Style And Substance: The Career Of Charlotte Whitton

Roger Morier

Le rôle joué par Charlotte Whitton: étudiante, travailleuse sociale, maire et activiste

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Ottawa Mayor Charlotte Whitton and Agriculture Minister Gardiner 'trip the light fantastic' at a Central Canada Exhibition Assoc. party, 1952.

In October of 1960, a reporter for ***Maclean's Magazine*** got into a taxi-cab in Ottawa and asked the driver what he thought of Charlotte Whitton's current mayoral campaign. 'Whitton?,' said the taxi driver. 'You want to know what I think about Charlotte Whitton? I'll tell you mister. If you were Charlotte Whitton and I had a revolver in this glove compartment, I would take it out and shoot you right between the eyes.' A short time later, though, the reporter asked another taxi driver how he had cast his ballot in previous elections when Whitton was running. His reply: 'You're damn right I voted for Charlotte. That girl's got courage! That girl's got honesty!'

If there was one thing 'that girl' did have all her life, it was an ability to attract attention. Whether succeeding in a brilliant academic career in her student years, proposing controversial social welfare policies during the depression, or engaging in some outrageous activities on Ottawa city council, Charlotte Whitton had a penchant for standing out in a crowd. For more than half a century, Charlotte Whitton made headlines in Canada with her words and deeds. Most people today remember her activities as mayor of Ottawa, yet her work in social welfare in the 1920s and 1930s certainly affected more people. Indeed, Whitton herself has said that she would most like to be remembered for her work in Child Welfare Protection (after the First World War).

In all her ventures, though, Whitton was something of a paradox. Never quite fitting into the stereotypical notions of the roles she played, Whitton demonstrated that people in general, and women in particular, are individuals above all else. To ensure that people received the respect and attention as individuals which they inherently deserve was a concept implicit in all her actions and it may, in the end, be her most lasting legacy.

Charlotte Elizabeth Whitton was born March 8, 1896, in the Ottawa Valley logging community of Renfrew. She remembers that she came from 'some of the blackest Irishmen who ever worked the Ottawa River log drives.' Charlotte came from a lower class family (her Yorkshire father was a minor official in the fledgling government forestry service), and this gave her a sense of inequality which never left her and surfaced in later years as concern for the under-privileged during the depression. Charlotte inherited the quick temper of her Irish-American mother and as she would say years later, 'My Irish tongue speaks before my Yorkshire brain thinks.'

Charlotte's paternal grandmother had a great influence on her. Grandmother Whitton lived with her son. She had been trained as a teacher in England and her large collection of books was well read by her eldest granddaughter. The grandmother-teacher also compelled Charlotte to use her mind in even the most prosaic of activities. For instance whenever Charlotte was sent to the local store to buy groceries for the family her grandmother refused to allow her to write a list: all items to be bought had to be memorized by the girl. When Charlotte was nine years old, she was taken aside by her mother and told, 'Charlotte Elizabeth, you'll have to make the best use of the brains you've got for you've neither a face nor a figure.'

Charlotte's drive to succeed academically was motivated a great deal by her highly competitive instinct. Her mother's admonition that she use her brain reinforced her own inclination to somehow compete with her glamorous and attractive younger halfsister. Moreover, Whitton has said that she noticed how much attention the town of Renfrew paid to the children of the rich timber barons whenever they won scholastic awards and this was an incentive to her. She was determined to win some scholarships herself and share the glory. When she graduated from the Renfrew Collegiate Institute and entered Queen's University in 1914, she did so on the strength of six scholarships: in English, History, Latin, Modern Languages, Mathematics and Science.

The university years provided Whitton with a feeling of achievement and a sense of efficacy that appealed to her competitiveness. Because of the war, the absence of men pushed the Queen's University women into traditional all-male preserves. When Whitton graduated in 1918, the year women won the vote, there was a great incentive for gifted and energetic women to enter new fields.

Charlotte Whitton took up the challenge, deciding to pursue a career in social welfare. Her years in social welfare work started out by accident. When Whitton graduated from Queen's in 1918, political scientist O. D. Skelton arranged for her to go to Ottawa to work in the national archives. However, at the last minute, Whitton declined the post, making way for a disabled war veteran who had fewer qualifications but who,she thought, needed the job more. Almost immediately, and coincidentally, the university received a request from the Social Service Council of Canada to recommend one of its graduating students for a position as assistant secretary, who would also be the assistant editor of the Council's journal, *Social Welfare*. Whitton was recommended by Queen's and took the job in Toronto in the summer of 1918.

