



MERNA FORSTER

CANADIAN HEROINES

FAMOUS AND FORGOTTEN FACES

Foreword by the
Right Honourable Kim Campbell



100

CANADIAN
HEROINES

100 Canadian Heroines

Famous and Forgotten Faces

By Merna Forster



THE DUNDURN GROUP
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“They planted the trees so we could enjoy the shade.”

— Dora Nipp, from an old Chinese saying

Foreword

by Rt. Hon. Kim Campbell

In virtually all societies, leadership is gendered masculine. This is not because women do not lead, but because the positions that define leadership have been dominated by men. When women occupy these positions, they are not seen to “belong” there in the same way that men are seen naturally to do. Rather than revise their predispositions about women and leadership, people are more likely to find ways around the contradiction, for instance by seeing the woman leader as an anomaly. Her story may simply be forgotten, for, if women are not to be leaders, why do we need to keep their stories alive to inspire girls? Worse, the stories of courageous women get rewritten. That is why it is so important that Merna Forster gives us back the true story of Laura Secord, whose extraordinary feat of courage and endurance has been diminished to a tale of a “stroll with a cow.” I was glad to see the story of Marie Guyart included in this book. I have had the good fortune to visit the museum of the Ursulines in Quebec City, and to see first hand what kinds of hardy, brave women founded our country. The term “weaker sex” should make one’s blood boil after reading this book!

Merna Forster’s celebration of one hundred Canadian women of extraordinary accomplishment has a very serious purpose. Of course the stories of these women entertain and inspire us, but more importantly, they contribute to changing the understanding that determines how societies define the roles of women. Throughout my life, I have found myself in positions where I was the first female — starting with my election in the spring of 1963 as student council president of my high school. In the course of my political career I had many perplexing experiences that I suspected were related to my sex, but which I didn’t know how to analyze. Since 1993, when an election thrust me into “political retirement,” I have had the opportunity to read a great deal of research on gender and how it plays out in the way we see leaders in Western societies. For several years I taught a course called “Gender and Power” at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and I travel around the world speaking on this subject. What I have learned is this: human beings are “pattern makers” who transform what they observe and learn into hypotheses that enable them to function in a complex world. Among the most powerful hypotheses that children create are those related to the social construction of sex, or what we call “gender roles.”

My generation of “baby boomer” women was told that all we needed in order to succeed was to be good at what we did. However, many women became frustrated at finding that this was not enough. Social science research confirms what they suspect — that there are deep, underlying preconceptions about femininity that dramatically affect the way women are perceived and that can override empirical observation.

Harvard economist Claudia Goldin discovered that when symphony orchestras audition musicians behind a screen, they hire 25 percent more women — the screen filtering out the negative preconceptions about women musicians. In *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*, psychologist Virginia Valian tells how hypotheses about height lead men and women to judge men to be as much as 3 1/2 inches taller than women of equal height. In *Closing the Gender Gap*, Marie Wilson, one of the founders of the White House Project (whose purpose is to elect a woman as U.S. president), tells of research that revealed that the ratio of men to women on the influential Sunday morning news programs in the United States is 9 to 1, rising to 13 to 1 after 9/11. Not only do the networks not feature women who hold key committee chairmanships in Congress, but they also call as commentators men who are former holders of such positions rather than the women who currently hold the positions.

These and other similar situations reflect the difficulty faced by women in overcoming deeply rooted notions of where leadership lies. That is why this book is so important. The only way to open up the full scope of opportunities for women is to “reprogram” the way people see gender roles. This is not a simple task. Research shows that by the time children arrive at school, they already have clear ideas about gender. But if we tell the stories of women who defy the stereotypes, we contribute to changing the social landscape from which children derive their views of how the world works.

For Canadians, whose worldview cannot escape the powerful influence of our neighbour to the south, telling these Canadian stories counteracts another form of invisibility. From 1996 to 2000, I served as Canada’s Consul General in Los Angeles. The key issues I dealt with included Canada’s position in the global film industry and our cultural policies relating to Canadian content. Canada has one of the most open media markets in the world, but living next door to the world’s largest economy guarantees that many Canadians see more Americans than Canadians in their media and entertainment.

