

# The Saga of Mary

BY CATH MCNAUGHTON

I suppose Mary's serious illness really began back in Scotland in 1953 when she had surgery for a Duodenal ulcer. A partial gastrectomy was carried out, removing the ulcer and leaving her with about a third of her stomach. Mary seemed to have no further discomfort, eating fish and chips three weeks after surgery and particularly enjoying oranges.

Twenty-seven years later, in Canada, in June 1980 while camping near Ottawa, Mary became very ill with severe vomiting and leg cramps. Abdominal surgery at Ottawa General Hospital found that her small bowel was obstructed by the pith of oranges, which had formed around the stitches on the operated end of her small stomach. An aneurysm from the obstruction occluded the circulation to Mary's legs. The left leg soon recovered, but circulation to the right lower leg was damaged and became gangrenous. Mary had a right lower leg amputation and few days later numerous abdominal procedures because of repeated sepsis of her wound. She needed a tracheotomy and special feeding and was critically ill most of the time.



Mary was in the intensive care unit at Ottawa General Hospital from June 29th, 1980 until August 10th, 1980. She had very little awareness of this time.

She was later transferred by air ambulance to Toronto General Hospital and a few weeks later Mary had gall-bladder surgery. At last, her abdominal wound began to heal. In November 1980, Mary attended West Park Hospital where she learned to walk with an artificial limb (prosthesis). Determined to return to teaching at OISE as soon as possible, Mary did so in January 1981. Although occasionally using a cane, she was alert and cheerful—able to do the cryptic crossword in ten minutes just as before.

These excerpts are from a diary I kept while she was in the Ottawa General Hospital.

## Sunday, June 29th, 1980

Motel near Papineauville, Quebec—Mary, Cath, and Xippe and Maggie (our cats)

12:30 a.m. Mary becomes ill—vomiting, severe leg cramps. Very little rest in between. Looks ill.

3:00 a.m. Mary and Cath left in Volkswagen for a 35-minute drive over the Quebec border to Hawkesbury Hospital in Ontario.

3:45 a.m. Admitted as in-patient. No diagnosis made. Mary given Demerol and Gravol and intravenous drip to help pain and sickness.

5:00 a.m. Cath drove back to Papineauville motel to collect baggage and cats.

6:35 a.m. Arrived back at Hawkesbury. Volkswagen van parked under a tree (temperature 28° Celsius in the shade) with windows slightly open and cats inside.

7:30 a.m. Mary still in pain—seen by specialist. Leg cramps very severe. Toes of right foot observed to be white. Decision made to transfer to Ottawa General Hospital.

8:00 a.m. Telephone Joan Archibald at Lachute who promised to drive to Hawkesbury to collect cats and take them to her cottage if Volks keys left at hospital switchboard.

8:30 a.m. Mary given oxygen and left by ambulance with registered nurse and attendant for Ottawa. Cath also travelled in the ambulance.

11:00 a.m. Mary in emergency department of Ottawa General Hospital. Seen by internist Dr. Malinowski. Dr.

Bouchard, the vascular surgeon, was called on consultation. Cath had notified Ena and Max McMahon on reaching Ottawa and they came immediately to the hospital.

12:00 p.m. Dr. Bouchard talked with Ena and Cath and said he must operate immediately. He was concerned about an aortic aneurysm or a pancreatitis.

12:30 p.m. Mary taken to operating room—drowsy, still complaining of pain in her legs.

4:00 p.m. Following operation Dr. Bouchard talked with Ena and Cath. Found acute obstruction of the small bowel by a large ball of fibre which had become entangled round the base of Mary's previous partial gastrectomy (previous stomach operation in the 1950s). The obstruction had caused five feet of small bowel to become gangrenous and this had to be removed. Dr. Bouchard hoped the circulation to her legs and elsewhere would now return to normal.

7:00 p.m. Dr. Bouchard decides to operate on Mary's right leg. Circulation is very poor. Operation number two.

11:00 p.m. Dr. Bouchard talks with Ena and Cath. Has removed several emboli (blood clots) from Mary's right leg. Doesn't think circulation to capillaries (narrowest of blood vessels) in toes can be helped much more. Hopes circulation might return in next 48 hours or at least that he might save the heel. Ena and Cath saw Mary in recovery room where she will spend the night. Cath staying with the McMahons.

#### **Monday, June 30th**

8:00 a.m. Mary transferred to intensive care unit (ICU). On continuous oxygen for her circulation (not on ventilation).

Rather confused, receiving sedation.

2:00 p.m. Max drove Cath to Hawkesbury to get Volkswagen. Cath phones Joan at Lachute. Joan will keep cats until July 2nd when they will go to boarding kennel in Ottawa.

Cath at hospital most of time, most days. Letters written, phone calls made all over the world.



#### **Thursday, July 3rd**

6:00 a.m. Mary very confused and upset by ICU. Transferred to surgical floor, first to a four-bed room, then to a single room. Having a great deal of pain in right foot which is becoming increasingly discoloured.

#### **Saturday and Sunday, July 4th–5th**

Angela Miles present, stays overnight with Mary one

night. Private nurse also stays for two nights. Mary continues to have pain and her temperature is elevated. Very severe pain in right foot.

#### Monday, July 7th

Mary still has high fever and looks toxic. Decision made by orthopedic surgeon to amputate right leg—Operation number three. Recovery

fever and looks toxic. orthopedic sur-tate right leg— Operation three. cov-ery

good from this surgery—plaster cast on leg. Returned to own room. Grace, Ena, and I present. Private nurse at night.

#### Tuesday, July 8th

Mary still looks very ill, temperature still elevated, pulse rapid—restless with pain in leg. Taken to x-ray for ultrasonic examination of abdomen. Air seen on x-ray and Mary thought to have peritonitis. Operation recommended immediately—Frieda present for Mary's birthday, Grace and Cath also present with Ena and Stewart.

