Making Space: The First Generation of Women Students at St. Dunstan's University

By Heidi MacDonald and Edward MacDonald

In the fall of 1991, Gertrude (Butler) O'Donnell deposited a sworn affidavit at the Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation. In it she attested, "I was responsible for having St. Dunstan's University open to women in 1942. Under the program, I was the first woman to graduate."[1] She was annoyed with a recent history of the Roman Catholic college, and had politely told the author as much.[2] Yes, the history had acknowledged her critical role in bringing co-education to what had been for nearly a century a male bastion of higher learning, but it had not given her pride of place. The first women to attend St. Dunstan's, the "official" history asserted, had been two religious sisters in the Island-based Congregation of St. Martha, and yet another sister had been the first to graduate, leaving Gertrude Butler as the first *lay* woman graduate from an Island university. O'Donnell didn't dispute that the sisters had come to St. Dunstan's before her; she just didn't feel that nuns should really count when it came to co-education. And so, since the book didn't do it, she felt she must stake out her claim in the archival record.

The incident of the affidavit is a telling one, not because it re-writes history, but because it reflects popular attitudes: first, the notion that change comes about because of heroic, individual action; second, that when women choose the religious life, they somehow shed an essential part of their gender. As a 1940s student at St. Dunstan's has observed, they were seen as "asexual."[3] If they weren't *really* women, how could Sisters of St. Martha pioneer co-education?

1PARO 4220. As evidence of her pioneer role, Mrs. O'Donnell also deposited an acknowledgment from Archbishop J. A. O'Sullivan, the bishop of Charlottetown, that she had lobbied him to admit her to St. Dunstan's.

2She explained as much to the author (one of this essays' co-authors!) in a personal meeting.

3Telephone interview with John Eldon Green, Charlottetown, by Edward MacDonald, 21 June 2006.

And why should history make them the pioneers? This is how.

Mind Over Matter

Many educational reforms were implemented in the mid to late 19th century in North America, but two particularly fierce and related debates continued: how much education was fitting for a woman and should women be educated with men? Those opposed to the higher education of women argued not only that higher education would be too strenuous on the delicate constitutions of women, but that it would upset traditional gender roles and even decrease women's likelihood of marrying. Supporters of higher education for women, who were smaller in number and tended to reside in the Maritimes or Central Canada, argued that women should have the same right to a university education as men.

A main issue in the debate centred on the hazards of educating both genders together once they had reached the age of sexual maturity.[4] According to historian Martin Friedland, when a group of male students wrote to the president of the University of Toronto in the early 1880s, saying they supported the admission of women to that university and promising they would welcome them, the principal replied that his fear was that the men's reception of women would be "*too* cordial!"[5] Thus, while some Canadians were completely against the higher education of women in any circumstances, others supported women's higher education as long as it occurred in specifically women's institutions, so that the women would be safe from the advances of men and the men would not be distracted from their studies by the presence of women.

Numerous ladies' academies and ladies' colleges were in operation in Canada by the mid

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4Paul Axelrod, *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800-1914* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997), 95-99.

5Martin L Friedland, *The University of Toronto: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 89.

19th century, and several began to arrange affiliations with universities so that the women could obtain most of their courses at the ladies' colleges and then the remaining upper level courses at the closest university, either by attending class there or having a professor from the university teach a few courses at the women's academy. In the Maritimes, both Acadia Ladies Seminary and Mount Allison Ladies College affiliated with universities in the 1870s. In fact, Mount Allison became the first university in the British Empire to award a woman a degree when it conferred a B.Sc. on Grace Annie Lockhart in 1875. Lockhart had taken the majority of her courses at the affiliated Mount Allison's Ladies College, and the conferral of her degree received minimal attention in the press.[6]

Despite the intensity of the debate over the higher education of women, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec each had at least one university that admitted women by 1885. In the less-populated West there was far less argument over women's education and fewer instances of ladies' colleges; as provincial universities opened in the four western provinces between 1886 and 1906, each accepted women from the outset.[7]

Maritime Catholic Universities

If the issue of co-education was controversial overall, it was even more fraught among Roman Catholics. As in the United States, higher education for women in Canadian Catholic universities, both in women-only or co-educational settings, lagged behind Protestant institutions. Along with the usual concerns about the higher education of women, Catholic educators were also worried that co-education would distract male students and ultimately

6John G. Reid, "The Education of Women at Mount Allison, 1854-1914," *Acadiensis* 12:2 (Spring 1983), 3.

7Heidi MacDonald, "Prince Edward Island Women and Education off and on the Island to 1943," *Acadiensis* 34(Fall 2005)2: 96.

decrease the number of men pursuing religious vocations in Catholic universities. And so, the first instances of higher education for Catholic women in Canada occurred in Catholic women's colleges that were administered by women religious, commonly called nuns.

