cultural stereotypes. Explaining why these refugees from the Highland potato famine settled in the remote and mountainous upper St. Francis district, which had been shunned by the American-descended farmers to the south-west, she wrote: “Only a land of vast, mysterious forest, of unexplored lake and stream could have offered the fitting background of a people cradled in mysticism.” Forgetting the French Canadians who arrived at the same time, Ross added that “only a land of granite could have produced the type of pioneer needed in this region at this time.” Presumably instructed to take advantage of the public appetite for an invented Highland tradition,<sup>41</sup> Ross strove for colourful prose rather than detailed journalistic accounts of everyday life. All the same, her descriptions of local folklore are compelling:

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40 Conversation with June O’Brien, 7 Oct. 2004.

41 See Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (New York: University of Cambridge Press, 1983).

Very soon hill, lake and stream were clothed in legend that, rooting itself in the Gaelic fibre of the rising generation, became a kind of local history which schools never quite dislodged. Up to this Gaelic penetration it is doubtful if the white man had ever disturbed these solitudes, yet the Woman in Red who appeared at the Big Bridge, the vanished mansion on MacKenzie's Hill, the Wailing Men of the Long Wood, the Children of the Cross-Roads, all had their histories dating far back in the past of this new land. The loneliness, the sense of exile of the pioneers were expressed in minor Gaelic recitative-elegaic poetry of which they could give no account, which might have proved a mine of wealth to seekers for the lost Gaelic cycles. There were among them poets who wove legend and romance into the gray warp of their daily life. These poets used the four-line stanza and the metre of ancient Gaelic; they sang instinctively and only for their kin, therefore much, if not all, of their poetry is lost.<sup>42</sup>

Ross provided some brief insights into local religious life, noting that the kirk elders shunned discussion of contemporary literature, "but in matters of life, death, and immortality, they were critics to be reckoned with. The minister, whose duty it was to 'open the question' and to judge the soundness of their exposition in 'speaking to the question' on Latha na Ceist (Question Day) of the annual Sacrament Week, had to be armed at every point to meet the thrusts of these able dialecticians." Ross illustrated the degree to which an entire extended community had been transplanted across the Atlantic: "The most distant connection by blood or marriage was honored. Angus McDonald (Angus Murdo) and Angus McDonald (Bhan) traced their cousinship through a forest of relatives, near, distant, step, and in-law; and, as criticism was the exclusive prerogative of kinship, comment on the part of an outsider was unsafe, very unsafe in the presence of younger men."<sup>43</sup>

Ross noted how young men and women sent wages home from the United States so that "large and comfortable frame houses soon replaced the log cottages of the first settlers; farms were well stocked, and were tended with the best implements." In an interesting gender analysis, she added that the "fighting spirit and Highland pride" that "expressed themselves in the executive ability and dignity of the girls" meant that they quickly attained positions of trust among their New England

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42 Margaret Ross, "Lewis Settlers of the Eastern Townships," Toronto's *Canadian Magazine*, June 1923, 173. On the community's superstitions, see Margaret Bennett-Knight, "Folkways and Religion of the Quebec Hebridean Homes," in *Cultural Retention and Demographic Change: Studies of the Hebridean Scots in the Eastern Townships of Quebec*, ed. Laurel Doucette (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1980), 91-126. On the local bardic tradition, see T.A. McKay, ed., *Oscar and Finlay: Bards of Scottish Lingwick* (Arlington, VA: self-published, 2000); and J.I. Little, "The Bard in a Community in Transition and Decline: Oscar Dhu and the Hebridean Scots of the Upper St. Francis District, Quebec," in *Canadian Papers in Rural History* 10 (1996): 45-79.

43 Ross, "Lewis Settlers," 173-74.

employers. But these were “the worst possible qualifications for life in the Western states” which attracted many of the young men, including – she might have added – two of her brothers. As a result, most of them did not rise above the living standards of their fathers, and some “fell victims of their fiery temperament in a land of peremptory codes, and were shot in disputes”<sup>44</sup> This observation provided a segue into a brief summary of the obligatory and tragic tale of the one man who did draw the attention of the outside world to Ross's childhood community, Donald Morrison, better known as the Megantic Outlaw.<sup>45</sup>