The placement of more formally trained social workers into settings requiring their expertise was a goal towards which Whitton worked, even though she had no training in the field herself. Whitton served to professionalize the field of social work, removing it from the arena of voluntarism and placing it in the realm of academic competence. As the 1920s ended and the depression years began, Whitton embraced the concept of 'administrative ability' as a solution not only to the community's social problems but also to the country's economic problems. This may be one of her most controversial moves, for in stressing the need for governments to ensure that college-trained social workers administer welfare relief policies, she was risking the reputation of the entire social work profession.

Essentially, what Charlotte Whitton did in a series of meetings with, and letters to, seniors members of R. B. Bennett's government in 1931 to 32 was to promise to reduce the cost of relief to the federal government. Bennett had decided to replace government makework projects with direct relief payments from Ottawa, to be administered by the provinces and municipalities. However, as unemployment continued to grow and the cost of such relief zoomed, Ottawa began to look around for ways in which to reduce its expenditures. Up stepped Whitton, with a memo to Bennett on April 9, 1932. Entitled 'The Distribution of Unemployment Relief',

the memo was, in effect, an offer to strike a bargain with the Bennett government:

Whitton knew that Bennett wanted to save money on relief. She offered him the resources of her profession to do so in return for a voice in formulating social policy . . . First the government must come to trust the social work profession. Only then could social workers hope to influence its attitude towards social assistance. For the moment, helping Bennett to cut costs on relief was the best means of establishing that trust.

Whitton argued that by making federal grants to the provinces and municipalities conditional upon their hiring professional social workers, the federal government could save money. This could be done in two ways: professional social workers could use their training to separate those truly needing relief from the thousands (Whitton suspected) who were 'loafing on the dole'. Furthermore, the municipalities paying relatively high rates of relief could lower those rates, the theory being that social workers could legitimate the lowest relief possible with their stamp of approval. Bennett never formally accepted Whitton's proposal to mandate the hiring of trained social workers, but the philosophy behind the proposal was spread to the lower levels of government and many graduates of social works schools (which were then being established) owed their first jobs to the Depression in general and Whitton's lobbying in particular.

Whitton had a close relationship with Bennett more than likely because she told him what he wanted to hear: that relief costs could be brought down through administrative efficiency. However Whitton came under increasing attack because of her friendly relations with Bennett. Many social workers argued that her marked Conservative sympathies were conflicting with her role as spokeswoman for the country's welfare agencies. Towards the end of Bennett's regime, Whitton acknowledged those criticisms. She spoke out against his government and publicly attacked his 'policy of drift'.

It was Whitton's work in advancing the status of social welfare and social workers for which she was widely recognized. As *Saturday Night* magazine said in 1944:

She put the social welfare work of Canada on the basis of a science from Nova Scotia to British Columbia, established standards, elevated the work from the abyss of casual 'charity' to the broad highway of a profession.

In recognition of that work, Whitton was made a Commander of the British Empire in 1934. She was also awarded the Jubilee Medal in 1936 and a Coronation Medal in 1937. She received a D. C. L. degree from the University of King's College, Halifax, in 1939 and her old school, Queen's University, awarded her an L. L. D. in 1941.

In 1940, Whitton's doctor told her to stop working so hard. As a result, she resigned from most of her voluntary work and even left the executive-secretaryship of the (now called) Canadian Welfare Council. She rested for a period of time and began lecturing and writing articles.

In 1943, Whitton was hired by the Conservatives to examine proposals for social welfare legislation. Family allowances in particular attracted her interest. Whitton felt that the proposal to pay parents $7.50 to $9 per month, per child, was a waste of money. She argued not only in her book but in speeches and meetings across the country, that it would be far better to take the $375 to 400 million proposed and provide for 'social utilities' instead. These would directly benefit the children of the country rather than creating an opportunity for mothers to receive family allowance cheques and spend the money on non-child items. Whitton's 'social utilities' included milk coupons, hot lunches and fruit juices in the schools, electrification and water supplies in isolated rural communities, better salaries for more teachers in the schools, playgrounds, and above all, more child protection, family welfare, clinical and nursing services. In Whitton's words, cash grants to parents would not help children as much as extending current social machinery and services:

. . . (the) cruellest waste of taxpayers money is that of giving earnest parents small sums to buy services that are not available or which people cannot afford to provide of their own effort. Thousands of families in Canada are utterly beyond reach of present medical, dental, nursing or hospital resources . . . Parents cannot *buy* non-existent care; most provinces have not the resources to provide the facilities.

