"EVERY STROKE UPWARD:" WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN CANADA, 1880-1906

Barbara Freeman

Vers la fin du siècle dernier, un nombre croissant de femmes canadiennes entraient dans la profession 'masculine' du journalisme. Parmi elles, des personnages notables tels que Sara Jeannette Duncan, Agnes Maule Machar, "Kit" Coleman, G. Cora Hind, et Kate Simpson Hayes. Dans cet article Barbara Freeman documente leurs expériences comme pionnières du journalisme canadien.

One morning, in the spring of 1904, Margaret Graham, a nineteen-year-old newspaper writer, marched into the Canadian Pacific Railways office in Montreal looking for publicity director George Ham. Her goal was to persuade him to take a group of newspaper women to the St. Louis World Exposition. He had earlier escorted a party of male journalists there, but had never offered the same trip to women writers. The angry Graham, Ham later wrote, felt that "women had altogether been ignobly ignored and she demonstratively demanded to know why poor downtrodden females should thus be so shabbily treated." He promised her that, if she could find a dozen press women, he would be happy to oblige her. She came up with fourteen and, true to his promise, Ham took them to St. Louis, in two private railway cars, free of charge.

Women who were working as journalists in Canada at the time were used to being disregarded by the men in the profession. Like women entering other fields, such as medicine and law, they found that they had to struggle to make their presence felt.

Some of the women on the St. Louis excursion were new to the newspaper world; others had been writing for years. Some wrote only for their home-town newspapers, while others moved all over Canada during their journalism careers. There were francophones as well as anglophones, Easterners as well as women from the West.

Together, they were representative of those who had been entering a new profession for women – journalism – since the late 1800s. Their ranks included the "dean" of female literary journalists in Canada, Agnes Maule Machar of Kingston, Ontario; journalist-turned-novelist, Sara Jeannette Duncan; the popular women's page writer, "Kit" Coleman of the Toronto *Mail and Empire;* the Agriculture editor of the *Manitoba Free Press,* E. Cora Hind, who was one of the very few women in a senior editorial position; and the unconventional Maritimer, Kate Simpson Hayes, who eventually brought them all together as members of the Canadian Women's Press Club.

Their reasons for becoming journalists varied. Some had always wanted to write; others entered the field because they suddenly found themselves without financial support and needed to make a living. They were single, married, separated and widowed, with and without children. All were, however, educated, middle-class women who were doing something quite untypical for many women of their generation – pursuing a career.

Like many pioneers, these women often found the going rough. Before the mid-1880s, women were not allowed into newspaper offices at all, with their gruff male inhabitants banging away at typewriters beneath clouds of tobacco smoke. Newsrooms were dirty, noisy places and considered quite unsuitable for respectable middle-class women. According to newspaperman Hector Charlesworth, men wrote the scattered bits of "women's news" until the 1880s when newspapers became more compartmentalized – partly to appeal to advertisers – and the women's pages were created. The few women who were already working for newspapers as short story writers, literary journalists or society editors, did so at home and sent their items in by messenger.

In the nineteenth century, there was no firm division between creative writing and journalism. Newspapers often published short stories, poetry, book reviews, opinion columns and editorials, all written by the same people.

One of the most prolific was Agnes Maule Machar (1837-1927); she wrote novels, poetry and opinion pieces on issues close to her heart (such as temperance, education for women, and improvements to the squalid living conditions endured by working-class people). Her work appeared mainly in periodicals such as *Rose-Belford's Canadian Monthly and National Review* and *The Week,* during the 1870s, '80s and '90s. She also contributed to the Toronto *Globe* and other daily newspapers, and continued to write well into the 1920s.

Machar was a rarity among women of her generation. She was well educated by her father, who was the second principal of Queen's College in Kingston, decades before girls in Canada were given equal education with boys. It was a time when women writers often disguised their presence on the literary scene by using male *nom-de-plumes* or by remaining anonymous – ploys that allowed them some success while upholding the Victorian code of female modesty. It was considered unseemly for a middle-class woman to "go public" about anything.

