

Donna Ronish

The Montreal Ladies' Educational Association

1871-1885

In all the celebrations for the sesquicentennial of McGill University we may be in danger of overlooking another centennial anniversary. It was just one hundred years ago that the Montreal Ladies' Educational Association was founded. This was, in its genteel, nineteenth century way, if not quite a prelude to Women's Lib., at least an important phase in the attainment of higher education for Canadian women.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the movement for higher education for women had gained great impetus in Britain and the United States. It involved the creation of separate women's colleges as well as the opening of some universities to women. Not so in Canada. In Montreal, where girls' education consisted of the limited fare offered by a multitude of private schools and where the High School of Montreal was open only to boys, neither the creation of special colleges for women nor women's admission to McGill seemed feasible. Although from its opening in 1857, the McGill Normal School had surprisingly attracted larger numbers of women than men (so that in retrospect it had become "practically a professional college for women"¹), acceptance at McGill University was not achieved by women until 1884.

Even a hundred years ago, McGill's financial condition was strained. Now we eliminate the expense of inter-collegiate athletics, then they worried about the added costs classes for women would entail. Nevertheless, at a meeting of citizens convened by the Board of Governors in 1870, a resolution to extend university benefits to women as soon as possible was passed unanimously. This commitment, coupled with a determination to find a means of expanding educational opportunities for the women of the community without further taxing the university's finances, prompted Principal William Dawson to devote some time during a visit to Great Britain to in-

vestigating women's educational institutions and their methods.

Having been impressed by the work of the Ladies' Educational Association of Edinburgh in "bringing young women up to the standard of the college degree"² through a program of regular lectures, Principal Dawson undertook to organize a similar association in Montreal. Aided by his wife, he made an appeal to a number of the city's most influential women. On May 10, 1871, at Belmont Hall, the home of Mrs. John Molson, The Montreal Ladies' Educational Association was formed, having as its aim

... the provision of lectures on Literary, Scientific and Historical subjects for the higher education of women, and eventually, if possible, the establishment of a College for Ladies in connection with the university.³

According to the plan formulated by a sub-committee of the Association, a total of eighty lectures (this number was later reduced to sixty and finally to forty) was to be presented each session with scientific and literary lectures scheduled simultaneously. Courses offered during the two terms of any session were to be related. However, from year to year different subjects were to be introduced, allowing new students to attend the lectures of any session without disadvantage and also providing continuing students with a broader academic perspective.

The first session (1871-72) opened with twenty lectures each on Mineralogy (Useful and Ornamental Stones), French Literature, English Language and Chemical and Physical Geology delivered by Principal Dawson, Professor Darey, Rev. Professor Cornish and Dr. Sterry Hunt, respectively. As well, Professor Goldwin Smith of Cornell University presented two lectures on English History.

The annual admission fee of twelve dollars gave members the option of attending as students or auditors, although the former choice was encouraged.

It is part of our system to make mere listeners welcome, but the lecture should not be prepared for their benefit. Popular lectures are useful in their season. But they are pioneers only — rough, unfinished introductions to new subjects of thought, quite unworthy of a place in an institution like this.⁴

Certificates of standing were presented to students who were successful in their examinations, while consistently superior

work was recognized by prizes from the Hannah Willard Lyman Memorial Fund. From the beginning it was observed that large attentive audiences tended to reveal disproportionately small numbers of students prepared to hand in assignments and even fewer still prepared to present themselves for examinations. This was a great source of regret to the lecturers, especially when noticed in practical courses as Dr. Roddick's lectures in Hygiene.

The attendance was large and regular, and too much cannot be said in praise of the attention displayed by all, through every lecture during the entire course.

As to the examinations, it is to be regretted, considering the exceedingly practical character of the subject, that a greater number of young ladies did not present themselves.⁵

Principal Dawson regarded this phenomenon as an indication that "in the future the ordinary pass certificates of the Association will be highly valued by those who may be so fortunate as to possess them."⁶ The executive committee of the Association concluded that the majority of the women were unwilling to receive less than a first class certificate of standing. "If this fear prevailed in Colleges, the number of graduates would be very small,"⁷ they further commented.