The Maritimes had six Catholic men's colleges by World War I: St Francis Xavier in Antigonish, St. Mary's in Halifax, St. Thomas in Chatham, Ste.-Anne in Church Point, St.-Joseph in Memramcook, Sacré-Coeur in Caraquet, and St. Dunstan's in Charlottetown. All provided undergraduate education, but equally importantly for the Catholic Church, these institutions were considered breeding grounds for vocations to the priesthood. Of these diocesan schools, only one, St. Francis Xavier, developed formal ties with a ladies college. St. Bernard's Ladies Academy in Antigonish had been operated by sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame (Montreal) since 1883. The CND had a long established reputation for excellence in teaching and Bishop John Cameron was very fortunate to procure them for the new school. In 1894, the Academy began an affiliation with St. Francis Xavier. Three years later, in 1897, more than twenty years after Mount Allison University graduated its first woman, St. Francis Xavier became the first Catholic university in North America to confer degrees on women. Four women, all of whom had begun their studies at St. Bernard's, were awarded Bachelor of Arts degrees. Shortly thereafter, St. FX even adopted a limited form of co-education when St. Bernard students, chaperoned by CNDs, began attending some regular classes with the boys on the St. FX campus.[8]

Two decades later, Mount St. Vincent Ladies' College in Halifax became the second Maritime Catholic institution to offer university education to women. Between 1914 and 1925,

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8James D. Cameron, *For the People: A History of St. Francis Xavier University* (Montreal: St. Francis Xavier University and McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), pp. 76-78, 97, 124. Mixing men and women in the same classroom was one of the innovations that sparked a near mutiny against Rector Thompson at the time.

women could obtain the first two years of a bachelor's degree at the college, and then finish their degree at Dalhousie. After 1925, Mount St Vincent University began granting its own degrees. Despite these developments, the acceptance of women students to the Maritimes' other Catholic universities was much slower. While women students were very occasionally admitted in exceptional circumstances, formal policies to accept women were only implemented much later, coming only in the 1960s for both St. Mary's and University Ste.-Anne.[9] Clearly, the Maritime region was not quick to exploit the educational precedents that it had set.

A Little Learning. . .

The situation for Prince Edward Island women was particularly unfortunate. By the First World War, Nova Scotia had four universities that accepted women and New Brunswick had two. Prince Edward Island had none. Nevertheless, for those women that stayed on-Island, higher education was available. From the time cost-cutting politicians merged the provincial Normal School with publically operated Prince of Wales College in 1879, Island women and men had mixed in a post-secondary environment. But Prince of Wales College was not a university, and until 1932 offered only a three-year program, the first two of which were grades eleven and twelve, while the final year was equivalent to the first year of university. Beginning in 1932, a fourth year was added, elevating Prince of Wales to full junior college status and allowing graduating students to matriculate into the third year of a university program. Most Prince of Wales students didn't stay that long, opting instead for one or two years of College work in order to qualify for a teacher's license. The teacher-training function helps account for the high proportion of women in Prince of Wales' enrolment. They generally accounted for over 60% of

9E-mail correspondence with Hansel Cook, Archivist, St Mary's University, 31 August 2004. St. Mary's late foray into co-education is probably explained by the parallel presence of a Catholic degree-granting woman's college, Mount St.Vincent, in the same city.

the student body during the 1930s.[10] Between 1934 and 1942, 37 women continued into fourth year, compared to 86 men, almost reversing the gender proportions in the overall enrollment.[11] The upper year program allowed these Island women, both Protestants and Catholics, to seek a higher education close to home. Completing their degree remained another story.

In the early 20th century, the only degree-granting institution on Prince Edward Island remained St. Dunstan's University. The little diocesan college traced its roots to 1831, when the Roman Catholic Bishop of Charlottetown founded St. Andrew's College, which re-opened near Charlottetown as St. Dunstan's College in 1855. After 1892, an affiliation agreement with Quebec's Laval University allowed St. Dunstan's students to attend the Island campus but earn degrees from Laval.[12] In 1917, provincial legislation granted St. Dunstan's its own university charter, but it would be 1941 before the college administration felt the school was strong enough to grant degrees in its own name.[13] If Island women wanted to earn a university degree "at home," St. Dunstan's was the only option, which for decades, meant no option at all.

It was not Island women's lack of interest in university education that encouraged St Dunstan's men-only admittance policy. Between the 1880s and 1942, the year St Dunstan's

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10In nine of thirteen years between 1929 and 1942, the percentage was 60% or better, topping out at 67%, although the percentage was in the 50s for four consecutive years during the mid-'30s, the low being 50% in the 1936-37 academic year. The overall average for the period was 61%. These statistics were compiled from enrolment lists published in the annual Prince of Wales Calendars, 1930-31 to 1942-43, UPEI Archives, Robertson Library, University of PEI, Charlottetown [henceforth UPEIA].

11Ibid. There were 37 women among 123 students registered in fourth year during this time period. A list of students actually receiving their fourth-year certificate, published in the 1942-43 PWC Calendar includes 23 women, 27% of the total fourth-year graduates. Between 1893 and 1934, when the maximum college course was only three years, 200 of 490 students completing third year were women, a whopping 41%. Obviously, much closer analysis of such statistics might be done.

12Edward MacDonald, 169-71. St. Dunstan's conformed its classical program to Laval's, and students wrote exams set by, and marked at, the Quebec university.

13As summarized in Edward MacDonald, especially pp. 3-18, 54-57, 169-71, 266-69, 287-335. During this period, St. Dunstan's was officially a "university," but popularly referred to as "St. Dunstan's College," even by its own faculty.

officially began to admit women, approximately five hundred PEI women attended universities off the Island, many of them having already completed as much of their education as possible at Prince of Wales. The vast majority of these women sought bachelor's degrees, but a few also earned professional degrees in areas such as law, medicine, and pharmacy.[14] It is not well known, for example, that a woman from St Peter's Bay, Annie Marion MacLean (c.1870-1934), received a bachelor's and master's degree from Acadia University in the 1890s and then in 1902 became the first Canadian woman to earn a Ph.D. in sociology.[15] Despite the Island's supposed conservatism, statistics suggest that Island women were as likely to go to university as women from any other Canadian province, despite having to leave home to do so.

