

The Glengarry News

Women's Rights, Suffrage and Pink Tea

July 11 2018 BY TARA MACDONALD News Staff

It was a packed house at the Glengarry, Nor'Westers & Loyalist Museum last week as Joyce Lewis and Keleigh Goodfellow-Théorêt spoke on women's rights in honour of the 100th anniversary of women's first right to vote in Canada.

Ms. Lewis - the new president of the museum - began by talking about the status of women throughout history.

The theme revolved around the changeable nature of how women and the value they bring to society are perceived, predominantly by men, and the resulting outcomes on women's rights not only in Canada but around the world.



Museum President Joyce Lewis and Curator Keleigh Goodfellow-Théorêt standing in front of a colourful Victorian Crazy Quilt. The quilt was stitched more than 100 years ago at the Ross home in Curry Hill. - TARA MACDONALD

Women as warriors, powerful priestesses and political leaders

“Women have gained and lost power at different times,” Ms. Lewis explained. “Some past societies had women who were warriors, powerful priestesses and political leaders. At other times... writers portrayed them as inferior to men.”

Ms. Lewis spoke of the Greeks and the origins of democracy; but a democracy wherein women did not have a right to vote. This was contrasted with stories from the Celtic culture of Gaul (now France) and the British Isles where women once fought as warriors alongside men. Referencing Boudicca -- a Celtic queen who fought against Roman invaders -- Ms. Lewis exclaimed: “What women may have lacked in physical strength, they made up for it in the fierceness of their attacks.”

From Saint to Whore: The complicated case of Mary Magdalene

Religion also played a strong role in how women were perceived.

Early Christianity, Ms. Lewis argued, featured women in positions of equal influence to men. The most controversial being Mary Magdalene who -- while commonly depicted as a repentant prostitute -- was once esteemed as an important religious leader.

“But all this was to change,” lamented Ms. Lewis as she spoke of a systematic degradation of women within Christian doctrine during the fourth and fifth centuries AD.

“Women were portrayed as weak, hysterical and open to temptations,” she explained. Going on to say church fathers -- such as Tertullian, St. Jerome, and St. Augustine - blamed Eve for the downfall of humanity, and by extension, all women.

Wicked Women: Witchcraft and women's rights

The contradictions continued into the Middle Ages and beyond, particularly in regards to accusations of witchcraft.

"Women had traditionally been healers using natural remedies," said Ms. Lewis, "their knowledge being invaluable in a world without modern medicine." With advances in contemporary sciences, however, medicine would soon become a male-dominated industry.

"Apothecaries, barber-surgeons and doctors dismissed herbal healing as quackery," she exclaimed.

Unable to study medicine, women once again lost their place in society. "It became illegal to practice medicine without a university degree," explained Ms. Lewis. "The persecution of women who continued to offer their services culminated in their being accused of witchcraft."

Remembering our past: Canada's early feminists

Ms. Lewis and Ms. Goodfellow-Théorêt spoke at length of the status of women in the United Kingdom which heavily influenced women's rights movements in Canada.

When most of us think about women's suffrage in Canada, we think about Nellie McClung and other members of the Famous Five who fought to have women legally considered 'persons.'

However, we don't often hear about the courageous and hard-working women who helped pave the way towards equality between the sexes.

Women, medicine and the right to treatment

"One of the early feminists in Canada was Emily Stowe, who supported her sick husband and family by working illegally as a doctor," Ms. Lewis pointed out.

At the time women were not allowed to study in Canadian colleges or universities, so she ventured to New York to obtain her degree. Upon returning to Canada, Ms. Stowe worked diligently to advance women's rights, particularly in regards to education.

In 1881, the first group of women were admitted into medical studies programs in Kingston and Toronto. Nevertheless, while more women were practicing medicine, it did not mean that women received equal medical treatment.

"When I was a student nurse in Quebec in 1961, a married woman could not sign for her own consent for treatment or surgery or consent for her children," said Nancy Woollven from Williamstown. "You had to have the consent of the husband or father."

Museum Director Wendy Wert agreed, "Especially anything associated with reproductive rights. I worked in an Operating Room in Ontario, if someone was going to have a therapeutic abortion, the husband had to agree to it. Oftentimes these women were in tears but the guy wouldn't sign."

It wasn't only reproductive rights that left women's health and well-being in the hands of men, recalled Williamstown resident Dr. Stephen Helle.

"In 1950s," said Dr. Helle, "I was a medical student at Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal. At that time a girl was admitted and needed to be put on a dialysis machine which was brand new in Canada. But for that one, you needed the father's permission. Since there was no father, we had to go to court for this girl to undergo treatment. It was unbelievable."

Equal Rights and the Women's Institute

Guests also heard about of Adelaide Hoodless who lost her 14-month old son to infection caused by drinking unpasteurized milk.

Blaming herself for her son's death, Ms. Hoodless dedicated her life to improving the health and nutrition of women and children through education. She wanted to ensure that other women – particularly new mothers - had the knowledge needed to prevent unnecessary deaths.

A voice for rural women and one of Canada's most prolific early feminists, Ms. Hoodless helped found The National Council of Women, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) of Canada, and the Victorian Order of Nurses. In 1897, she also founded the first Women's Institute which offered practical instruction on domestic sciences, including farm and household management.