Machar was an early "social gospel" advocate in Canada who felt that practical application of the lessons from the Sermon on the Mount did more good in this world than piety without action. Much of her writing dealt with this theme.

For a long time, apparently to please her conservative mother, Machar did not sign her name to her articles. Upon reaching middle age, she finally began to use a pen-name, "Fidelis," a reflection of her strong Christian faith. The use of pen-names such as hers was a common practice among journalists of both sexes, but particularly for women, who often took on a male persona. For example, Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922) enjoyed a meteoric early career as "Garth Grafton" before she finally began to sign her own name to her work.

Duncan was a young career woman of the 1880s – a member of the generation that succeeded Agnes Maule Machar's. She started at the Brantford *Expositor,* her Ontario hometown newspaper, moved to Washington where she wrote editorials for the *Post,* and later returned to Canada as women's page editor of the *Globe* and

then as Ottawa correspondent for the *Montreal Star* and *The Week*.

This was an amazing record of journalistic accomplishment for a woman who was still in her twenties. But despite this success, she was still cautious about her vulnerability as a woman writer. One way to circumvent unfair criticism, she once explained, was to use a male *nom-de-plume:*

> *. . . in the case of a distinctively masculine pen-name as George Eliot or Charles Egbert Craddock, I believe the selection is due to a dread of that instinctive bias in criticism which a woman's acknowledged literary effort invariably suffers* (Toronto *Globe*, May 27, 1885).

Duncan had her own biases about what women could accomplish in journalism. She believed women could write literary criticism, political and social commentary, advice columns and travel features. But she drew the line at day-to-day news reporting with its strict deadlines: she did not believe that women could think and work fast enough for that kind of assignment. Her bias was consistent with her middle-of-the-road approach (for the time) on other issues: she believed, for example, that women should have the vote but that they did not know enough about the law to be Members of Parliament.

Duncan herself had been the victim of some prejudice in the journalism field. As a rookie, she once approached a Toronto newspaper editor, E. E. Sheppard, and asked him for a job. He turned her down, explaining that the last woman he had hired had not done a good job. Years later, he rued that day in print, devoting much of his column to praise of Duncan's writing ability and literary success. Certainly, Duncan can be given much credit for opening the eyes of male editors to the potential of female journalists. She represents a transition point between the somewhat elite intellectual journalist and the everyday women's page editor: she was both in her time.

The women's page offered the most opportunity for ambitious female writers because it was the only editorial department of a newspaper in which women were generally welcome. Of course, they were not treated the same as the men. Their male editors often refused to take them seriously because they wrote "women's"news – and indeed, whatever their ambitions, they were relegated to the women's pages from the start. Very few managed to slip over the gender border into the "male" reporting areas of politics, business and crime. Those who did – like Duncan, Cora Hind and occasionally "Kit" Coleman – received greater recognition than most of their female colleagues.

Kathleen Blake Coleman, "Kit" of the Toronto *Mail*, was the most popular woman's page writer of late nineteenth century Canada. Her Saturday page, "Women's Kingdom," appealed to both sexes, thereby helping to boost the *Mail's* circulation. Coleman (1864-1915) was a tall, spirited red-head, of aristocratic Irish connections, with a bright, lively and sometimes irreverent style. She did not confine her writing to fashion notes and recipes, but commented on most of the politcal and social events of her day.

In fact, it is a mistake to assume that the women's pages were less than serious journalistic efforts. Coleman, like Duncan and other female colleagues, was very much interested in federal politics; Canada's relations with Britain; international events and many social concerns (such as the movement of women into the workforce, female suffrage, street urchins, poverty, prostitution, and temperance).

"Kit," a small-l liberal with conservative leanings, had her opinions on all of these issues, as did the other writers. Her politics were not always consistent, but they did reflect the experiences of a woman brought up in a genteel environment who never expected to have to earn her own living.