Having gotten herself published, Margaret Ross was determined to persevere in her quest for recognition as an author. In the summer of 1924 she returned to Columbia University, but this time studied in “the writing department.” Her literary ambitions may have precipitated her departure from UBC the next year. On contracting acute laryngitis in January 1925, she took an unpaid leave and returned to Columbia, but, now in her early sixties, found it too stressful. In August 1925 Ross resigned from UBC and returned East.<sup>46</sup> Restless to the end, Margaret Ross lived her last eighteen years in Montreal, Toronto, and, finally, the Eastern Townships villages of Scotstown and Cookshire where she could rely to some extent on her extended kin network even though she appears not to have lived with any of its members. But she did not forsake her Braemar proteges, remembering them as late as 1941 with a letter to be read at a gathering of former students.<sup>47</sup> After a brief illness, she died in the Sherbrooke Hospital at the age of eighty-one in June 1943.<sup>48</sup>

Margaret Ross's “Autobiography,” apparently written as an exercise for a writing class while she was at Columbia in 1925, is reproduced here essentially as it was first written, except that some of the brief hand-written additions have been included for the sake of clarity. There is little reason to doubt its overall veracity, though there are some relatively minor discrepancies between what Ross wrote about her family and what is recorded in the family genealogy and a local history. Most surprisingly, she recalls that she was the thirteenth and last child even though she was the twelfth, followed by a sister who died at the age of two and a half (see appendix). The most plausible explanation seems to be that she was indulging in artistic license, suggesting that even though she was born into a large and nurturing middle-class family, she was

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44 Ibid., 175. On this theme, see Little, *Crofters and Habitants*, chaps. 4 and 5.

45 See J.I. Little, “Popular Resistance to Legal Authority in the Upper St. Francis District of Quebec: The Megantic Outlaw Affair of 1888-89,” *Labour / Le Travail* 33 (Spring 1994): 97-124. Family legend has it that Ross wrote an article on the Morrison affair, only to be scooped by *Maclean's Magazine*, which she then sued. Conversation with June O'Brien, 7 Oct. 2004.

46 Margaret Ross's one-time student at Braemar, Dorothy Somerset replaced her as French instructor at UBC. Somerset would make her career in theatre at UBC.

47 “An informal gathering,” *Province*, 20 Mar. 1941.

48 “Margaret Ross Dies in Quebec,” *Province*, 23 June 1943; *Sherbrooke Daily Record*, 8 July 1943, p. 10.

consciously presenting herself as an outsider, surely an ideal perspective from which to be a writer.

While Ross's memoir makes no direct mention of the handicaps she faced as a female teacher and entrepreneur, or any reference to being a feminist, she concludes by expressing frustration with her inability to earn a living as a free-lance journalist. Her instructor was not encouraging, noting at the end of the memoir that the writing was "solid & vigorous but showing no particular aptitude for narrative." The comments continued: "You don't bring out the color of your experience very much. The method is expository rather than narrative. Narrative has to do with sensations & emotions primarily. But this you may learn. For narrative purposes some of the facts you give could be subordinated or omitted." One can only wonder if this rather harsh critique precipitated Ross's decision to quit Columbia and return to her native province.

From a historical perspective, it is fortunate that Ross included as many facts as she did. Despite the instructor's criticism that there is not enough soul-searching in the essay, it does reflect a considerable amount of psychological insight and emotional honesty, especially given the social status and age of the author. While Ross begins with the deterministic depiction of herself as the product of a distinct "race," she also emphasizes the role of her family and social environment in shaping her personality and outlook on life. She was exposed to a good deal of music and literature while growing up, and her close-knit family also engaged in frequent political and religious discussions. Family tradition reinforces the impression that Margaret Ross was a proud and uncompromising woman. While she was certainly more romantic than religious, she disapproved strongly of the frivolity of her brief life as a debutante among the social elite of Ottawa. Judging from her memoir, and her subsequent life, it would appear that the peripatetic Ross formed few close personal bonds after she moved from home. Certainly, her solitary living arrangements marked a distinct shift from the nineteenth century norm.<sup>49</sup> Despite being born in a small tradition-bound village prior to Confederation, Margaret Ross was, in many respects, a modern woman, associated with the educational vanguard as well as drawn to the recognition and independence promised by the career of free-lance writer. Whatever her literary and journalistic talents may have been, Ross was impeded by the need for a reliable income until she was quite advanced in years and failing in health. As a result, her last years seem to have been somewhat bitter ones, but, eighty years after it was written, Ross's brief, previously unpublished memoir now provides a window onto the life of a previously forgotten woman who challenged the restrictive gender norms of her era.

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49 See, for example, Michelle Stairs, "Matthews and Marillas: Bachelors and Spinsters in Prince Edward Island in 1881," in *Mapping the Margins: The Family and Social Discipline in Canada, 1700-1975*, ed. Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 247-67.

