

Gurli Woods & The AASSC

by Jette Ashlee

Gurli Woods was born in Denmark and educated in Denmark, Germany and Canada. Her active involvement in furthering Scandinavian studies in Canada began a couple of years after she had joined the Canadian Nordic Society of Ottawa. Dan G. Harris, one of eight founders and the moving force of the Society formed in 1963, called her one day and asked her whether she would be interested in seeking the nomination for president of the Society. At first, she was reluctant since she had never even served on the executive of the society. However, she agreed provided that Harris serve as general secretary. Gurli Woods was president of the society from 1979 to 1981, a period in which the membership increased considerably.

Woods worked on stressing the academic component of the Canadian Nordic Society. In 1981, she organized a Scandinavian Symposium, a day of presentations, films and discussions in the National Gallery. Prominent scholars and academics spoke about such subjects as the Viking voyages to Newfoundland, the architecture of Alvar Aalto, the medieval stave churches in Norway, Norse settlements in North America, war and peace in Scandinavia, Scandinavian loan words in Canadian English and Ingmar Bergman films. The day was a success and helped launch Woods into a career of fostering support and interest in Scandinavian subject matter.

In 1981, The Canadian Scandinavian Foundation invited Woods to serve on their Board of Directors. She is still a director of the Foundation, founded in 1951 by Scandinavian business and community leaders. The Foundation has a secretariat at McGill University which collects funds and administers scholarships to send qualified Canadians to Scandinavia for study and research. Woods moved on from the Canadian Nordic Society and the Canadian-Scandinavian Foundation to help form the Association for the Advancement of

Scandinavian Studies in Canada.

In late spring of 1981, Joan Magee, a librarian at the University of Windsor, contacted Maria McMillan, the Information Officer at the Embassy of Sweden in Ottawa, about the possibility of forming a learned society for Scandinavian Studies in Canada.

One of the first people Maria McMillan contacted was Woods at Carleton University, where Woods teaches comparative literature, women's studies and Danish language courses. In September 1981 Gurli Woods met with Joan Magee and in October an ad hoc committee for the formation of the Association for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies in Canada was established in Woods' office at Carleton. The committee consisted of four members: Joan Magee, Dr. Peter Williams (Carleton University), Dr. Edward Laine (National Library and Public Archives), and Dr. G. Woods, who agreed to chair the committee. Within a couple of days, the Dean of Arts at Carleton gave the Committee an "aid in formation" grant of \$500 which covered the cost of printing and mailing over 400 questionnaires across Canada, establishing a filing system, and printing and mailing the first issues of the *AASSC Newsbulletin* and *AASSC Membership and Research Directory* in January and February of 1982. The Nordic Embassies quickly joined in giving financial aid to this promising endeavour.

Woods recalls how she went to the national planning meeting of the Learned Societies on October 16, 1981 at the University of Ottawa as Chair of a committee of four people and no other members, and how she frankly asked the Learned Societies Secretariat to provide a suitable lecture room for a two day conference for an estimated one dozen papers to be given to approximately 40 participants. Woods is still amazed that there was no hesitation at all on the part of the Learned Societies at this request, as it came practically out of nowhere. Everyone was most accommodating.

Within a couple of months of sending out the questionnaires, which also contained a Call for Papers notice, there were more than enough papers to choose from, and a full-blown conference program with 18 papers and 4 poster sessions was announced in the second *AASSC Newsbulletin* of April 1982. By the time the conference took place on June 3 and 4, 1982 at the University of Ottawa, the structure of the Association was in place. An executive had been nominated, and a network of liaison officers at universities across Canada had been established on the basis of responses to the returned questionnaires numbering about 120 members, in this organization which, strictly speaking, was still non-existent. At the business meeting of the founding conference, the slate of nominations was confirmed, an editorial board for the Association's journal, *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies*, was elected, a fee structure for the membership was set up, and the Association was ready to embark on the Canadian academic scene. Dr. Christopher Hale was elected president in charge of the only program of Scandinavian Studies in Canada leading to a Bachelor of Arts. It is offered at the University of Alberta through the Department of Germanic Languages. Since the funding conference, Gurli Woods has continued to be a driving force within the Association for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies in Canada. She has served as Secretary, Editor of the *AASSC Newsbulletin* and two volumes of *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies*, held the interim chair of the editorial board and the program chair of most of the Association's conferences. She has also held the office of vice president and is currently serving a two-year term as president.

Since the formation of the AASSC, their objective has been to promote multidisciplinary Scandinavian related studies and research. Most of the membership, which numbers 200 or so, is associated with the humanities or the social sciences

but the natural sciences, government, museums, archives, the Scandinavian community, and other interested individuals are also represented. The AASSC is now marking its sixth anniversary since its founding in 1982. The Association confers annually during the Learned Societies conferences. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada has provided travel assistance and administrative grants to AASSC for the past five years, and the Norwegian Government makes available travel grants totalling \$3,000 annually to members of AASSC who wish to carry out study or research in Norway.

According to Gurli Woods, the existence of AASSC had indirectly led to significant developments within the Scandinavian studies community in Canada. The initial questionnaires from 1981 show that there was considerable interest in Scandinavian studies, research and culture just waiting for a focal point. AASSC is providing a focus through its publications, especially the *AASSC Newsletter* and the *AASSC Membership and Research*

Directory. The Association is collating and disseminating relevant information to AASSC members in Canada and abroad. Activities in Scandinavian area studies have accelerated over the past two years, especially at McGill University with its Centre for Northern Studies and Research, at York University in conjunction with the University of Toronto, at the University of Manitoba which has a Chair of Icelandic Studies, and at the University of Alberta where a Canadian Institute for Nordic Studies was established a short time ago. These activities received a boost when the Swedish Government announced in 1986 that it would grant \$40,000 towards the establishment of Scandinavian Area Studies Centres in Canada. In 1987, AASSC was asked to hold this money. A Scandinavian Studies Centre Committee of representative universities was struck and is chaired by Gurli Woods to work out the best uses of the Swedish grant; negotiations are still underway.

Gurli Woods hopes to further expand the activities of the AASSC. During her

term in office as president, she has established formal links with the Nordic Association for Canadian Studies (NACS). AASSC has been invited by NACS to help coordinate one session at their next conference at the University of Oslo in 1990. She also hopes to form a closer association between the AASSC and the SASS, the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies in the United States. The two associations hope to cooperate on bringing in a major series of lectures in the humanities and the social sciences. The lecture series would visit universities in the United States and Canada during the early 1990s; it is to be sponsored by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Gurli Woods is delighted with the progress of the AASSC and says she is proud of having been instrumental in furthering Scandinavian-Canadian academic contacts, as she is convinced that Canada and the Scandinavian countries can benefit a great deal from exchanges of ideas and research. She regards this work as her personal contribution to Canada.

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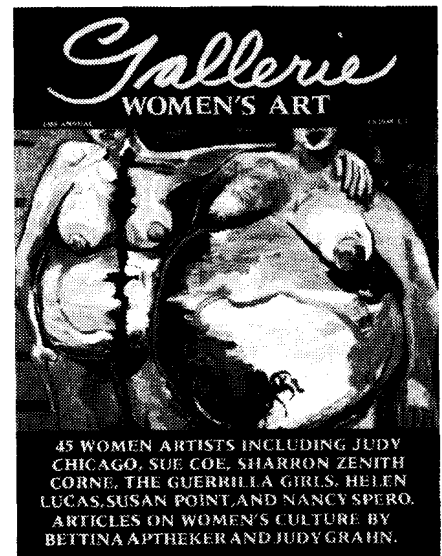
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