Ironically, while Ms. Hoodless played a pivotal role in advancing women's rights, she did not support the suffragette cause and believed that a women's natural destiny lay in the home. Nevertheless, her efforts to educate women armed them in their fight for equal rights and suffrage.

Women and Academia

"Before the 20th century, men and women... would receive very different educations," said museum curator Ms. Goodfellow-Théorêt. "A woman's education would be much more centered around the home and the manners of a proper hostess or wife."

Crossing the pond over to Canadian universities, the curator spoke of Carrie Derick, the first woman graduate of McGill (1912) who was to become the first woman to obtain a full professorship in Canada.

Fighting for women's suffrage in Canada: "Lunatics, idiots and persons of unsound mind"

In Manitoba, the Elections Act of 1888 stated: "The following persons shall not be entitled to be registered as electors...Lunatics, idiots and persons of unsound mind."

It was not until 1916 that Manitoba women obtained the right to vote and officially stepped out of the class of criminals, children, idiots and lunatics as far as politics were concerned.

Ontario followed suit in 1917, with Nova Scotia in 1918, New Brunswick in 1919 and Prince Edward Island dragging behind in 1922, but Quebec's suffragettes waited longer still.

According Henri Bourassa -- a notable anti-suffragist and founder of *Le Devoir* -- "women risk[ed] becoming 'public women,' veritable women-men, hybrids that would destroy women-mothers and women-women." Meanwhile, according to Ms. Ms. Goodfellow-Théorêt, Liberal Premier Louis Alexandre Taschereau claimed that women in Quebec would not get the provincial vote as long as he was in office. Holding his position from 1920 to 1936, the women of Quebec didn't obtain the right to vote until 1940.

"It was being able to use the vote that mattered"

"This was a much more dynamic movement than simply seeking to get the vote for women," said Ms. Goodfellow-Théorêt. "It was being able to use the vote that mattered."

Groups advocating for women's suffrage also fought for better education, healthcare, employment opportunities, as well as an end to violence against women and children.

Women's rights in Canada: suffrage for 'some'

The years between 1916 and 1921 saw a revolution in women's rights in Canada, however the right to vote did not extend to all women. Those outside of the privileged white class, such as Indigenous women and women of colour, had to wait much longer. It wasn't until 1960 that ALL Canadian women finally had the right to vote.

What's in a name? Changing attitudes towards identity and marriage

Within the family, women played a prominent role caring for children and the elderly. They were also guardians of the faith, contemporary art, and the preservation of culture. Nevertheless, women's low status within society remained after marriage.

Pointing to a war-time quilt on display at the museum, the curator described how women of that era were not recognized as individuals: "We transcribed all the names on this wartime subscription quilt, some 500 or so. It's a veritable 'who's who' of the area circa 1916," said the curator. "However, some names aren't very telling at all and risk the bearer being lost in history. These names go something like Mr. George so-and-so and Mrs. George so-and-so."

"I remember being at a convention with the Women's Institute," recalled Ms. Wert. "Everybody was like my mother was a Mrs. Lloyd McRae and my grandmother was Mrs. Edgar McKnoughton. So I stood up and I said I didn't like that. We had our own name!"

"I wanted my own name too," said Susan Robertson from Bainsville. However, Ms. Robertson recalled, "Some ladies argued that the mail had to be posted under your husband's name or the Post Masters would never find you."

A woman's place: Politics and feminism in contemporary Canada

"I remember when Joe Clark was Prime Minister," said Susan Ramsay of Lancaster. "His wife was Maureen McTeer. She kept her name. At that time, it was scandalous."

Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau - the glamorous wife of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau - is making Canadians revisit the idea of spousal surnames. Having maintained her maiden name after getting married in 2005, she changed it soon after her husband's rise to Prime Minister; an act that sparked controversy in the couple's home province of Quebec.

According to Quebec's Civil Code, "In marriage, both spouses retain their respective names, and exercise their respective civil rights under those names." The 1981 reform was a significant and symbolic step towards equality between the sexes. Such policies are in stark contrast to predominantly English-speaking provinces where most new brides continue to adopt their husband's name.

"I notice that so many young ladies are still taking their husbands name," bemoaned Ms. Ramsay. "Sometimes they add his to theirs, but they are still doing it. My daughter did that, I she recognized it as being part of the family."

Unlike her daughter, Ms. Ramsay was eager to regain her identity. "I was married in 1970," she said, "and in 1972 I read that we do not have to take our husbands name. It's only social, it's not a law anymore. So I went back to my name as soon as I could."

Advice for young women

When asked what advice she'd give to young women today, Ms. Lewis replied: "Young women and girls should always exercise their right to vote and have their say in how their country, province

and municipalities are run. It was a right that women struggled for so that we should have that freedom.”

Others agreed. "This would be an excellent example to introduce to high-school students," commented retired teacher Raylene Goulder of Bainsville. "It's an in-depth short-form of what women have had to go through in order for them to give them the rights that they have today, like get a driver's license and have rights over their own bodies.”

The museum's popular Tea Talk series is on Thursday afternoons at 2 pm during the summer season. For more information, call 613-347-3547.