### **Autobiography of Margaret Ross**

My childhood and adolescence were passed in an environment controlled by my strongly individual sisters, more interested in abstractions than in human behavior; my early teaching years were spent in surroundings dominated by a man gifted with unusual insight into the mainsprings of conduct. The inherited traits I brought into the world were more distinctly tribal than universal, and, I believe, much less modifiable. They sprouted slowly; they went their own ways until early adult life when they were forced to some degree of amendment. Then they sat; and from that period I can see in myself little profit from experience.

If I am to emerge as a developing individual in this narrative, I must give much of it to my family and their background, and to the scene and determining influences of my first working years.

My father, of undiluted Highland blood, was born and educated in Ross and Cromarty. In his early twenties he left Scotland for the new world, going first to South America where he spent some time, then up to Quebec where he met and married my mother.

She belonged to the third Canadian-born generation of an Irish family; she was seventeen, beautiful, and just out of the Ursuline Convent where, although protestant, she had been educated.

After a period of work in the old capital, my father decided to try his fortune in the new townships of south-east Quebec where many of his Celtic-speaking countrymen from the Outer Islands had settled. He went with his young wife into the hill country near the Maine-Quebec watershed and made the first clearing in the district that afterwards became the postal, church, and trading centre of the Lewis settlements.

The Eastern Townships of Quebec have an interesting history. To encourage settlement in the fertile, wooded country lying between the American border and the seigniories of the St. Lawrence plain, the government offered generous grants of land in freehold tenure, built roads, and delimited townships. Settlers poured in, and soon the eleven counties given over to homesteaders took the name of “Eastern Townships” to distinguish them from those counties settled under feudal tenure. Many of the pioneers came from Vermont and New Hampshire. In our school histories they are called, without the least historical justification, United Empire Loyalists; they were in fact New England farmers – a fine type. Many had gone into the lower levels of Compton County (ours); by the time the Scottish pioneers, and the French-Canadian homesteaders from the seigniories had hewn out homes in the forests of the upper levels, the sons and grandsons of Vermonters had made their end of the county blossom like a rose.

My parents must have faced trials in these early years, but they passed on no tales of hardship. They were young, vigorous, and devoted to each other; the land, once cleared, was highly productive; the many

swift streams made logging comparatively easy. My father manufactured pearl ash; he farmed, logged, and raised stock.

The three racial elements in the county recognized his forcefulness, his breadth, and integrity, and they sent him to the Quebec Legislature to represent them. The House honored him for his devotion to his adopted country, for his character, and for his attainments; – he was an able debater, a student and lover of literature, and he was equally fluent in English, French, Gaelic, and Spanish.

But he was not a politician. He expressed himself vigorously when silence would have been politically golden; he acted on his own convictions rather than on orders from the party machine directed from Ottawa. He finally gave up his seat for a position as Dominion immigration agent in the north of Scotland, believing that in this direction he could best serve the land of his birth and the land of his adoption.

He had the satisfaction of seeing quick results from his efforts, and he had the happiness of a yearly visit with his people in Invergordon. He was accompanied on his second trip by my mother and my eldest sister, the latter, after a month with her Scottish relatives, going on with friends to the continent. But his work grew heavier and necessitated longer absences from his home. He began to show strain. On his return from a particularly exhausting trip, he contracted pneumonia and died.

I was a child at the time of his death. When I came, thirteenth and last, into the family, I was not a particularly welcome little stranger. Perhaps it was to make up for the lack of cordiality on the part of my sisters that my father made me his special care, not that I gave much trouble to any one, for, despite medical theories about the mentality, disposition, and resistance of late comers into large families, I appear to have been quite normal in my response to the usual tests of baby intelligence, and quite contented with my new world. Infantile maladies were to my sturdy physical make-up as is water to a duck's back.

It is not easy now to recall and describe my feeling for my father. I trotted at his heels when he was at home; when he was away, I moped. I made little outcry when he died, but I was transported to some drab, unreal region into which not even the pitying love of the grown-ups penetrated. I often in later years thought that my mother's spirit took the same journey into desolation, and stayed much longer.

Naturally pliant, she had in her a thread of steel that helped her to calm courage in hardship and sorrow. It was this thread that held her to protestantism in the convent where everything appealed to her innate mysticism; it accounted for her bravery in facing life in the wilderness; and, later, the grief that came through the death of two children, the disastrous marriage of her eldest daughter, the decision of her eldest born to seek his fortune in Montana, and the disposition of her youngest boy, the black – or perhaps better the dark gray sheep of the family.