Dangerous Liaisons

It is hard to know at this distance how much the idea that women as well as men might earn degrees at St. Dunstan's was unthinkable and how much it was simply unthought-of. To apply to the Diocese of Charlottetown the notoriously conservative attitude among Quebec clergy towards women's "proper" place in society is tempting – many, perhaps most, Island priests attended seminary in Quebec – but simplistic. St. Dunstan's attitude did not need to borrow from the Quebec Church's peculiar sense of its own destiny to deny any obligation to provide Island women with higher education. Nevertheless, the fact that Roman Catholic social teaching did not place a premium on female education until the 1930s provided a moral principle to clothe economic pragmatism.

14Heidi MacDonald, 97. How many of these were Roman Catholic women is hard to estimate.

15Juanita Rossiter, *Gone to the Bay: A History of the St Peter's Fire District Area* [2000], 232. Heather MacMillan, 'Annie Marion MacLean: The Public Career of a Maritime Progressive in the United States, 1896-1934,' (Honours thesis, Acadia University,1987), 1. MacLean earned her doctorate from the University of Chicago.

In the early decades of the 20th century, St. Dunstan's administration toyed with the idea of agricultural colleges and missionary schools, but it did not contemplate a female branch. It is true that the dreams of expansion were driven mostly by financial opportunism, that is, the prospect of willing funders, rather than philosophy; St. Dunstan's had always struggled financially, since tuition fees tailored to Islanders' means meant income that inevitably fell well short of College needs. But it is also true that women weren't much wanted at St. Dunstan's – at least, not as students.

There had always been women among the support staff on campus, performing traditional "women's work," that is, cleaning, cooking, and laundry. Between 1903 and 1916, the female domestics were French-speaking nuns, first from the Congregation Les Filles de Jésus, a community expelled from France during an anti-clerical interlude there, then from the Little Sisters of the Holy Family, based in Sherbrooke, Quebec. In 1916, the Bishop of Charlottetown, Henry J. O'Leary, founded an Island-based order, the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha, to take over the domestic chores on campus and to serve the Diocese in a variety of other ways. The Marthas were an English-speaking order, but when increasing workloads forced the College sisters to hire additional help, they turned to French-speakers from the Magdalen Islands and Island Acadian communities.

How high the language barrier was between anglophone student and francophone staff remains unclear, but the intent to discourage fraternization between them was deliberate and earnest. St. Dunstan's officials considered women a moral danger, providing an occasion of sin even as they undermined potential religious vocations among males. Moreover, the college could ill afford to be the subject of gossip in the larger community, where Protestants and Catholics lived in watchful equilibrium. Not only did the possibility of sexual liaisons need to be

minimized, it had to be seen as minimal. The same considerations applied to the notion of women university students.

Higher education for women may not have been condemned outright in the Diocese of Charlottetown, but it was clearly not a priority. As early as 1912, an Island sister in the Congregation of Notre Dame had asked permission from Laval University to complete a B.A. degree as "an extra-mural student" through St. Dunstan's College as a way to enhance her teaching credentials at Charlottetown's Notre Dame Academy.[16] Father Tom Curran, a former rector, supported her request but noted , "it would be out of the question for her to attend the College." Instead, she would study privately and "take the examinations outside of the College under the supervision of some person appointed by the University."[17] In 1916, Bishop Henry O'Leary renewed the request, this time with the sisters being privately tutored by St. Dunstan's professors. Diocesan need drove O'Leary's proposal: to qualify for government salary grants the Sisters must either earn a teachers' license from Prince of Wales College or hold a bachelor's degree from St. Dunstan's.[18] Laval discouraged both requests. Although it had no objection to the Charlottetown Sisters obtaining a special baccalaureate degree for women, it preferred established practice, which would require the Island sisters to take the requisite exams at the Congregation of Notre Dame mother house in Montreal.[19]

A few years later, the unwelcome prospect of co-education became a reason to question

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16Sr. Saint Agnes, Notre Dame Academy, to Rev. A. E. Gosselin, Rector, Laval University, Quebec, 12 October 1912, Laval University Archives, 177/48a.

17Rev. Thomas Curran to Rev. A. E. Gosselin, Rector, Laval University, 12 November 1912, Laval University Archives, 177/63B.

18This appears to have been a temporary concession on the part of the Island government, since out-migration had caused a severe teacher shortage in the province.

19See the margin note on *ibid.* See, also, Bp. Henry J. O'Leary to Mgr. Francois Pelletier, Rector, Laval University, 20 March 1916; Pelletier to O'Leary, 11 April 1916 (both Archives of the Diocese of Charlottetown); and Sister Saint-Anne-Marie, CND, to Mgr. Pelletier, 3 April 1916, Laval University Archives, 185/19B. My thanks to Professor Scott Lee of UPEI's Modern Languages Department, for help with the translations here.

the Carnegie Corporation's ambitious proposal to fund a federation of Maritime universities. As Rector G. J. MacLellan warned, the SDU Board of Governors "would not agree [to] . . . the co-education of the sexes in the same institution, owing to the reports of immorality that come from institutions so situated." At the end of the decade, when the Carnegie Corporation offered to fund science facilities if they could be shared with Prince of Wales College, Principal S. N. Robertson was dubious about the prospects: "Though Rector [James] Murphy did not attach much weight to it, I scarcely believe that the Church authorities of his institution, who maintain sex segregation in their grade schools [in urban areas, at least], would admit mixed classes to St. Dunstan's."[20]

For various other reasons, neither Murphy nor Robertson was keen on sharing Carnegie-financed science facilities, so Robertson's reading of SDU attitudes requires caution. Even so, such attitudes were hardly atypical. At PWC, men and women might be educated in the same room, but they still used separate stairs and entrances, and were segregated outside the classroom.[21] It is worth noting, too, that by the 1920s the SDU Board's objection was not to university education for women, but to "co-education of the sexes in the same institution."[22] Of course, since the Diocese of Charlottetown hadn't the resources to fund a separate college for women, the distinction made little difference at the time.

