

EDITH S. WATSON

A PHOTOESSAY BY FRANCES ROONEY

Au début du siècle, Edith Watson s'est bâti une carrière de photographe qui couvra éventuellement plus d'une cinquantaine d'années. Elle traversa le pays d'un bord à l'autre, documentant la vie et le travail de la population rurale, notamment celle des femmes. Dans cet essai photographique, Frances Rooney décrit sa vie et fournit des exemples graphiques de son talent.

In the late 1880s or early '90s, a painter who had established a reputation for scenes of her native New England, spent the summer in Newfoundland in search of new subjects. She boarded with families in fishing villages, travelling from outport to outport by the ferries that provided the only connections between them. And she fell in love with the colony and its people. She returned each summer and, as she became known in the outports, local newspapers announced her arrival each year. In the mid '90s, one such notice commented that this time she had brought a camera with her: this marked a drastic change in Edith Watson's career.

Watson supported herself (and at times her sister and parents) with her Canadian photographs for over fifty years. By the turn of the century she had expanded to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and the Gaspé Coast. From there she went West. The subjects of her photographs changed little: they started and remained primarily rural people, most often women, at work. To photographs of women working the fish flakes and gathering wood and water in Newfoundland, of women working Maritime farms, she added those of women at looms and making soap in Quebec; of Mennonite women and children in Manitoba; of Hungarian women farming in Saskatchewan; of Doukhobour communes in Alberta and British Columbia; of Haida and Japanese women tending nets on the B.C. coast and in the Queen Charlottes. She took publicity photographs for rope and cordage companies, for steamship lines, for the small railroads in the Maritimes, and for the CPR. Her work appeared in such disparate places as the *Toronto Star* and *Montreal Gazette*, *Canadian Magazine*, *Chatelaine*, *Maclean's*, *Saturday Night*, *National Geographic*, *Vogue*, *Hygeia* (the magazine of the American Medical Association), *Yachting*, and the publications of the Methodist and Baptist churches in the U.S. and Canada.

In 1911, at the age of fifty, Edith met Bermudean writer Victoria Hayward. They worked and lived together until Edith's death two days before Christmas in 1943. "Queenie," as Victoria was called, was an appropriate partner for Edith. She was easygoing; Edith was often abrasive. Her sense of fun moderated Edith's compulsive work habits (born in part of necessity: most photographs sold for \$.50 or \$1.00 each). Both women had a passion for the sea, for islands, and for travel.

These are five of the approximately 3,000 of Edith Watson's known remaining photographs. It is possible that an equal number exist anonymously in family collections and in public and company archives in Canada and the U.S.

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Gathering firewood in pieced quilts, Newfoundland outport (c. 1904)



Doukhobour woman (1919)



Cree mothers with babies, The Pas, Manitoba (c. 1916)



Woman digging potatoes, Path End, Newfoundland (c. 1904)



Doukhobour women harvesting plums, Okanagan Valley, B.C. (1919)