Kathleen Blake was born near Galway in western Ireland and had a privileged upbringing, during which she received a good education. At sixteen, her parents persuaded her to marry a local squire who was forty years her senior – apparently their attempt to keep the family finances in order. But when her husband died four years later, he left her destitute.

The young widow emigrated to Canada, worked as a secretary in Toronto, married her boss, E. J. Watkins, and moved to Winnipeg, where she had two children, a girl and a boy. When her second husband died suddenly, she moved back to Toronto where she did freelance writing to support herself and her children. When she was hired by the *Mail* in 1889, she became an immediate success and was a leading figure in journalism for the next twenty-five years. She was, in fact, a self-made woman and proud of it.

Unidentified members of Canadian Women's Press Club, Lake Louise, Alberta (c. 1913)
Credit: Public Archives of Canada

Charter members of Canadian Women's Press Club en route to St. Louis World's Exposition, Detroit (June 1904) *Credit: Public Archives of Canada*

That is not to say that she became a rich woman. The pay for both sexes in journalism was poor and it was usually worse for women, because their work was not considered as important as the men's. There were no paid holidays, or unions, or other advantages for the newspaper writer of either sex. When Coleman first started in the business, she made $20 a month – not much more than a domestic servant – and had to do light housekeeping overtime to make ends meet. Even after she became a successful writer, she complained of long hours, few holidays and inadequate pay. One source has it that she received $35 a week from the day she was hired – a generous sum for the time. It is more likely that she was earning that much by the time she quit the *Mail* in 1911 and began syndicating her columns at $5 each.

Her popularity did mean that her editors gave her certain privileges. Unlike most women's page writers, "Kit" was occasionally allowed to escape in order to cover events in other parts of the world. In 1898, after much wrangling with the United States Army, she managed to make her way to Cuba to write about the grim conditions being suffered by young soldiers fighting in the Spanish-American war. In 1906 she was in San Francisco, documenting the aftermath of the earthquake. On another occasion, in Cleveland, she smuggled herself into the cell of a notorious female fraud artist, Cassie Chadwick, and got an exclusive story.

It cannot be said that "Kit" was typical of women's page writers. Few were as sophisticated, as bright or wrote as well as she did. But she was the acknowledged leader in her field at the time and, by all accounts, well-loved by most of her sister-journalists, especially the young "cubs," who looked to her for encouragement and advice.

"Kit" would tell tqem that a woman must serve her apprenticeship, as hard and discouraging as rejection letters from editors could be, if she expected to be successful. But an awareness of one's image as a woman was also important in journalism:

> *. . . and if she would try to infuse a little of her charming femininity into her writings – then, indeed, she will be a great success. Her individuality will shine out strongly, and she will charm, intoxicate and allure you in dull, cold type just as much, perhaps more, than if you were sitting beside her, looking into the depths of her soft eyes* (Toronto *Mail*, November 16, 1889).

It is clear that writing was becoming acceptable as a profession for women – as long as the writers in question maintained a certain propriety in print. Female pen-names, like "Kit's" own, were now prefered and were commonly used from the time the women's pages were established. There were, of course, exceptions to the rule: there were mavericks among the women journalists in Canada who, for one reason or another, did not conform to social expectations.

One was E. Cora Hind, the Agriculture and Commercial Editor of the *Manitoba Free Press*. When she first applied there for a newspaper job in 1882, she was turned down because she was a woman. She set up a typewriting service, got to know the farmers and businessmen who were her clients, and started writing freelance articles about the agricultural market. When newspaper editors urged her to use E.C. Hind as her byline, she refused, insisting on E. Cora Hind because she wanted her readers to know she was a woman.

By the time she was finally hired by the *Free Press* in 1902, Hind had established a reputation as an agricultural expert, one she maintained for the next forty years. She became world-reknowned for the accuracy of her crop forecasts – and the

acidity of her tongue in the face of male disapproval.