If my father had lived a few years longer, the most aggressive of his flock would have learned moderation, and the study and guidance given to the first comers would have reached those of us at the tail end. But

when the sense of loss had lessened, and the personality that persisted in the home after his death had finally grown dim and faded out, the domestic atmosphere changed.

The sister next in age to me – the two between us died – was in her middle teens, a clever girl with a quick keen mind and a razor-edged tongue. She was sent to Montreal to be trained for teaching, and returned with a brilliant record. She played the piano well – the two older girls had received and passed on an excellent training in music – she read the most difficult compositions easily at sight. In quick thinking and apt expression, she was the equal of the seniors, without their measure of acquired restraint. Fighting was the breath of her nostrils; but a fight once over was forgotten.

Discussion of literature or music could grow heated, but not acid; it was when a clash of opinion came in politics and religion, that the atmosphere was changed. We were brought up Presbyterians. Two of the family began to coquet with ritualism; on the first serious protest they jumped so far into the Anglican camp that they landed with the extremists. The others tightened up their Calvinism. On Sunday mornings the spirit in the house was reminiscent of Smithfield; in the evening all difference were sunk in the struggle with oratorio.

The Lewis Highlanders had never forgiven the Conservative party leaders for their treatment of my father. The intractable attitude of these farmer-voters caused concern; they might come to hold a strategic position in the county. The men in the seats of the Conservative might cast benevolent eyes on the two of my father's sons who were carrying on in his place; they loaded them with meaningless county honors. Those boys – they were little more – speaking French and Gaelic as their mother tongue, were popular alike with habitant and Lewisman. Greatly flattered, they set out to bring the recalcitrant Scots back into the fold. The domestic fat went into the fire. No blandishments could soften the women of the family: like the Lewismen, they remembered. They proceeded to make things very uncomfortable for the two who had turned the other cheek, turned it in vain as events came to pass. The fear of the bosses was realized: the Scots gained a strategic position, used it well, and the county went Liberal. Today it is an impregnable Liberal stronghold in solidly Liberal Quebec.

It was in this atmosphere that I grew out of childhood, and, with adolescence, into habits that rooted themselves and largely determined my future.

I enjoyed listening to discussion and verbal battles even when they went completely over my head. On the first crack in our religious and political unity, I became a ferocious little Presbyterian and Liberal. I had learned the Shorter Catechism as an act of faith; I could repeat sections of the major prophets without any comprehension, but with a sense of their splendid rhythm. I knew that organs in churches, set forms of prayer, singing “amen” at the end of hymns, kneeling instead of standing during prayer, were all wrong: the church of my father knew not such

doings. In the political rift one thing only emerged for me: the Conservatives had sinned against my father. Janet Geddes and Oliver Cromwell became my exemplars; in spirit I flung stools and cut off heads.

Where books were concerned, my sisters were gregarious: everything of interest was read aloud, and discussed in intervals of rest and change of reader. I began to enjoy this informal analysis and criticism and to sit patiently through chapters that had no interest for me in order to head what was to be said about them.

As far as I can remember, my first reading as a private venture was "Little Women"; this followed by Harrison Ainsworth's sanguinary historical love tales, and the somewhat heavy fiction of "Chambers Journal". I can recall no interest in fairy tales, I lived in a community where every hill and stream had its legend – vague, mysterious, tenuous tales that made Little Red Riding Hood and her literary company obvious. Fairy tales have their season and pass; but the myths and legends brought to the Canadian wilderness from the misty isles of Skye, Uist, and Lewis, once in the blood, are indestructible. They followed in the wake of my studies in adolescence, confounding reality at every turn. A few years ago I tried to give literary expression to this indestructibility of a childish conception in a sketch, "The Other Side of Mackenzie's Hill," published in a Montreal journal, but I fear that I succeeded only in puzzling my readers.

"Our Mutual Friend" was the first tale of the group readings to interest me for itself; I gave up Ainsworth for Dickens. Then I was tremendously moved by "A Princess of Thule", and my devotion turned to Black. Middlemarch inspired me to try George Eliot, but I found her heavy going. In listening day after day in the hope that some one as interesting as Black might come along, I got doses of Hawthorne, Thackeray, Carlyle, Emerson, and Macaulay. We had very little Scott; I believe that we knew highlanders too well to like Sir Walter's brand. When poetry was read, I walked off: I liked words to march straight to a meaning – metre and rhyme made them as the crackling of thorns under a pot.