Charlotte Whitton being sworn in as mayor of Ottawa by city clerk Nelson Ogilvie, Oct. 2, 1951.
Canadian Press

Whitton's stand at the time was controversial, especially within the social work profession. Many saw her stand as anti-supportive of the family and today's social work students are taught that Whitton was opposed to the baby bonus and that she was a non-professional who was, in effect, 'meddling' in the profession's affairs.

One of Charlotte Whitton's last 'crusades' in the field of social welfare had to do with her first concern — child welfare. In 1947, the Alberta chapter of the IODE asked her to study child adoption procedures in the province. Whitton's report appeared publicly in *New Liberty Magazine* under the title 'Babies For Export' and to say it raised a storm would be an understatement. Whitton contended that the centralization of social services in the Alberta welfare system had resulted in loose administrative procedures. As a result, 150 to 175 babies-a-year were being smuggled out of Alberta and sold in the United States and Ontario. Whitton's charge that 'trafficking and bootlegging' in babies was a result of incompetence in Edmonton led to her being charged with conspiracy to commit criminal libel. After a 19-day hearing in the Supreme Court of Alberta, the charges were dismissed. In July, 1949, a Royal Commission concluded that Whitton was essentially correct in her allegations. Even though Whitton had served the public good she earned more displeasure from the social work profession for her attacks on its Alberta members.

Most Canadians who know about Charlotte Whitton today remember her time on Ottawa City Council. She was mayor of the city for nine years, from 1951 to 1956 and 1960 to 1964. She was also an Alderman from 1966 to 1972. Whitton, on her speaking tours in the

'Many Tender Ties'

Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870

Sylvia M. Van Kirk

Many tender ties of family bound generations of Indian and mixed-blood women to the fur traders of the 18th and 19th centuries. The arrival of white women in the 1820s and 1830s profoundly altered these family relationships.

Professor Van Kirk's sympathetic analysis of these marital unions has been meticulously researched from little-known journals, letters and wills in Canada and the United Kingdom.

Among the women are Thanadelthur, the spirited Chipewyan who led a trade expedition from Churchill into the Barren Lands; Isabel Gunn, the Orkney lass who signed on with the Hudson's Bay Company disguised as a boy; and beautiful Sarah Ballenden, part-Indian wife of Chief factor John Ballenden.

This compelling book is enhanced by an unusual collection of nineteenth century paintings and photographs. It will be of interest to those who have their roots in Western Canada and to students of native and women's history.

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1940s and in her articles, constantly exhorted women to get involved in politics. She felt that it was probably easier for a woman to be elected at the municipal level since there was no party system to block female candidacies. Yet Whitton's own entry into formal, elected politics came about almost on a dare. After a speech to a women's group in Montreal in October, 1950, she was challenged by the *Ottawa Journal* to, in effect, put up or shut up. Whitton decided to run for one of the four controllers' seats. As she told the local Council of Women:

I'll stand, but only if a responsible and representative committee is set up to handle my campaign now — tonight. You'll have to get behind the campaign and push or go back to your vacuum cleaners and mops.

The 1950 race for controller was truly a woman's campaign. When it was suggested that a man head her Finance Committee, candidate Whitton rejected the idea quickly: 'Naming a man would be an admission of defeat at the outset. Let's make this a women's campaign as far as chairmen are concerned.' For years, women's groups had been directing their efforts to 'getting things cleaned up at City Hall.' The minor instances of patronage and corruption had accumulated to such a point that many more in the city were looking for a strong personality — a new broom to sweep clean at City Hall. Whitton herself used a different metaphor. In talking about the four-person Board of Control during the campaign, she

liked to say, 'I'm calling for a new deal. Don't you think it's time you drew a Queen to three Jacks?' Whitton had the support of the city's three daily papers and numerous service clubs and organizations. Yet the strength for the campaign came from the women of Ottawa who, as Ross Munro was to write, Whitton 'slugged into working.' On election day, Whitton not only won a seat on the Board of Control but she topped the polls, winning 10,000 votes more than the mayor. She was pleased with her first-place finish, for it accomplished three things: put her on the Finance Committee, made her deputy-mayor, and enabled her to demand the jobs she'd rather do. As she said:

I don't think the people of Ottawa intended me to take any left-over portfolio, not with the vote they've given me. I'm accepting no favours from City Council, but I'll certainly insist on my rights.

