

## Back to the Future, All Over Again

**The effect of the home on the level of the community is like the influence of the moon on the level of the sea. . . . Good homes minister to the welfare of people by ensuring conditions under which the children may be healthy, wholesome, and happy and be directed toward the exercise of right ambitions and aspirations.** – Report of the Commissioners. Royal Commission on *Industrial Training and Technical Education*, James W. Robertson, Head Commissioner. 1913.

On August 10, 1911, Flora Nicholson, 19, of Richmond, Quebec, received in the mail the little piece of paper she had been waiting for: a certificate for entry into the Model School Teachers' Program at Macdonald College in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue.

Her mother, Margaret, a truly gifted homemaker, and her two lesser skilled sisters, both schoolteachers, got right to work 'sewing her up'.

"So, my fate is sealed," Flora wrote in a letter to her Dad, Norman, who was away in Northern Ontario working on the Canadian Transcontinental Railway. "I am to be a school marm." Flora was happy and excited but, in truth, her life's path had long been established.

Sure, era magazines liked to run articles about women in unusual jobs – blacksmith, stock broker, even aeroplane pilot – but, in reality, in 1911, there were few professions open to 'respectable' females. Well-educated middle-class women who couldn't find husbands could hardly be expected to work as scullery maids or on a filthy factory floor.

Luckily for Flora, whose respectable, well-connected family was essentially broke, Macdonald Teachers' College was offering free tuition to country girls, with the expectation that, once trained in the latest methods, these women would return to their roots to teach. In this way, the 'Powers-That-Be' hoped to solve the pressing 'rural problem' in education.

Even luckier for Flora, who bloomed under the bright lights of the big city, there was an equally pressing 'city problem' in education. At graduation, she applied for a job at the Montreal Board and got work at William Lunn School in Griffintown.

There she taught manual training and nature study to some of the poorest children in the Western World. A brochure from the 1912 Montreal Child Welfare Exhibit, sponsored by various women's leagues, described families (largely immigrant) as living in cramped quarters "with little air, less light, where the floor flooded each spring with several inches of water; a breeding ground for tuberculosis and juvenile delinquency."

"I feel so sorry for my students, they have such difficult lives," wrote Flora, a wannabe suffragette, in a letter home to Mom.

All the Nicholson women, even mother Margaret, were politically active 'new women'. Indeed, the girls stepped out with the McGill botanist Carrie Derick, militant suffragist (or suffragette) and early advocate of birth control. But then, many teachers of the time were social progressives, even radicals.

It's ironic, then, that Macdonald College, which absorbed the McGill Normal School in 1907, grew out of the Macdonald-Robertson Movement. This was an educationally progressive movement, but one tainted by nostalgia for a gentler past. It aimed to solve the crushing social problems of the day – the menace of the city slum, the bedraggled state of the rural school – in part, by turning back the tide and restoring the old order.

Advocates believed that happy farms, homes and schools made for happy societies – not the other way around. And so, Macdonald College offered women a two-year course in the domestic sciences, with a diploma – to be presented, I presume, to a prospective husband on the first date.

To be fair, there was a sense, back then, that new technologies in the home were actually complicating things and making the 'old knowledge' of homemaking (Margaret's kind) obsolete.

Silly, silly, silly. So, why, then, dwell on this cockeyed chapter in Canadian history?

*Newsflash: January 22, 2008. The Guardian: Cooking classes to be made compulsory in UK schools.* This to combat childhood obesity. And look around. All kinds of jazzed up domestic science courses are cropping up in North American schools, aimed at both genders this time, and called Family and Consumer Science or Home Ecology or Fitness and Nutrition.

Seems there's a growing sense that we've become so de-skilled by technology over this past century that we are in thrall to corporate interests. We must restore some of the old knowledge, for our own health and the health of the environment.

Indeed, understanding how our dinner gets to our plate (or straight to our palate in the case of fast food) is not only a matter of personal empowerment; it's good global citizenship. The three R's (reduce, reuse, recycle) were baby steps. Now, we must move on to more daunting terminology: industrial food chain, carbon footprint, sustainable agriculture. So, here we are, once again, trying to solve colossal social problems from the bottom up using, ah, farms, homes and schools.

Except this time, it's not just a rural problem or a city problem. It's a planetary problem – and it's pressing, all right. |

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