Sister Students

While the SDU administration was clearly not keen to make the university co-educational, in the

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20Both statements are quoted in Edward MacDonald, p. 415.

21Marian Bruce, *A Century of Excellence: Prince of Wales College, 1860-1969* (Charlottetown: Island Studies Press and PWC Alumni Association, 2005): 143, 153.

22Its views echoed Church teaching. In his 1929 encyclical "Rappresentanti in Terra," Pope Pius XI commented, "False also and harmful to Christian education is the so-called method of 'co-education.'" See Claudia Carlen Ihm, ed. *The Papal Encyclicals, 1903-1939* (Raleigh, N.C.: McGrath Publishing, 1931): 363. The Pope was particularly concerned about co-education during adolescence.

late 1930s, they were compelled to seriously consider a request on behalf of two religious sisters. Sister Mary Paula (MacPhee), the mother general of the Congregation of St. Martha, had been lobbying the university rector for some time to allow sisters of St. Martha to attend SDU. Several factors converged in the late 1930s to make the request very difficult to refuse. The Congregation, which had been serving St. Dunstan's for more than two decades, had recently been asked to provide grades eleven and twelve in the district school in Kinkora. The provincial Department of Education required that teachers of these grades have university degrees, but the Congregation could not afford to send its sisters out of the province to obtain them. It had not yet recovered financially from administering key diocesan institutions, the Charlottetown Hospital, St. Vincent's Orphanage, and Sacred Heart Home, through the very difficult years of the Great Depression.

Couldn't the administration of SDU allow two sisters to quietly take classes at SDU so that upon graduation they could offer grades eleven and twelve in a district school? The Sisters would hardly be visible; they would take their meals and spend time between classes at the existing convent right on the SDU campus where the sisters who provided domestic service to St Dunstan's lived. Did SDU officials really think that two *nuns* would bother the other St Dunstan's students? How could the rector refuse such a benign request that would ultimately be so beneficial to Island Catholics? Besides, this was not really a change in the university's men-only admittance policy, but rather an exception. And if it did not work out, St Dunstan's would not be bound to accept any more Sister-students.

During 1938-39, two Marthas, Sr. John of the Cross (Jeanette MacDonald) and Sr. Margarita (Agnes Kelly), took high school classes at St. Dunstan's. According to a recent history of the Marthas, the two sisters were accepted "after much begging," and thus became the first

women ever enroled at St. Dunstan's.[23] The following year, in the fall of 1939, more history was made when Sister Mary Peter (Bernice Cullen) and Sister Mary Ida (Mary Jeanette Coady) became the first women ever in the university program at St. Dunstan's.

In addition to their special status as professed women, the Sister-students probably benefitted, in terms of acceptance on campus, from the increased flexibility in gender roles caused by the outbreak of the Second World War. Certainly, wartime enlarged female horizons, allowing women to move temporarily into jobs and roles normally preserved for males, and softening attitudes towards "acceptable" female behavior. In her graduation profile, the *St. Dunstan's Red and White* would connect Sister Mary Ida's admittance to the mobilization of men for the war: "The Fall of '39–War! Mobilization! And the loss of many of our best students to the ranks! As compensation . . . S.D.U. gained one of its most outstanding students, Sister Mary Ida." An even stronger argument for the sisters' suitability to St Dunstan's was their academic success: both Sister Mary Ida and Sister Mary Peter earned the highest grades in their classes, graduating in 1941 and 1943, respectively. Their success spoke to the intellectual ability of women students in general, and surely made some of the faculty at SDU more amenable to the co-educational policy that was soon to be adopted.

But their success also seemed to make some people uncomfortable, as the rules were quietly changed to exclude Sister Mary Peter from getting the award as top graduate. Previously, the prize had been given to the student with the highest average in his graduating year. In 1941 that student was Sister Mary Peter, but the terms of the award were amended to reward the highest average over four years of the college program. Because Sister Mary Peter had received

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23See Sister Ellen Mary Cullen and Sister Bernice Cullen, *By the Flame of the Lantern: A History of the Sisters of St. Martha of Prince Edward Island, 1916-2000* (Charlottetown: Sisters of St. Martha, 2005), p. 54 and 189.

transfer credits and only attended for two years, she was not eligible.[24] In 1943, Sister Mary Ida also had the best marks among senior year students, but she, too, was deemed ineligible for the prize according to the new rules.

And yet, the Sisters did receive a measure of formal approval. At the 1941 convocation ceremony, the first to grant St. Dunstan's degrees, they received six of the twenty-one academic prizes awarded,[25] and Sister Mary Peter was singled out in both the Rector's report and the address to the graduates delivered by Rev. Dr. Patrick MacMahon. Ambiguously mixing class standing with alphabetical order, Rector Murphy noted that Sister Mary Peter "stands first in a class of fifteen graduates. She can, therefore, claim the distinction not only of being the first woman graduate of this college, but also of being the first graduate to receive the Bachelor of Arts diploma with the seal of St. Dunstan's affixed." It was, added Father Pat MacMahon, "a red letter day" for the little Catholic school, not only because it had activated its university charter, but because it had graduated a Sister of St. Martha. "It is a happy event because I think you can see today foreshadowed as it were what her future life will be. It will consist of disinterested service to God: in her allotted sphere she will give of the abundance of her own heart and mind already consecrated to God, to the world about her."[26] She was a model, MacMahon continued, for the male graduates in their "wider field of influence." MacMahon was a priest, not a prophet. Sister Mary Peter would be model alright, but just as much for women as for her male classmates.[27]

24Interview with Sr. Bernice Cullen, Charlottetown, by Heidi MacDonald. See also, "Prize List at S.D.U.," *Guardian*, 27 May 1941, p. 8.