Whitton was the first woman ever elected to Ottawa City Council (Whitton: 'It was the 97th Council of the City of Ottawa and never had the city fathers had a woman father among them') and there were bound to be problems. A few weeks after her election she heard about, but was not invited to, the traditional dinner for the retiring council. The dinner was to be a stag, but Whitton insisted on going. At the door to the dinner she told her fellow councillors:

I'm coming to everything that's going. Whenever there's going to be back-room talk I'll be there ... You'll find out I won't be pushed around just because I'm a woman. Get used to the fact that the City Council consists of the same number of members as before.

Whitton's stint as controller lasted only eight months. In August, 1951, Mayor Goodwin died and Whitton succeeded him, becoming the first woman mayor of a major Canadian city. Over the next five years she would preside over some of the stormiest council meetings ever as she sought to end the patronage at City Hall. Her main battles were with developers who sought to escape from the city's building by-laws, with contractors and suppliers to the city who took advantage of loopholes to make big profits, and with the federal government which paid no taxes to Ottawa and gave miserly cash grants instead. In all three areas she achieved her objectives — but not without making headlines. In 1956 she decided to retire and a year later, looking back, she described her memories as 'on the whole gratifying.' The mayoralty was 'six of the most satisfying, if wearing, years of my working life.'

Two years after she left politics, Whitton was anxious to conquer new fields. She won the Conservative nomination in the federal riding of Ottawa West yet she lost in the 1958 Diefenbaker sweep to a Liberal, George McIlraith. She wrote a column for *The Ottawa Citizen* while biding her time until the next mayoral election in 1960. Whitton entered the contest early but this time her candidacy was not as welcome as 10 years before. Grattan O'Leary, an old friend of hers and publisher of *The Ottawa Journal* wrote an editorial opposing her. He said her previous administrations had created 'a holocaust of verbiage and civic dissent' and he said her councils had been marked by 'disharmony and rancor.' This time all three newspapers in Ottawa opposed her candidacy, even *The Citizen*, which carried her column. During the campaign, Whitton's only media support came from CFRA radio, owned by her brother-in-law. Yet, on election night, Whitton emerged the winner, narrowly beating a wealthy lawyer.

Whitton's fourth and fifth terms as mayor were even more raucous than her first three, and City Hall reporters came to call the council meetings 'the biggest free circus in Canada.' There were frequent shouting matches with aldermen, acrimonious debates, and at one meeting, fisticuffs as Mayor Whitton physically assaulted an alderman. At another meeting, Whitton pulled out a toy pistol and aimed it at a terrified alderman who took it for the real thing. At still another, 'she refused to preside over a discussion and surrendered the mayor's chair. Then she went up to the spectator's gallery and heckled the Board (of Control) for the rest of the meeting.' The list of stories and anecdotes about the council meetings is a long one.

Whitton's main accomplishment during her second stint in office was to find a permanent site for a new Ottawa City Hall. She wanted to continue in office for a few more years, but in 1964 she was defeated in her quest for re-election as mayor. It seemed the people of Ottawa had tired of the circus at City Hall. Whitton bowed out of politics for two years, again writing, giving speeches, and even working as a commentator for an Ottawa TV station. In 1966, though, when the municipal elections came around again, Whitton couldn't resist and ran for alderman in the ward where she lived. She was elected that year and again in 1968 and 1970. However Alderman Whitton was more subdued than Mayor Whitton, perhaps because she had been chastened by her defeat in 1964, perhaps because she was 70 years old when elected as alderman for the first time, perhaps because an aldermanic seat didn't entail as much responsibility. Whitton was planning to run as alderman again in the fall of 1972, but a short time before she was to be nominated she fell at home and

broke her hip. She was in hospital throughout much of the campaign, but more than being forced out of an election she saw the accident as an omen of sorts and decided that perhaps it really was time to finally retire from politics. She was 76 years old when she officially announced her final retirement.