I began to want more light on things, to ask questions; but my mind moved slowly and demanded time to get thought into words. Slow thinking and deliberate speech were, in that company, fatal: no one paid any attention to me. Not much concerned, I let half-fledged opinions float along in the streams of consciousness, shedding scraps, taking on bits from the experience of school-mates who came from homes where discussion was limited to settlement gossip. This was the beginning of fuzzy thinking, of timid, clumsy expression, recognized as habits only when they began to handicap me.

In school high standing was expected of me; I never went above average. I wasn't interested in what was offered. Arithmetical problems involving impossible situations were inventions of Satan, – not half as stimulating as a good game of fox and goose played furtively with my neighbor on a part of my scribbler quickly coverable when teacher came



Margaret Ross and her four sisters, probably Dec. 1885, when Margaret was 23 years old: the date that Malvina received a silver service from her students to commemorate her resignation as principal of the Brantford Young Ladies College. Front, left to right: Margaret, Malvina, Elizabeth. Back: Belinda, Jane. Photograph produced by Park and Co., Photographers, Brantford, Ontario.  
Courtesy of Jean Johnston, North Vancouver, B.C.

around. Of history as then written I held views in line with one later expressed by Henry Ford. English history was a record of wars, usurpations, and beheading, with an oasis of interest at Henry VIII. Canadian history, in the highly edited form fed to us, was dry bones.

I gradually perfected a technique of slipping from under instruction that didn't appeal to me, while keeping a weather eye out for pass standing. When my method was discovered, I was sent to boarding-school.

During my childhood my mother saw that I was well fed, adequately clothed, and kept out of what mischief the settlements offered; the rest she left to my sisters. I believe that, to the day of her death, she never quite got over her astonishment at the brood for which she was responsible; but, as they all loved her, and except the gray sheep, adhered to the fundamentals of an orderly life, she let them go their ways. She understood – I think she shared – my tendency to clothe our enviroing forests with unreality, to people it, to give it beneficent or hostile attitudes; she called the elders<sup>50</sup> sharply to account for giving my flights of imagination a less euphonious name. We were growing close together when the cumulative results of shirking brought me on the carpet. I was entered as a resident student in a school whose teaching staff was headed by my oldest unmarried sister.

My recollection of boarding-school hasn't much vitality. In the first year I gave my sister a good deal of worry. I was now required to take full responsibility for the condition of my wardrobe; but I progressed towards neatness very slowly. Pins were a good substitute for buttons and hooks; apertures in stockings, if well covered, didn't matter so very much. I grew to hate my room-mate, who was in fact rather a self-righteous little prig always damning me with faint praise to my sister. Reformation came with a sharp attack of jealousy. The object was a girl with pink cheeks, black eyes, tight black curls, and beautiful well-kept hands, who was regarded by the school as its beauty, and by the music department as its star. I tortured my hair – my one fine inheritance from my mother – into corkscrew curls, took thought to my grooming, and put belated energy into Czerny, only to find that there was no place in the school's sun for me.

The latter part of my boarding-school life was spent in a convent. This period was, I believe, the most profitable to me. My growing tendency to petty envies, to sudden likes and unreasoning dislikes was checked. We all had to dress in sober black; had to wear hair, curly or otherwise, in a plain braid; had to be considerate of each other; and had to restrain from gush. The superior was a woman of great nobility of character. She was born in France, trained there in art and music, and sent out to Canada. Everything about the convent reflected her. The little

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50 A reference to the kirk session elders who were the moral guardians of the community. See Little, *Crofters and Habitants*, 184, 187, 195, 198.

chapel up under the roof was a place of beauty; there was nowhere about the building a trace of the tinsel that so often mars churches and religious houses in Quebec. She trained a choir of nuns – young novices who put into their rendering of ecclesiastical music a spiritual quality without which it is sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. I was powerfully influenced by my surroundings: I imagine that the ancient catholicism in my blood, an inheritance from highland and Irish ancestors, struggled hard to overcome the post-reformation principles of comparatively late generations. But those principles were my father's – that settled the matter.

A year of my school life was spent in attendance at a high school in the northern end of our county. I lived at the home of an old parliamentary friend of my father's; worked fairly well, and qualified for entrance into the normal school. I can't remember much about that year; it was the least interesting of my adolescence.

During these years away from home all the little literary sprouts of my group reading days withered. I devoured contemporary best sellers which I am unable to recall. I am sure, however, that the strong, silent man of fiction was born about that time. For years his image loomed up behind the youths, neither strong nor silent, who made themselves responsible for my candy supply.