25"Prize List at S.D.U.," *Guardian*, 27 May 1941, p. 8.

26"Commencement Exercises at S.D.U.," Charlottetown *Guardian*, 27 May 1941, p. 3.

27If given to hair-splitting, one might argue that fellow students slightly diminished Sister Mary Peter's accomplishment. Women students are not mentioned at all in Eugene Gorman's valedictory address, and while the *Red and White*'s editorialist is effusive about Sister Mary Peter, "a brilliant student always," citing "one of the most distinguished academic careers in the history of the College," he grants her only "the distinction of being the first Religious

“These Were Strong Women!”

The Marthas had nudged open the door to co-education at St. Dunstan’s, and the first Sisters had ventured inside. At the time, the precedent they set was distinctly under-appreciated. Allowing religious sisters to attend St. Dunstan’s did not exactly commit the university administration to a policy of co-education; the sisters could be explained as exceptional cases admitted for diocesan purposes. Nor were they integrated into the social landscape that was so much a part of life at a residential college.

As one early ‘40s high school student remembers, “I never really gave the nuns a thought. . . . They were there all the time, part of the machinery.”[28] A classmate maintains that male students weren’t even sure exactly why the sisters were in class.[29] The nature of early 1940s pedagogy meant they were unlikely to find out. The St. Dunstan’s classroom was no place for lively discussion among students. Professors spoke; students listened. They questioned; students answered. When class was over and the lively, informal mechanisms of student life geared up, the student Sisters simply faded back into the fabric of the campus. It was hard to think of them as fellow students when they looked so much older, were so clearly apart, seemed so embedded in the St. Dunstan’s establishment. In such circumstances, it was easy to forget that behind the sisters’ concealing habit and dignified mien was someone’s sister or cousin. “They kind of ignored me,” recalls Sister Bernice Cullen. “The students didn’t bother me. Because I was a nun I guess they had a good deal of respect for me. . . . but, you know, they didn’t make themselves

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Sister ever graduated by St. Dunstan’s,” as if that somehow stopped short of co-education. See *St. Dunstan’s Red and White*, 32(April 1941)2, p. 132, and “Ad Multos Annos,” pp. 146-47.

28Telephone interview with Michael Hennessey, Charlottetown, by Edward MacDonald, 27 June 2006.

29Telephone interview with John Eldon Green, Charlottetown, by Edward MacDonald, 21 June 2006.

very sociable either."[30] The social gulf between sister and male student, then, was obviously real, but it may have had as much to do with socio-religious hierarchy and circumstance as with gender.

That the Sisters of St. Martha were a known entity and sexually unthreatening to college authorities worked in favour of their acceptance as students at St. Dunstan's, even as it worked against their full recognition as co-educational pioneers. For male students, the first lay women students were at the time more obviously exotic and had a far more visible impact on the college community. For many alumni from the period, both men and women, co-education wore bobby socks, not a nun's habit.

The Summer of '42

St. Dunstan's University ran in Gertrude Butler's family: her brother (a diocesan priest) and two of her uncles were alumni. Butler was determined to have a university degree as well. By the spring of 1942, she had completed the four-year program at Prince of Wales College, and now needed two more years of university work to complete her Bachelor of Arts degree. Neither she nor her father, a potato shipper and warehouse owner, could afford for her to attend an off-Island school. That left St. Dunstan's.

"Why is it that St. Dunstan's refuses to take girls?" Butler asked Father J. P. E. O'Hanley, St. Dunstan's philosophy professor, on the way back from a Canadian Federation of Catholic College Students Conference at St. Francis Xavier University in November 1941. "When did St. Dunstan's refuse?" O'Hanley chided. "Don't say St. Dunstan's refused until you apply and have been turned down."[31] Butler may not have needed much prompting; she was nothing if not

30Interview with Sister Bernice Cullen, CSM, by Heidi MacDonald, 22 April 1998.

31Interview with Mgr. J. P. E. O'Hanley, Charlottetown, 22 July 1982, by Edward MacDonald. Butler was a delegate representing the Catholic Collegiate Club at Prince of Wales

combative. “Get a good argument and you will find ‘Gertie’ battling away for dear life,” her PWC graduation profile teased. “Right or wrong she always manages to get there somehow.”[32]

The first published account of what happened next appeared in a diocesan fund-raising newsletter in 1945. In it Butler makes her bid to attend St. Dunstan’s almost an accident. “Way back in the spring of 1942, when I was about to leap into an institution of higher learning, somebody asked me, ‘What university are you going to?’ Very innocently and very absentmindedly I responded, ‘To St. Dunstan’s.’ Had I told a lie? Two girls and I determined to find out, and I suggested that we should ask St. Dunstan’s for the answer. We did.”[33]

Forty years on, Butler remembered a more deliberate campaign: “In 1942, about to graduate from P.W.C., I dared to challenge the masculinity at St. Dunstan’s by writing Mgr. James A. Murphy, the Rector of S.D.U., and by visiting (more than once) the Most Rev. J. A. O’Sullivan, Bishop of Charlottetown, to request that St. Dunstan’s University be made co-educational. It was in late summer that Father [John] Sullivan, the Registrar, came to our home to say that they had granted my request.”[34] Like some Biblical Danielle, Butler had bearded the co-educational lion in his den and tamed it.