In 1975, the *Globe and Mail* in an obituary editorial said she would be remembered for the 'spunk and pugnacity that elevated her above the rank and file.' Yet when Charlotte Whitton died in January, 1975, only 60 people came to her funeral.

In a strange and sad way, the anomaly of that fact served to highlight what was perhaps the central theme of her career. Charlotte Whitton was nothing if not exceptional, and throughout her life her singularity and unconventionality served to break new paths. The accomplishments in her life are numerous, but the ones surrounding the issue of feminism are particulary worthy of mention here.

Obviously Whitton was a female politician in a male domain and she used her sex in curious ways. In the 1950 campaign for controller she ran a woman's campaign. In 1952, seeking to be elected as mayor in her own right, she again capitalized on her sex (in 1950, 'Charlotte's Women' wore a sewing needle and thread in their lapels instead of campaign buttons; in the 1952 election they wore a darning needle, 'because it's a bigger job'). She reinforced the notion of her uniqueness by occasionally remarking at a Council meeting, 'Speak up gentlemen - I am not opposed to male participation in government.' Yet Whitton was not averse to seeking sympathy for her situation. She wrote in 1957 about this 'problem':

"Your worship", pleaded one controller at an interminably long committee meeting, "let's get going. My wife will have a fit waiting dinner and getting me back off in time for council tonight".
And I, a woman, had had to plan my menu, pick up my meat on the way home (I always ate an almost raw filet of beef before entering the amphitheatre on council nights), cook my meat, and get off to the next port of call. A man hasn't his hair, his makeup, his lingeries, runs or crooked seams on his hose to worry about, or a complete change of clothes for luncheon, afternoon, the evening or a new hat for each season.

The notion that the person who rocks the cradle rules the nation was one which Whitton could adopt. In 1945, she wrote that women's fundamental role in society hadn't changed because of the war:

The outward features of women's role seem to have been completely distorted by the conditions of war, but their inward and spiritual aspects have really varied little or not at all in the relative power and place of women's responsibility and influence in the moulding of the character of the family, the home, and the race.

This is not to say that Whitton favoured women staying at home to raise children. Rather she was a humanist who sought to liberate *people* from the societal ties that bound them to stereotypical roles. During the Second World War, for instance, she argued that the state should somehow provide opportunities for the woman who did not wish to return to the role of wife and mother when the war ended.

The basic thing is that women should be recognized as having their own right to make their own choice, and one out of three or four of our women will continue to find her vocation in the professions, or in these other avenues of manufacture, business, finance, personal and household services.

Whitton occasionally embraced the rhetoric of feminism in order to urge women on to a greater participation in politics. She seemed particularly disappointed that so many women refused to utilize their electoral rights which had been won in long, hard battles when she was at university. 'We have been sluggards,' said Whitton. 'We haven't used our franchise as we should. We must strike off our shackles and claim our freedom.' But Whitton did not want women to merely serve as adjuncts to males. She derided women's auxiliary groups attached to essentially male organizations. She once refused an invitation to speak to a women's group in Ottawa, saying, 'There is not enough money in the Royal Mint to get me to chatter to a mixed grill of Ladies Days or Ladies Nights or wives-and-what-have-you-females-at-the-convention.' Again, in 1968, asked why she would not appear before the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, she said '(It's a waste of time) that will get nowhere and deserves to get nowhere. What can you do when women by the thousands prefer to join the ladies' auxiliaries and cut sandwiches to getting out and working for what they're demanding.'

When Charlotte Whitton made that comment, she was 72 years old and approaching the end of a long and fruitful career. She will be remembered for the way in which she pushed back the boundaries of definition, Those boundaries usually had to do with the ways in which women were perceived, and Whitton served notice to all that the old ways of thinking about women, their careers and their political activity were no longer valid. ◔

Due to space restrictions this article has been shortened for publication and the extensive footnotes have been eliminated. For more information, please contact the author at 106 Banff Road, Toronto, Ontario. M4P 2P5. This article was written under the direction of Sylvia Van Kirk, Department of History, University of Toronto.

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