When I was about thirteen, my brother, Jim, who went to Montana before I was born, came home for a visit and spent the summer in the settlements. He was a bachelor with enough money to live on, and some over to help friends; a staunch American, differing from his brothers in speech and manner as much as he resembled them in appearance. Only once did I see the breezy, tolerant westerner show himself a highlander – a highlander who knew men, white and red, and had in his fibre the code of the mining camps. In that short five minutes he taught a lesson greatly needed in the settlements, and saved a life – perhaps two. That is a tale I must write when I know better how to handle such material.

He played the violin as we had never heard it played: music that grew in the west. He taught me how to get the appropriate rhythm in accompanying him on the piano, and soon our repertoire brought us fame in the settlements. The *Arkansas Traveller* and *Old Zip Coon* became classics.

His leaving broke us all up; he had to promise to come back the next year before we could let him off. But he never returned. Montana was developing; it held his heart and his interests. He kept putting off his visit; and then he died. He lies near the foothills he loved.

He was followed back to the west by so many of our young Lewismen that the exodus became a provincial problem. Few of these boys ever returned. Among those who came back was Donald Morrison whose story, the drama of highland blood and cow-boy training in a clash with rascality that kept under cover of the law, made the settlements

famous for a time. In an article on the Hebridean settlements published in "The Canadian Magazine" of June, 1923, I re-told this story briefly.<sup>51</sup>

I was a prime favorite with Jim, who was frankly sceptical about the value of school records as a measure of ability. I can see, in looking back, the efforts of my sisters made at the time to see me from his point of view. A few years later they had another mental jar when my brother Crawford, who lived in Ottawa, decided to take charge of me as the most promising musically and socially of his younger sisters. The eldest sister at home strongly – and wisely, as it turned out – disapproved of his plans for me, and he compromised: I was to go to the normal school in Montreal, take my training, and then go to Ottawa. I went to Montreal, took my diploma, and soon after went into residence in the college attached to the Ottawa Conservatory of Music.

There is no part of my life that I look back on with so little pleasure as the two years spent in our capital, where I was popular and to some extent sought after.

My brother, kind and generous to a fault, was not inclined to look below the surface in people. I was tall and good-looking; I danced well, spoke French, and played in the showy manner of the other Conservatory students. He gave me a generous allowance, he saw that I dressed well and met the right people.

Up to this period I had been forced to consider others at every turn in our crowded household; I had valued my slender possessions; I had been at least honest in my likes and dislikes; although clumsy in expression, I had never tried to bluff. In Ottawa I was considered clever, and cleverness became my pose; I was selfish and extravagant; worst of all, my old failing, quick likes and vigorous dislikes took on the evil complexion of expediency: I liked people who were worth cultivation, I saw that my dislikes were confined to people who didn't count socially. Crawford, whose business and club activities took up much of his time, didn't see enough of me to note the disintegration going on in my character.

What my sister had foreseen happened; he fell in love and married. The girl was one of my associates in the Conservatory – one of my likes.

For a time I lived with them, shutting my eyes to the fact that my young sister-in-law was getting me in wrong with my brother. Their pretty home made a good background for me, and gave me a strategic position with a young millionaire who was somewhat more devoted to me than to several others in my set. This young man was a good sort, a little dense, very wary on account of his millions, and slightly too sure of acceptance.

I was beginning to find my position in my brother's home intolerable; I kept things to myself, but my sense of injustice was mounting. Then

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51 Margaret Ross, "Lewis Settlers," 171-76.

one evening the youth of the millions gently insinuated that I suited him admirably except in a few minor points.

Once upon a time an old Lewiswoman at home had remarked to my mother that “when Peggy iss mad, it iss a bad mad.” This time my “mad” was salutarily bad. I went home to the townships and secured work in a residential school.

The year following I accepted a position under the Montreal board as a grade teacher in a public school, built as an experiment in an exclusive residential district. While the staff was chosen with an eye to neighborhood prejudices, ability to teach was a condition of retention.

Two years later I was chosen for a form in the junior department of the High School for Boys, organized on the Edinburgh model with a preparatory department. There I came under the direction of one of Canada's finest men and greatest educators, the Reverend Elson Rexford, Canadian by birth and training, with a wide knowledge of Canada's needs. He had just accepted the position of Rector of the school, and had made new blood on the staff a condition of acceptance. The school had reached such a state of demoralization that the students had twice set the buildings on fire, burning them to the ground on the second attempt.

The view of Dr. Rexford just expressed was far from being the view I held in the months following my appointment.

Course and method in the Montreal grade schools were inflexibly standardized under the city superintendent, an Oxford man fast losing touch with the mounting Canadianism. When I was sent up to the High, I was complacently settled in a nice little rut. Up to Dr. Rexford's appointment to the new High, its junior department had followed the public school course and used its methods.