How – or even whether – Gertie Butler persuaded Bishop O’Sullivan is less evident. In December 1942, the *St. Dunstan’s Red and White*, would recall, “The adoption of a co-educational system was a subject much discussed of late years by the authorities of the

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College. In communicating with the authors, she never mentioned this conversation, but contemporary references confirm both were at the conference [See “Catholic Collegiate Club Report,” *Prince of Wales College Times* (December 1941): 39; and *Red and White* 33(December 1941)1: p. 34].

32“Graduating Class 1942,” *Prince of Wales College Times* (May 1942): 43.

33“A Graduate Looks at St. Dunstan’s,” *Diocesan Campaign News*, 29 July 1945.

34Questionnaire response from Gertrude (Butler) O’Donnell, Florida, 1983. Butler’s initiative didn’t go unnoticed. See interview with Mary (Hennessey) Macdonald, Cardigan, by Edward MacDonald, 2 July 2006: “I knew Gertie Butler had been to see the Bishop.”

university."[35] Perhaps so, but the nature of the discussion went largely unrecorded. At the turn of the millennium, Dr. J. T. Croteau, St. Dunstan's Carnegie professor of sociology and economics during the 1930s, would write, "I have held a small conceit that it was I who persuaded Bishop O'Sullivan to admit women to St. Dunstan's. Probably a lot of other advisors were also doing persuading." Certainly, Father O'Hanley numbered himself among them. Interviewed in the 1980s, the ex-philosophy professor justified university education for females within a traditional conception of women's place in a modern world. After all, he observed, women "are as much human beings as you and I are; and they have a very important role to play." As the primary influence on young children, "mothers should be educated women, who knew the mind of the Church." At the same time, "they should be leaders in the community."[36]

On a more practical note, it might be argued that allowing women was meant to offset the loss of male students to military service. Perhaps so, but what the war took from SDU, it also gave back. Although enrolment sagged during the first two years of the war, it rose steadily after 1941 as wartime prosperity bankrolled a new generation of students.[37]

Perhaps this was the tenor of the co-education debate in the late 1930s and early '40s, but the official record contains only this terse announcement by the Bishop of Charlottetown to a meeting of the St. Dunstan's Board of Governors: "His Excellency then announced that girl

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35"Co-education Comes to S.D.U.," *St. Dunstan's Red and White*, 34(December 1942): 27.

36Interview with Mgr. J. P. E. O'Hanley, Charlottetown, 22 July 1982, by Edward MacDonald. Such views may seem like after-the-fact rationalization, but they are loudly echoed in Mary Creighan's "Education for Women," in the *St. Dunstan's Red and White*, 44(Autumn 1952)1: 23-25: "A true education for women is one which concerns the whole woman, her intellect, her emotions, her will, and gives her the means to be able to live her life as a true woman and a true Christian." (Of course, a "true woman" remained a wife and mother, but an educated wife and mother, alert to "the false notions of womanhood which she has seen so attractively portrayed in movies, advertisements and the literature of the modern era.")

37According to St. Dunstan's annual calendars, the enrolments for 1939-40 through 1944-45 were 128, 122, 126, 160, and 210.

students would be admitted to the College years and that application had already been received from girls residing in the city."[38] Clearly, though, the co-education of "girls" was part of a larger process of acceptance that was mental as much as actual.

Nor was the process always deliberate. While Gertie Butler self-consciously challenged St. Dunstan's male monopoly, Mary Hennessey backed into history. Hennessey had completed two years at Prince of Wales College by 1942, and was contemplating a career in nursing. All through the summer of 1942, her mother nagged her to go down to the Charlottetown Hospital and apply for the nursing program there. But Hennessey kept putting things off. She was not quite 18 years old and she was having far too much fun going out dancing with the RAF personnel stationed at the wartime airbase on the outskirts of town. Nursing school, she well knew, had a strict curfew, so she was taking her time about applying.

Out on her bicycle one day in August 1942 Hennessey met her friend Eileen MacPhee on Kent Street. "Do you have to go to St. Dunstan's?" MacPhee asked. "I don't think so!" cried Hennessey, who had no such intention. "Well, you'd better go home," said MacPhee, "because I think you do." Sure enough, Hennessey's parents, tired of her dithering, had decided that if she wasn't going into nursing she was going to college. They had enrolled her at St. Dunstan's University, where her brother Mike was already in high school, and all of her tears and protestations couldn't change their minds. Mary Hennessey would be a "Saint," whether she wanted or not.[39]

Butler and Hennessey probably represent two ends of the spectrum for the first cohort of lay women students. They were joined at the university by two other Charlottetown women,

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38Minutes of the Board of Governors of St. Dunstan's University, 1942, St. Dunstan's University Archives [henceforth SDUA], Chancery Office, Diocese of Charlottetown, Charlottetown, PEI.

39Interview with Mary (Hennessey) Macdonald, Cardigan, by Edward MacDonald, 2 July 2006. Her family, she says, was determined to have someone in college.

Eileen MacPhee and Kathleen “Kay” MacNeely , both classmates of Hennessey at Prince of Wales, and by a Quebec student, Suzel Thibault, from Riviere du Loup, whose brother Marc was already attending St. Dunstan’s. Thibault and Butler entered as a third-year students; the other three joined the Freshman class.

