

A NOT-SO-DISTANT MIRROR

In 1912 Canada, an ambitious 26-year-old career woman was invited to accompany family friends on a cruise to Europe. She couldn't go. "Teachers," she wrote in a letter home to her mother, "will have to make more money before I ever see Paris."

Marion Nicholson, the woman in question, was pulling in a comparatively excellent salary teaching grade five at Royal Arthur School in southwest Montreal: 650 dollars a year!

That's a full 400 dollars more than her older sister, Edith, was earning at a missionary school in toney Westmount. And 150 dollars more than her younger sister, Flora, was earning as a first year teacher in grungy Griffintown.

Somewhat more than a top notch cook (480 dollars a year) and somewhat less than a highly-skilled hat maker (1000 dollars a year). Yes, teaching in Canada had come a long way since 1900 when the McGill's Carrie Derick had described the profession as low-paid, overcrowded and cheerless.

Still Europe wasn't in the cards for her.

You see, 'the demands on her purse' (as Marion put it) were heavy. Over and above her personal expenses – 20 dollars a month for room and board; a new fashionable hat each year (7.50 at Ogilvy); 10 cents a day for the streetcar and an occasional play at His Majesty's Theatre (50 cents for the cheap seats) – there were her family obligations.

In 1912, the Nicholsons were 'dead broke', in danger of losing their Richmond, Quebec home, Tighsolas, (lighthouse in Scottish Gaelic) to creditors. Time and time again Marion was called upon to bail them out. "I am sending you the 50 dollars from my raise," she writes in September of 1912. "I don't need it for I am not getting married, and that's what girls save for, isn't it, a trousseau?"

I know all this because I lately happened upon a trunk load of documents from the 1907-1913 era, letters, diaries and more. Although these papers reveal little about the classrooms of the day (darn!) they are a window on a truly pivotal era in history.

I've become quite knowledgeable about the 1910 era – and what a time it was! Had Marion made it to Paris in 1912, she would have found herself at the very epicenter of a massive cultural upheaval, occasioned by new technologies. Had she wandered north, uphill, to the heart of Montmartre, she might have found herself outside Picasso's studio, where he had unveiled, in 1907, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, a painting set in a Barcelona brothel that sent shock waves through the art community.

Worlds apart, you say. Why juxtapose the image of a prim Presbyterian pedagogue, her curves squeezed into a corset and shrouded in a "school marmish" (her words) shirtwaist suit with some angular, glaring ladies of the evening? Well, because Picasso created this iconic canvas in direct response to the changes happening around him in the world.

In Canada, we had the somewhat less sexy Royal Commission on Industrial Training and Technical Education, launched by Laurier in response to the economic challenges of the new Industrial Age. The final report, published in 1913, recommended, among many things, that education be compulsory for children 5 to 14 years of age. (Women's groups, especially, applauded.)

Back in her austere classroom in that institutional brick school building in Little Burgundy, Marion, the humble instructress, was surely sensing these shockwaves, on some level, at least.

Today, we are experiencing a similar cultural upheaval. All of Cyberspace can be called the epicenter, and some warehouse in Seattle or high-rise in Singapore might be the 2007 version of Picasso's studio. The best part: with digital technology is that any teacher, any student in any classroom anywhere can potentially place him/herself, ah, plunk on Pablo's lap...top.

Marion Nicholson quit teaching in 1913 to marry Hugh Blair. She had been depressed about work. "They have hired a mere boy out of school for the seventh form and given him 800 to start. It makes me sick."

She returned to the profession only in 1928 after being widowed and cut out of her husband's share of the family business. Not one to dwell on the past, she became a union activist and, eventually, President of the Provincial Association of Protestant Teachers during WWII.

When she died prematurely of a heart attack in 1948, the Montreal Gazette sang her praises on the editorial page. "With the death of Marion A. N. Blair, education in Quebec, indeed, the whole Dominion has suffered a serious loss."

The article told of her tireless efforts to win better salaries and pensions for teachers in Quebec and explained how she had represented the Canadian Teachers' Federation at a UNESCO education conference the previous summer. Where was this conference held? In Sèvres, a suburb of the French capital. So, Marion Nicholson, my husband's grandmother, did finally make it to Paris, and on a teacher's salary at that. |

For more about Marion visit www.tighsolas.ca

Dorothy Nixon, a freelance journalist from Montreal, writes for both pleasure and pain – but her passion, of late, has been researching the life of teachers in the Laurier Era. She also volunteers on the Literacy Committee of the Quebec Federation of Home and School Associations.