Dr. Rexford left the senior department of his new charge to the assistant masters, and concentrated on the junior school. He had no say in grade school organization, but he had full control in the High. He walked warily with the course of study – the city superintendent was at once alertly on the defensive – but class room methods were put through change that dislocated the remnant of the old staff, and fired us of the new blood with indignation.

The High's new Rector had been Secretary to the Council of Public Instruction in Quebec; he had studied the drift of educational thought and had made many effective changes in the provincial schools – entirely separate from the Montreal system. On taking over direction of the Boys' High – the oldest school in the Dominion – he superannuated the ancient library, retrieved from the fire, and gathered for our use the books that embodied the best modern theories of education. He subscribed to educational journals, which we read under protest. He visited the best schools and training colleges in the States, and came back with inspiration and ideas. Soon the junior department became a laboratory where material and methods were tried out, rejected, or incorporated. He was amazingly patient with our sulky attitude; but he made it clear that we had to mend our educational ways.

I began to look speculatively over the young men who seemed disposed to offer me a hand, a heart, and a limited income. But marriage meant a trousseau, I was very poor, and my "mad" was still too actively operating to permit acceptance of a cent from my brother. I would work and save; in the meantime, to keep the peace, I would conform.

I began to see astonishing results from my conformity. For the first time in my life my instinct to do some one thing well and with interest was roused and satisfied. At the end of two years, I was appointed first assistant to the Rector in charge of the junior school.

In these two years, the poor showing of our Sixth Form (matriculation into McGill) brought open comment from School Board and parents. But Dr. Rexford went his way quietly, following the junior classes up into and through the senior forms. When our first junior class under his direction came out of the Sixth, they carried off the first eighteen places in the province. Six years after his appointment, the big new school building had to be enlarged, and the staff greatly increased. The Rector's red hair had gone quite gray.

It was natural that friction should develop between the conservative superintendent and the progressive Rector of the school that received the output of the grade schools. It was when this friction was at its worst that the governors of the heavily endowed and beautiful Diocesan Theological College offered our Rector the principalship, with a generous salary and a charming residence. He accepted; and Canada, running true to form, lost one of her big men from the field where big men are most needed and least in evidence.

Direction of the High – there were other high schools, but somehow they never counted with us – was given to one of the masters, an excellent class teacher and a good fellow, but unable to measure up to the job. Any institution staffed and organized as was the High at that time could run itself for a period; when the new head began to use his own judgment, we all felt the weakness. I applied for and received a transfer to the technical High School as specialist teacher of French. I was well qualified through my command of the spoken language and through three years honor work taken at McGill while I was form teacher in the High.

I liked my work in the Technical High, but not the school. However, I was getting a good salary, as salaries went, and was able to have three summers abroad. In 1911 I was put in charge of the first training school for teachers of French established by the Council of Public Instruction of the province in connection with the McGill summer session.

At that time I was on a committee appointed to examine and recommend French text books to the Council. The chairman of the committee was financially interested in the matter under discussion – he wrote the books used in Montreal schools – and couldn't be dislodged. I resigned, giving the Council my reasons. It would take time and space to explain why the Council members were more or less helpless in the affair.

The events of the year following justified a presumption that the chairmen of our committee was only one of a powerful Montreal group. I was involved in a series of petty, irritating, elusive incidents that promised continuance. A few days after an intimation that angered me, I received a telegram offering me the principalship of the girls' school operated by Wesrtern Residential Schools, Limited of Vancouver, and I accepted.

This was the gravest in a series of mistakes that began with my transfer to the Technical High – all due to the same defect in my character. I should have remained in the High, where my ambition to teach French in the senior school would eventually have been realized. I should have remained on the committee and forced the fight into the open. I should have ignored pin pricks and held my position as senior specialist in the interests of a purpose close to my heart – Canadian education for Canadian youth. In going to Vancouver I cut myself off from friends and relatives, jeopardized my pension – at the best cut it in two, and entered a field of work for which I had neither liking nor aptitude.

Before I leave Montreal, I must pick up a few threads that couldn't be carried along with my teaching experience.

At the time I began work in that city, salaries were low, and the cost of living high. I learned to make my own clothes, to do without things, and to keep my poverty to myself. My sisters married; my mother died; the home was sold. Crawford was kind, interested in my progress, and, I think, proud of my independent attitude. For his sake I went several times to Ottawa during my holidays; but I found my sister-in-law unchanged, and I ceased to accept her grudging invitations. I met the young plutocrat of former days, but my emphasis on values had switched. In Montreal I received enough attention to keep my vanity from suffering, but no one in the crown measured up to my ideal – a composite of my father, Dr. Rexford, and Crawford.