While Suzel Thibault boarded with the Sisters of St. Martha at St. Vincent’s Orphanage, across the road from St. Dunstan’s, the four Charlottetown coeds commuted from home as day scholars.[40] Already neighbours, the Charlottetonians customarily travelled back and forth to campus together, often stopping on the way home at Milton’s Old Spain on Kent Street for a gossipy milkshake.[41] In the strictly regimented routine that governed college life, hanging out with male students would have been difficult in any case, but special care was taken to keep the men and women apart. They were not escorted on and off the campus by Rector Murphy, as some later stories suggested, but they were asked to sit at the back of the class, to prevent lovelorn male students from gawking at them. They also dined separately with the College Sisters in their convent, and between classes, they were given the top floor of the new Science Building as a study hall and social lounge.[42] Unable to afford a separate women’s college, St. Dunstan’s was, in effect, providing the women with a parallel space within the university. It was a hybrid sort of co-education; the women were in, but not fully of, the campus. Yet, informally and unofficially, they were already very much a part of student life in a way that the women religious could not be.

The presence of bright, attractive young lay women students seems to have been both novel and exciting for most male students. “Meandering about the campus and along the shady

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40Once co-education became established, the Marthas at the Orphanage fitted up a wooden building on the grounds as a makeshift residence for female students. See Cullen, *By the Flame of the Lantern*, p. 67.

41Interview with Mary (Hennessey) Macdonald.

42Interview with Mary (Hennessey) Macdonald.

college paths in early September, ‘old boys’ were at first startled, then pleased, at the sight of coeds strolling about or dashing from class to class intermingled with the boys. . . . ,” the St. Dunstan’s *Red and White* observed near the end of first term. “The innovation, made this year largely as an experiment, is proving most profitable from almost every point of view. The faculty have certainly expressed nothing but complete satisfaction, and the boys – well – they heartily endorse the system. The girls themselves? ‘Swell’ was the very expressive reply given when they were approached on the subject.”[43]

While the presence of religious sisters in the classroom had rated no mention in the college quarterly almost until the moment of Sister Mary Peter’s graduation, the *Red and White*’s “Nonsense Avenue” took on a distinctly romantic profile in 1942-43, peppered with jokes, spoofs, and teasing allusions to the female coeds. It was actually easiest for the male and female Saints to mix off-campus, during the Thursday afternoon socials at the Holy Name Hall, at sanctioned sporting events, and on the handful of free nights that residential students were granted each term. “There was no lack of dates while we were at St. Dunstan’s,” recalled Butler four decades later. Mary Hennessey agreed.[44]

Despite their segregation within campus, the pioneer lay women felt accepted by both faculty and students.[45] If there was any opposition to co-education it was carefully camouflaged. Interviewed forty years later, one of Butler’s classmates, Frank Aylward (later, as Father Frank Aylward, St. Dunstan’s long-time bursar), agreed that women were liked, even admired, but at

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43“Co-education Comes to S.D.U.,” *St. Dunstan’s Red and White* 34(December 1942): 26-27.

44Questionnaire response from Gertrude (Butler) O’Donnell, and interview with Mary (Hennessey) Macdonald. Other questionnaire responses from early coeds amplify this observation.

45See interview with Mary (Hennessey) Macdonald and questionnaire response by Gertrude (Butler) O’Donnell.

least some students still considered St. Dunstan's a boy's school.[46] And while the first women, perhaps, couldn't afford to fail, their classmates' male pride couldn't stand for the women to succeed too well. According to Aylward, some male students in Butler's year got together to ensure that she didn't win any prizes by having one man specialize in each subject in an effort to gain the top mark.[47] In the end, Butler did win one prize, for chemistry, and graduated *cum laude*.

There were two Sisters of St. Martha in Mary Hennessey's class at St. Dunstan's, and she remembers the friendly bond that formed between the women students, both lay and religious.[48] The connection was symbolic as well as personal, but that may have passed unnoticed. Even if Butler and Hennessey knew that nuns had preceded them as students at St. Dunstan's, they could hardly appreciate how much the Congregation's quiet lobbying had softened official attitudes towards the risks and benefits of allowing women at St. Dunstan's or how gradually diocesan attitudes had changed since the turn of the century. Under the circumstances, Gertrude Butler might be excused for thinking her blow alone had knocked down the door.

Conclusion

Four more lay women, two "Freshmen" and two high schools students, joined four returning coeds at St. Dunstan's in September 1943, but the fall after Butler graduated in 1944, there were just five women enrolled at St. Dunstan's, two lay women and three women religious, out of a total enrolment of 201. The co-educational slump was only temporary. In 1945, the return of peace, an economic boom, and the provision of Sedes Sapientiae Scholarships for women

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46This observation is based on interviews with a number of male students from the 1940s and early '50s, as well questionnaire responses from both male and female students.

47Interview with Father Frank Aylward, Fort Augustus, by Edward MacDonald, 2 December 1982. "These were strong women!" Aylward noted approvingly.

48These were Sr. Margaret Marie Devereaux and Sr. Mary Eugene Kilbride. Interview with Mary (Hennessey) Macdonald.

students generated a fresh wave of coeds.[49] During the 1945-46 academic year, there were eighteen women, including two nuns, at St. Dunstan's. They considered that co-education had now been formalized, and in 1949, a woman was chosen valedictorian for the first time. While it would be another decade before St. Dunstan's was able to provide a women's residence, Marian Hall (set pointedly apart from the rest of the buildings on campus and presided over by the Marthas), co-education had clearly come to stay.