Having lived in the United States for most of the past eight years, I can confirm that Canada and Canadians are largely invisible in American media. As Merna Forster shows in this book, Canadian women have made their mark at home and abroad, and our country has attracted women who wanted an opportunity to flourish.

Of course, there are many more courageous and brilliant Canadian women than can fit into this book, and I await with anticipation the sequel to this volume, but these stories are a great contribution to our understanding of women and a corrective to the standard histories. Celebrating these one hundred Canadian heroines reminds us that Canadian women do amazing things, and it will be a loss to our whole country if we forget them.

Introduction

Laura Secord is number one. Surveys show she's the most popular heroine from Canadian history, though pollsters suggest this has more to do with the tasty line of chocolate treats that bear her name than knowledge of Laura's heroism in warning British troops of a planned American attack.¹ Madeleine de Verchères was once a key historical heroine in French Canada, but her popularity declined somewhat with the passage of time.²

Who is your favourite Canadian heroine? How can you possibly pick without knowing the stories of notable women in the history of Canada? Perhaps pilot Helen Harrison who ferried Spitfires and other military planes during World War II, mountaineer Phyllis Monday, the first woman to climb the highest peak in the Canadian Rockies, or maybe Gudridur the Viking, the adventurous Icelandic explorer who visited North America five hundred years before Columbus. What about singing sensation La Bolduc or painter Helen McNicoll? Maybe the best-selling author Mazo de la Roche or explorer Agnes Deans Cameron?

If you've never heard of these people it's not surprising. Women are practically invisible on the pages of Canadian history textbooks, too often overshadowed by the feats of famous men. The faces of politicians such as Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir Wilfrid Laurier stare at us from crumpled bills in our wallets, but there is never a female face to greet us — aside from the Queen of England. At least more and more Canadian women are showing up on commemorative stamps, reminding us of some of the notable women who have helped develop Canada.

Are there really few heroines in Canadian history that we would be interested in knowing about and remembering? Perhaps the word *heroine* conjures up visions of women in Greek mythology, or the legendary Joan of Arc. But are there heroines in Canadian history?

Dictionaries define a heroine as a woman noted for courage and daring action, or a woman noted for special achievement in a particular field. Every country has its heroines, and Canada is no exception. Our history is coloured with amazing women who have done fascinating things.

Many Canadian heroines should be recognized for their brave deeds or heroic actions. Countless other heroines made notable achievements in many fields. Heroines in sport, science and medicine, business, arts and entertainment, exploration, literature, politics, social reform, and many other fields. Some faced incredible obstacles to fight for their beliefs and to improve the quality of life for others. They battled prejudice, discrimination, repression, and worse to follow their dreams and excel in their chosen paths.

There are women mountaineers and Olympic medallists, famous dancers and daring adventurers. Pilots, painters, and poets. Farmers, fugitives fleeing slavery, fighters for

the freedom to vote and to be called a person. Aboriginal storytellers. Nurses, nuns, and novelists. Gold seekers on the Chilkoot Trail. Miners, mothers, and lovers, stars on stage and the silver screen. Inventors and Inuit artists.

Each of these heroines in Canadian history, being neither a mythological character nor a super-heroine from a comic book, is a human being: an imperfect person with strengths and weaknesses. A woman who reflects social behaviours and attitudes of her time — some of which are objectionable by modern standards. Were her achievements any less? Can we still celebrate the achievements of the heroines while acknowledging their flaws?

This book is a collection of stories celebrating the accomplishments of a small selection of women who made significant contributions to society. I chose people from throughout Canadian history, a variety of fields, and most regions of the country — trying to include heroines of many races and backgrounds. Most of the women were born in Canada and lived their entire lives in this country. Others immigrated to Canada or spent just a short time here, but left an important legacy. Some of the heroines were Canadians who achieved great things in other countries. We claim all these women as heroines for Canada.

Some of them are famous. For example, actress Mary Pickford and artist Emily Carr. You may recognize the names of others profiled in this book, but may not be familiar with their stories. Did you know that the first Canadian best-seller was the autobiography of a dog, penned by author Margaret Saunders? Or that politician Agnes MacPhail, the first woman elected to the federal parliament, was so stressed by her early days on the Hill that she lost twelve pounds and, despite an impressive career in politics, she died in fear of poverty with the unfulfilled dream of getting a seat in the Senate?