But if the number of students presenting themselves for examinations was small, the level of achievement was unexpectedly high. (The only failure recorded during the M.L.E.A.'s fourteen year history was noted in the first year, in the English Language course given by Rev. Professor Cornish.) Correspondence recorded in the annual reports bears witness to a degree of excellence which surprised even the lecturers.

I suffered . . . from an "embarrassment of riches," in the form of a superabundance of the best answering.⁸

I must candidly own that the results . . . surprised me, that I was not prepared for the style, quality and quantity of work which the ladies sent up, and which would have done credit to a class of the best trained students in our English universities.⁹

I must express my gratification at the exceedingly high average obtained by the candidates — higher than I am accustomed to in other examinations on the same subject.¹⁰

It has never been my good fortune to examine a set of papers in any department, more generally free from errors or showing a more intelligent appreciation of the work studied.¹¹

And the only weaknesses in the examinations which prompted any comment, have at one time or another been brought to the

attention of almost every student. Professor Moyses noted that it would "be well if the students depended less on remembering the lecturer's words."¹² Rev. Principal Lobley mentioned that he had noticed "a tendency in some cases to be content with a mere vague indication of the facts asked for, instead of a distinct and circumstantial account of them."¹³

Although the Association had hoped to maintain a strictly academic orientation, it did in time sponsor a number of practical courses. Lectures in Domestic Economy and Cookery, Household Surgery, Domestic Medicine, Nursing and Personal Hygiene met with great success. But these subjects might not have been presented had not Princess Louise, Patroness of the Association from 1878, underlined the importance of Domestic Economy "which properly lies at the root of the highest life of every true woman."¹⁴ True to their aims, the ladies of the Association were more concerned with providing lectures in Music, believing that an understanding of its theory would "lead to the forming of taste for, and appreciation of the study, as one of those most tending to cultivation and refinement."¹⁵

The establishment of a regular course was an aim the Association never realized. This had seemed to be a step closer when, in 1877, it was deemed necessary to create a certificate to present to students who had attended courses for three consecutive years, successfully passing examinations. Financial problems, however, appeared to loom larger every year, retarding progress. Despite refusals from Principal Dawson and Professor Goldwin Smith to accept payment for lecturing, and despite a donation of three hundred dollars from Dawson, it was obvious by the third session that expenses would barely be covered. In the opinion of the President, Mrs. John Henry Molson, the "novelty [was] wearing off."¹⁶ By 1876-77 it was necessary to borrow money from a fund reserved for covering the cost of materials required for experiments conducted during the course of lectures. It was only because of the great response to lectures on cookery that the Association was able to meet expenditures in 1878-79. By 1880-81, a balance of only \$2.23 was recorded. In 1881-82, the last year for which an annual report has been located, a total of \$28.85 was all that remained. Yet despite this financial pressure, the work of the Association was carried on to the end of the 1884-85 session.

Since there are no annual reports available beyond the 1881-82 session, it is necessary to reconstruct the final part of the history of the Montreal Ladies' Educational Association

from two indirect sources — the Association's Student Register and the records left by Principal Dawson. From the former, one can only assume that courses were not continued after the 1884-85 session. The latter reveal that Principal Dawson had asked the Association to assist him in setting up classes for women at McGill. Had this plan been carried through, the Association would have been a step closer to its ideal of establishing a women's college in affiliation with the university. Both the Association and the university would have been able to share the financial burden. Instead, an unexpected endowment of \$50,000 from Sir Donald Smith (later Lord Strathcona) designated for "a college for women with classes for their education in collegiate studies"⁷ rendered both these plans and the continued existence of the Association unnecessary.

During its fourteen year existence the Association had offered to the women of Montreal a long list of courses on a wide variety of subjects including Electricity (Frictional and Voltaic) and Magnetism, Applied Logic, Architecture, Light, Ethics and Rhetoric, proving to the lecturers, and more important to the women themselves, that higher education was within woman's range. Though they began at a time when little value was attached to providing education for women, the members of the Association had carried on their work long enough to see the first class of women, including a former student of the Association, Miss Georgina Hunter, enroll at McGill University.

references

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