But maintaining a feminine image was important to her as well. Because Hind brooked no nonsense, did a "man's job" and never married, it was easy for her detractors to question her femininity. Probably the best-known photograph of her shows her standing in a field, dressed in what was considered masculine attire – riding britches, boots and a scout's hat – examining a sheaf of wheat. This particular image of the woman on the job appears to have made some of her more protective women friends uneasy. They were quick to point out that when Hind was not out on her rural rounds, she wore dresses, large feminine hats, and always had her knitting basket by her side. She was, one younger contemporary recalls today, a very "womanly" woman, who loved to crochet lacey underwear for her female friends!

There were other women who maintained a proper outward image, but who were not typical of their generation. One of the more interesting women in journalism was Kate Simpson Hayes, who worked in a number of Canadian cities and was well-respected by her peers, despite a very unconventional private life.

Hayes started her career in 1873 at the age of sixteen, writing a children's column under the byline "Ivy" for the *St. Croix Courier* in St. Stephen, New Brunswick, for the sum of one dollar a year. As an adult she taught school for a while, and then married a senator. But the marriage failed and, despite her Roman Catholic upbringing, Hayes left her husband and struck out on her own. During her career, she worked as George Ham's assistant in the CPR offices in Montreal and, as "Mary Markwell," first women's page editor of the *Manitoba Free Press*. Eventually she moved to Ottawa to work as a journalist and, not incidentally, to be with her married lover, Nicholas Flood Davin, a journalist-turned-Member of Parliament, with whom she had two children.

Her private life probably did raise eyebrows among her sister-journalists, but Hayes filled a prominent role among them as the organizer of the Canadian Women's Press Club. The club had been "Kit" Coleman's idea, an offspring of George Ham's trip to the St. Louis Exposition, and Coleman was its first president. But it wasn't until 1906, when Hayes organized its first national conference in Winnipeg, that the fifty-member club became firmly established and branches started to spring up across Canada.

From its beginning the CWPC deliberately cultivated a professional, patriotic image – but an intriguing clause referring to its members' proper "social and moral connections" was discreetly dropped from its constitution at that first conference. The club's records do not explain what happened, but it appears that the women agreed not to judge each other's private circumstances, but to emphasize professional qualifications. It is likely that Hayes, who took over as president, had something to do with the change.

Delegates attending second general meeting of Canadian Women's Press Club. (Front, L-R): Françoise Barry 4th, Kathleen Coleman 7th, Kate Hayes 9th, Peggy Watt 11th. Winnipeg (June 1906).
Credit: Public Archives of Canada

The press club's members were prominent and not-so-prominent women who had been working in various capacities on newspapers and other publications across Canada for years, but who had never before banded together for mutual professional and personal support. The members included Agnes Maule Machar, Sara Jeannette Duncan (married by then and writing novels in India), "Kit" Coleman, E. Cora Hind, and Kate Simpson Hayes. Other names that appeared on the membership list were: Lucy Maude Montgomery, former society editor of the Halifax *Echo* and future novelist; Robertine ("Francoise") Barry, who had her own women's weekly, *Le Journal de Francoise* in Montreal and who led the francophone contingent of the press club; Sara McLagan, the first female newspaper publisher in Canada, who took over the Vancouver *World* from her late husband; Agnes Deans Cameron, who explored the Canadian North and made her living by writing and lecturing about her adventures; and small-town newspaper journalists such as Gertrude Balmer Watt, the cub reporter "Peggy" of the Woodstock, Ontario *Sentinel Review*.

Full of optimism, they adopted a motto for their club – "Every Stroke Upward" – and vowed to work together to advance journalism as a career for women – women who wanted to write in their own names, do whatever job in journalism they wanted to do, and be considered the professional equals of the men with whom they worked. In 1906, after more than twenty years in the profession, they wanted women journalists to be given the recognition they so rightly felt they deserved.

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