Unfortunately, many of the stories of Canadian heroines have been forgotten. They are buried in books that are out of print or gathering dust in libraries. Hidden away in old letters and photo albums, records brittle with age. Some are lost in unwritten legends or tales of centuries past, but many are waiting for us to discover — or rediscover. In recent years some remarkable stories have been rescued from obscurity by passionate researchers who came across mentions of unfamiliar names and faces. Stories of great Canadian women that should be part of our history.

“When I was growing up, I heard, and I actually believed that there had never been any great women artists. This was the wisdom of the day,” said the gifted Canadian artist Dorothy McCarthy in 1999.³ How terribly sad.

I hope that this book will help acquaint you with a few of the countless heroines in Canadian history — women that can inspire us to achieve our own dreams. Visionaries. Rebels. Strong women who can encourage us as we learn of the pain of their struggles and hardships, their determination, and the glory of their remarkable achievements. Many of the women featured here are role models who have made a significant impact in Canada or beyond its borders, distinguishing themselves by heroic deeds or excellence in their fields.

There are so many amazing women in the history of Canada. Faces that should not be forgotten — but recognized and celebrated as Canadian heroines.

Specialist of the Heart

Maude Abbott 1868–1940

It was a tough time for a Canadian woman to become a doctor, but Maude turned every opportunity she got into a major accomplishment.



Maude Abbott.

Maude Abbott gained fame abroad as a distinguished medical researcher and teacher, yet never gained the academic promotions she deserved at McGill University — where she spent most of her career. Refused admittance to the program of medicine at McGill University in 1890 because she was a woman, Maude was forced to continue her studies at the University of Bishop's College. In 1883 Augusta Stowe had become the first woman to graduate with a medical degree from a Canadian institution, but there was still considerable opposition to the idea of respectable young women becoming medical doctors. Throughout her impressive career Maude Abbott struggled to overcome the barriers that were presented to early Canadian women eager for success in the profession of medicine.

Maude was fortunate to have received encouragement for her education from the loving maternal grandmother who raised her and her sister, Alice. Born in the village of St. André d'Argenteuil, Quebec in 1868,⁴ Maude was the daughter of Frances

Abbott and a French-Canadian Protestant clergyman named Jérémie Babin. Her father had been acquitted of a charge of murdering his invalid sister, but the community was apparently unconvinced of his innocence. When Frances died of tuberculosis he moved to the United States and left the baby girls with their grandmother, Mrs. William Abbott. She changed their surname to Abbott.

Under the guardianship of the gracious Mrs. Abbott the sisters thrived. A governess taught Maude at home until she was sent to a private school in 1884. Eager to learn, Maude yearned to go to college even though most young women at that time in conservative Quebec did not have such an opportunity. In September of 1884 Sir Donald A. Smith announced he would be giving \$50,000 to support the higher education of women, and in the fall of that year female students were permitted to enroll in the Faculty of Arts at McGill for the first time. Maude registered in 1886, in the third class that allowed women. On graduating in 1890 with the Lord Stanley Gold Medal, she was also Class Valedictorian. Maude received a Bachelor of Arts and a teaching diploma.

When Maude had asked her grandmother if she could become a doctor, Mrs. Abbott responded with “Dear child, you may be anything you like.”⁵ Despite Maude’s considerable efforts she was not able to gain acceptance to study medicine at McGill, due to the opposition to teaching mixed classes of men and women. One person who wrote about the controversy explained that certain terms could not be used in lectures for risk of embarrassing the young ladies, and added another reservation: “And can you think of a patient in a critical case, waiting for half an hour while the medical lady fixes her bonnet or adjusts her bustle?”⁶

After becoming a medical doctor in 1894, Maude spent three years in Europe taking post-graduate training with distinguished medical teachers — most notably in Vienna, where she spent two years. She received particularly good training in pathology and internal medicine. Her sister Alice accompanied her on the trip and required considerable support, as she was a manic-depressive who became an invalid.

On returning to Montreal, Dr. Maude Abbott began practising medicine and started doing research in pathology and a clinical problem related to heart murmurs. An important scientific paper she wrote about her research was presented to the Medico-Chirurgical Society by a male doctor, since women were not permitted to be members. It was because of this impressive research that Maude was elected to the Society despite the rules. A subsequent research paper was presented on her behalf before the Pathological Society in London in January 1900 — the first time that a paper from a woman had been presented there.