Historical trends are easy to make out from a distance, but they're harder to see up close. Only one of the first lay women at St. Dunstan's actually graduated there. Suzel Thibault, the Quebecois junior, spent only one year at St. Dunstan's, leaving to marry the university's young French instructor.[50] Eileen MacPhee transferred to St. Francis Xavier University.[51] Kay MacNeely went off to become a lab technician. In 1944, Mary Hennessey, one of history's most reluctant coeds, married a Saint, Ronan Macdonald, Class of '43. It was only later that she came to appreciate how much she and her classmates had helped shape history.

For her part, E. Gertrude Butler, Class of '44, always warmed to her role as history-maker. When she earned her Master of Social Work degree from the Catholic University of America in 1947, she invited J. A. O'Sullivan, now Archbishop of Kingston, to her graduation. In his graceful demurral, O'Sullivan wrote, "You have done wonders since that evening when you put the heat on me to allow young ladies to enter St. Dunstan's."[52] Even the Bishop, it would appear, was inclined to overlook the young ladies of the Congregation of St. Martha.

By the time Gertie Butler graduated from St. Dunstan's, the Marthas had already gone

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49According to *The Red and White*, 37(November 1945)1: 29, Father J. P. E. O'Hanley, SDU's philosophy professor was "mainly instrumental" in having the bursaries for women established.

50Interview with Mary (Hennessey) Macdonald. Macdonald maintained sporadic contact with Thibault for a time after SDU.

51Where she met and married Danny Gallivan, future Hall of Fame hockey broadcaster.

52J. A. O'Sullivan to Gertrude (Butler) O'Donnell, June 1947, PARO 4220.

from being students to becoming faculty. In 1943, Sister Mary Ida, Class of '43, joined the High School staff and later that year, she became College librarian, a "temporary" appointment that lasted many years.[53] In 1966, Sister Mary Peter (Bernice Cullen), Class of '41 *summa cum laude*, now Dr. Cullen, joined the Religious Studies department at St. Dunstan's. Her university career there spanned the creation of the University of Prince Edward Island. By the time she retired from university teaching in 1979, women were so much accepted at university that the term "coed" was slipping out of usage. But neither Bernice Cullen nor Gertrude Butler might have predicted that by 2005, women would comprise 65% of the enrolment at the Island's only university.[54] Or that educational experts would be pondering a new dilemma: how to persuade more males to attend university and, once they got there, how to get them to perform as well as the women.

Sources

This article expands on – and in some cases revises – our published work, chiefly, Heidi MacDonald, "Prince Edward Island Women and Education Off and On the Island to 1943," *Acadiensis* 34(Fall 2005); and Edward MacDonald, *The History of St. Dunstan's* University, 1855-1956 (Charlottetown: Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation and Board of Governors of St. Dunstan's University, 1989). It also draws on interviews and questionnaires, some old and some new, with participants in the history we're exploring. Among those interviewed were Mgr. J. P. E. O'Hanley, Father Frank Aylward, Father Thomas MacLellan, Sr.

53Other early staff members were Sister Cecilia Joseph (Gallant), who took over the college choir in 1939 and Sister Mary Gerard Lannon, who taught typing beginning in 1937, worked in the Extension Department, and later became secretary to the Rector. (See Cullen, p. 190).

54My thanks for this statistic to Dr. Clive Keen of UPEI's Department of Lifelong Learning, who is currently researching gender trends in university enrollment.

Bernice Cullen, and Michael Hennessey (all by Ed MacDonald, back in 1982-83); and Sr. Bernice Cullen (by Heidi MacDonald), Mary (Hennessey) Macdonald, John Eldon Green, Michael Hennessey, Frank Ledwell, and Ronan Macdonald (in 2006). The questionnaires were filled out by SDU alumni back in 1982-83, and include a signed response from Gertrude (Butler) O'Donnell. Other primary sources include items from the St. Dunstan's University Archives (held by the Diocese of Charlottetown), plus newspaper accounts of convocations and copies of the *St. Dunstan's Red and White*, all available through the Special Collections Room, Robertson Library, University of PEI. Brief but telling references to the Marthas and co-education can be found in Sister Ellen Mary Cullen and Sister Bernice Cullen, *By the Flame of the Lantern: A History of the Sisters of St. Martha of Prince Edward Island, 1916-2000* (Charlottetown: Sisters of St. Martha, 2005). Marian Bruce's new history, *A Century of Excellence: Prince of Wales College, 1860-1969* (Charlottetown: Island Studies Press and PWC Alumni Association, 2005) provides useful references to women at the Island's other post-secondary institution, which we have supplemented by reference to PWC's annual calendars from the 1930s and early '40s as well as the *Prince of Wales College Times* for the period. Other important secondary sources include: Paul Axelrod, *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800-1914* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997); James D. Cameron, *For the People: A History of St. Francis Xavier University* (Montreal: St. Francis Xavier University and McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); Martin L Friedland, *The University of Toronto: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); John G. Reid, "The Education of Women at Mount Allison, 1854-1914," *Acadiensis* 12:2 (Spring 1983); and Laurence Shook, *Catholic Post-secondary Education in English-Speaking Canada, A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

Pictures:

Lily Seaman, Third Year Professor, PWC

Sr. Mary Henry and the makeshift accommodations at St. Vincent’s Orphanage

Sr. Mary Ida and Sr. Mary Peter

Gertie Butler

Mary Hennessey and the women of 1942

etc.