In my grade school teaching days, I wrote a story and sent it to the St. Johns “News.” It was published, and I was greatly puffed up. Deflation came with the family's criticism, and I gave up fiction. The Canadian Magazine and The University Magazine<sup>52</sup> accepted and paid for articles that won family approval and encouragement. When I took up work at McGill, all other study except that needed in connection with class work had to be dropped.

I brought to my work in Vancouver social qualifications, teaching and organizing ability, and knowledge of residential school life. I brought as well a training and temperament that fitted me but ill to deal with my own sex. I had taught boys chiefly; I had worked in association with men, and with women who had taken much from men's codes. In

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52. While the author's first name is not identified, the latter reference is clearly to M. Ross, “An Excursion to la Grande Chartreuse,” *University Magazine*, Feb. 1911, 84-90.

spite of handicaps I got along with my staff and won the confidence of the public. But I was desperately unhappy.

The policy of the directors of the Western Residential Schools was to make the two institutions under their control sink or swim together. The boys' school, barely staffed, lost money; we made up the deficit. When I could secure no amendment of a situation that after four years began to impair our efficiency, I resigned and went to New York to study at Teachers College. The directors gave out to the public that I was away on leave, and put the head teacher in charge.

While I was in New York (1916-17), the government took over the school buildings for four years as military hospitals, and both schools had to go into temporary quarters. The president of the board came east and urged me to return. I went back in June. In leaving Teachers College and New York at that time I made the gravest mistake of my life; for once a mistake made after considered judgment and uninfluenced by temperament.

In going back I exacted a promise that we would have our earnings for our own requirements. After five months, during which we reached a waiting list and the boys' school piled up its heaviest deficit, I learned our legal position: our earnings were company assets, and as such made good the deficit.

Western Residential Schools went into voluntary liquidation, and I took over the girls' school as my business, operating at a profit until, on the news of Crawford's sudden death, my nerve broke. I sold out and accepted a position as instructor in French in the university where I remained until February, 1925. I went away on leave after a succession of acute laryngeal attacks, and resigned at the end of the session.

In 1923 I went down to the University of California for the intersession. I took a course in the short story, largely to get a better narrative style into my article writing. Four sketches of life and people in the Lewis settlements, written as exercises, were later published by a Montreal journal. In 1924 I went to New York by Panama, and remained for the summer session at Columbia. I went back on receiving leave in 1925 and resumed work in the writing department; but my rheumatic throat made stay in New York impossible.

My interest centres in our constitutional development, and in the drifts and currents in our national life. I am qualified by research, by observation and experience to write on these questions; but there is practically no market for such writing. The few Canadian journals giving it space require opinion and fact of one color; the serious American magazine look first at names.

My brief study in California revived my interest in story telling, and at the same time showed me the need of direction.



## Appendix

### Offspring of James Ross and Maria Ann Brown

1. Jane Christian - b. 20 Feb. 1841, m. 1 June 1864 (George Pennoyer, remarried to Alex Mackay), d. 1926
2. Hugh - b. March 1843, d. 10 April 1843
3. James - b. 28 Feb. 1844, d. after 1896 (Montana)
4. Malvina - b. 29 June 1847, m. 1886 (John MacLeod), d. 24 Nov. 1923
5. Belinda - b. 16 Sept. 1848, m. (date unknown, Donald Martin Macrae), d. 4 Sept. 1913
6. Alexander - b. 1 Aug. 1850, m. 9 Jan. 1878 (Maria J. Guy), d. 8 Sept. 1918
7. Charles W. - b. 26 Aug. 1852, d. after 1919
8. Crawford - b. 4 Oct. 1854, m (date unknown, Elizabeth Christie), d. 2 March 1919
9. George Andrew Brown - b. 30 Sept. 1856, d. before 1919 (Montana)
10. Elizabeth L. - b. 1 Sept. 1859, m. (date unknown, Henry A. Odell), d. after 1919
11. John Henry Pope - b. Nov. 1860, d. 27 June 1869
12. Margaret Maria - b. 24 Nov. 1862, d. 23 June 1943
13. Henrietta Douglass - b. 3 Dec. 1866, d. 5 June 1869.

**Sources:** Family Group Sheet kindly provided by Andrew Cunningham; Eastern Townships Research Centre, Chalmers United Church (Lingwick-Gould) fonds, Baptisms, marriages, and burials (1849-89), UC059/008/001.