Dr. Maude Abbott had begun to carve a name for herself and became known as an authority on congenital heart disease. In 1905 the noted physician and medical teacher Dr. William Osler asked her to write a chapter on this subject for a medical textbook he was preparing. This was a significant honour, and Dr. Osler said the paper she produced had “extraordinary merit ... It is by far and away the best thing ever written on the subject in English — possibly in any language.”⁷

Osler also encouraged Maude Abbott to become heavily involved in her work at the McGill Medical Museum, and she developed an important course in pathology that involved its collections. Maude then began organizing the International Association of

Medical Museums. She served as its secretary for thirty years and edited its journal. Maude gained international recognition for her work with medical museums as well as congenital heart disease.

Reluctant to leave McGill, Maude finally accepted one of the many invitations she received from other universities. In 1923 she agreed to go to the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania as Professor of Pathology and Bacteriology and Director of Clinical Laboratories. On her return to McGill two years later, Dr. Abbott became Assistant Professor of Medical Research. Despite her numerous entreaties requesting a promotion, Dr. Maude Abbott retired at age sixty-five with the title of assistant professor. Author Margaret Gillett speculates that this was because Maude "was an anomalous female scientist in a conservative male milieu."⁸ McGill did, however, grant her two honorary degrees. Gillett reflects that Maude received important but relatively small opportunities, which she managed to transform into major accomplishments.

Despite the lack of recognition in the place where she particularly wanted it, Maude earned many honours and boasted a lengthy list of accomplishments. After Maude retired in 1936 she was elected an honorary member of the New York Academy of Medicine. She had written over 140 publications and her *Atlas of Congenital Heart Disease* (published in 1936 by the American Heart Association) was an important reference. Along with Dr. Helen MacMurchy, Dr. Maude Abbott worked to found the Federation of Medical Women of Canada; each year the group awards the Maude Abbott Scholarship in her honour.

Dr. Maude Abbott died on September 2, 1940. Colleague Charles Martin wrote that she was "a scholar at McGill who, with but few exceptions, had greater international repute and contacts than anyone in the Canadian profession," and a person with "vivid personality, with engaging traits of character to give an example to future generations."⁹ In 1993 the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recognized Maude as a national historic person of Canada, and in January 2000 Canada Post released a commemorative stamp to celebrate her accomplishments.

Quote:

"I wonder what my life will be like and if I will have any opportunity to do something good or great with it."¹⁰

Diary of Maude Abbott, age fifteen.

A Lady of the Empire

Lady Aberdeen (Ishbel Maria Marjoribanks) 1857–1939

Dubbed one of the brainiest women to tread Canadian soil, she created a big stir.



Lady Aberdeen.

Lady Aberdeen loved Canada, even before she and her husband moved here when he served as Governor General. The couple had travelled across the country on vacation, purchasing a scenic ranch in the Okanagan. Lady Aberdeen called it Guisachan after her father's estate in the Scottish highlands.

Ishbel Marjoribanks was born in London, England, in 1857 to a wealthy and politically influential family. Her stern father was a banker from the Scottish gentry. She grew up in the exclusive Mayfair area of the city, overlooking Hyde Park. As a young girl she enjoyed times spent in the more relaxed atmosphere of the highlands, where she could ride ponies. Forbidden by her father to enter university, Ishbel welcomed her mother's invitations to deliver food and medical supplies to isolated residents of the Scottish highlands near Guisachan, and a Lady Cavendish involved Ishbel in helping the needy of London. The religious young woman believed in Christian charity — her vocation would be to help others.

There were, of course, still obligations for young women in her position. Wearing a beautiful white satin gown with a ruffled train, she was presented to Queen Victoria on reaching her eighteenth birthday. Ishbel socialized with the most powerful people in

the land, including British Prime Minister Gladstone — who became a close friend. Then of course a suitable marriage had to be arranged. At the age of twenty, Ishbel wed John Campbell Hamilton Gordon, the seventh Earl of Aberdeen. He spent his life as a public administrator, most notably as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1886 and from 1906 to 1915, and Governor General of Canada from 1893 to 1898.

When the Aberdeens moved to Canada with their four young children, Ishbel was thirty-six years old. She was energetic, intelligent, knowledgeable, and articulate. Despite initial nervousness about her responsibilities, Lady Aberdeen plunged in with her usual enthusiasm. She soon earned a reputation as a charming hostess who organized extremely popular social events, such as costumed balls. Lady Aberdeen took a very active role in behind the scenes political manoeuvring, including some very delicate discussions, since Lord Aberdeen was involved with four prime ministers during his term in Canada.

Lady Aberdeen provided her husband with valuable political advice and by all accounts was a primary confidant. Her frequent travels across the country provided the Governor General with useful information about what was happening. Ishbel was a true partner. John T. Saywell, editor of a published version of her journals, remarked on the extent of the power she held: “While both the law and the conventions of the constitution are silent on the point, Lady Aberdeen might well be graced with the title of Governess-General. Like Victoria’s Albert she was a power that could not be overlooked.”¹¹

Ever the reformer, Lady Aberdeen also played a significant role in many social projects. The year that she moved to Canada, Lady Aberdeen was elected president of the International Council of Women, a federation of women’s groups created “to best conserve the highest good of the family and of the state.” Except for a brief break she held this post until her death in 1939. Some women approached Lady Aberdeen about organizing a Canadian group, so she eagerly helped found the National Council of Women (NCW) and became its president.

Through the leadership of the NCW, Lady Aberdeen and her colleagues created the Victorian Order of Nurses to improve health care for Canadians in remote areas. Lady Aberdeen worried about the suffering of settlers and was inspired by the national nursing service in England. Despite strong protests from doctors and the Aberdeens’ political opponents, Lady Aberdeen launched a successful public relations campaign — including talks given by a prominent American doctor — to quell the opposition. In December 1898, the Victorian Order of Nurses was established by royal charter, with Lady Aberdeen as president.

Touched by the loneliness of isolated pioneer farmers in the wheat fields of Manitoba, the irrepressible Ishbel also developed the Aberdeen Association for Distribution of Good Literature to Settlers in the West; the pioneers soon began receiving welcome parcels of books and magazines. Ishbel helped female Ottawa teachers organize an educational union. She created the May Court Club, a group of young women socialites in Ottawa, whose members committed to do community work. The list of charitable work went on and on.

In 1898 Lord Aberdeen completed his term as Governor General of Canada and his family returned home. The *Chicago Record* remarked on Ishbel’s contribution to Canada:

She is particularly interested in the intellectual advancement of women, and during the last five years has roused the women of Canada in all social classes to improve their conditions. The wife of no Governor-General within recollection has created so much of a stir. The working girls, the shop-clerks, the servant class, the farmers' wives, the trained nurses, the schoolteachers, and every other class have received a share of her interest...¹²

Many farewell banquets, receptions, and other social events marked the departure of the Aberdeens. The Senate and House of Commons presented Ishbel with a gift of two hundred pieces of Royal Doulton china, on which Canadian subjects had been painted by sixteen women from the Women's Art Association of Canada. By delivering a speech of appreciation for the "splendid gift," Lady Aberdeen became the first woman to speak in the House of Commons. The *Globe* newspaper reported her speech "...was grand as a piece of oratory, and her voice was simply thrilling. She brought tears to the eyes of all who were around her. I never saw an audience so captivated by a woman."

Another tribute to Lady Aberdeen came from the *Brockville Recorder*: "Her excellency is one of the brainiest women that ever trod Canadian soil, and sympathy of soul and breadth of thought are the prominent features of her every public word and act..."¹³

Lady Aberdeen was a born leader. Biographer Doris French comments that the accepted notions of the appropriate role of women confined Ishbel to the backrooms of power. "Her acumen, generosity, zeal and loyalty would have carried her far in the first instead of the second rank of public affairs."¹⁴

The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recognized Lady Aberdeen as a national historic person of Canada in 1979.

Quote:

"In the towns, they will go to those who cannot now afford the care of trained nurses and often die for lack of it; on the prairies, in the forests, in mining districts, everywhere throughout the country they will go hither and thither amongst our brave pioneers and bring help to those who are building up the future of this beautiful country amidst many hardships and privations."

Lady Aberdeen, referring to the Victorian Order of Nurses.