6:00 p.m. Operation number four by Dr. W. Waddell and Dr. Cole.

9:00 p.m. Dr. Waddell rather discouraging about surgery—original anastomosis (joining) healing well but he found some other small holes in bowel, which he sutured. Gallbladder also very inflamed, and a drain left in there also. Off to intensive care and on ventilator. This is a machine which breathes for the patient enabling the body to rest and relieving the heart. Mary unable to talk when on machine, given sedatives and painkillers and remembers nothing of this.

#### Tuesday and Wednesday, July 8th–9th

Telephone calls to Fifi, May, and Auntie. Auntie decided to come over to be with Mary. She will fly on July 10th and be met by Rosalie in Toronto who will fly with her from Toronto to Ottawa. Mary very ill, temperature elevated but a little lower. Still on ventilator but breathing a little on her own. Hyper-alimentation feeding started to nourish small bowel directly with glucose, protein, and vitamins. Intravenous fluids continued.

#### Thursday, July 10th

Auntie arrived with Rosalie at 10:00 p.m. and they asked to go to ICU to see Mary. She recognized Auntie who very bravely accepted all the ICU machinery. All staying at Ena's. Mark and Rachele came from Toronto.

#### Friday, July 11th

Little change. Rosalie stayed over until Saturday. Grace also came from Montreal—cats at present with her daughter Pat at Blackburn Hamlet just outside Ottawa.

#### Saturday, July 12th

Rosalie flew home, Mary's condition somber, temperature about the same.

#### Thursday, July 17th

Operation number five because of high spiking fever. Dr. Waddell talked to us afterwards. Small septic area found and small bowel repair. Ileostomy performed to take strain off bowel. Still critically ill, on ventilator.

#### Sunday, July 20th

Flo, Doug, and Molly visited.

#### Monday, July 21st

Operation number six—tracheotomy.

#### Wednesday, July 23rd

6:30 p.m. Cath flew to Toronto with cats and returned next day. Mary holding her own but still in ICU and still very ill.

#### Friday, July 25th

Off ventilator, oxygen continued.

### Saturday and Sunday, July 26th–27th

Frieda visited. Mary a little better, up in chair but still in ICU. Trying to talk.

### Tuesday, July 29th

Ann Papert visited. Seemed better—transferred to floor with special nurses around the clock.

### Wednesday, July 30th

Mary's condition deteriorated. Temperature and pulse elevated and had loose cough. Metal canula (plug) in tracheotomy to allow her to talk.

### Thursday, July 31st

Back in ICU. Hyper-alimentation tube moved to other side.

### Thursday, August 2nd

Tracheotomy tube closed. Oxygen continued.

### Sunday, August 3rd

Mary transferred to New General Hospital 2:20 p.m.—all carried out in 20 minutes. Still has fever and quite confused.

### Tuesday, August 5th

Chest aspiration 500cc blood-stained fluid removed from left lung. After this Mary showed gradual improvement and by Saturday and Sunday, August 9–10, she began to be less confused.

### Wednesday, August 13th

Moved to Room 8219, surgical floor. Large two-bed room with huge window overlooking the building of the new Health Science Centre and the Gatineau Hills behind. Mary making gradual progress, wound healing, coming together, ileostomy draining well. Some problems with electrolytes and one episode with gallbladder drainage. Mary now getting up and using walker to go to toilet but taking things slowly. Delay in bed being procured at Toronto General Hospital. Mary finally transferred by air on evening of September 5. Auntie and Cath drove in van as Mary accompanied by registered nurse.

*This excerpt is an account of Mary's illness during the summer of 1980. Tragically, after recovering from these serious health problems, she was subsequently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1995, and died on October 17th, 1998.*

*Cath McNaughton met Mary 45 years ago at Knightswood Hospital in Glasgow, Scotland. As young women in a first job as Ward Sisters, they became friends and because of their rather fetching veils and uniforms, they decided to have their photographs taken. It was the beginning of a strong partnership in Scotland and in Canada, and it was to last through illnesses, career changes, and even through the painful journey that is Alzheimer's disease. Mary's courage made it possible and to the end she never gave up fighting for control. The saga gives a very limited record of all she suffered. It was written because her friends and family could not understand why she was so critically ill for so long. Mary saw it as a grim fairy tale made endurable because she was loved so much.*

## MARY O'BRIEN

### XXVIII

Pity me  
my young love said  
turning his dark head  
away  
to watch the melancholy play  
of cloud  
against the sky.  
Pity you!  
my reply:  
dearest, ask for all I have  
full sweeping radii of love  
but I must keep my sympathy  
for what I know  
you'll do to me.

### IV

You look  
with entomological cool  
and see  
that transparency without iridescence  
is no more becoming to me  
than to moribund moths impaled.

I look  
with furry nurtured zeal  
and see  
that compassion without comprehension  
is anathema to you  
as to a black panther caged.



*Original photo by Sarah MacKenzie*

## Mary O'Brien and November 11—Remembrance Day

Sixty-one years ago, November 11th, 1918, at 11:00 a.m. Armistice was signed and the First World War was over.

On that date every year since then, victory is celebrated and fallen men remembered in ceremonies at cenotaphs up and down this land.

For the past two years, Toronto women have attended the Armistice Day at Toronto City Hall. They came in silent solidarity to lay flowers at the foot of a different cenotaph. A cenotaph created in memory of all women who are victims of wars past, present, and future, the world over.

During this brief ceremony, a speech is read by Mary O'Brien:

**On this day, when we remember the agonies which war brings to the lives of ordinary people, the women of this city remember too the grief, terror, and violence which have always been part of women's experience of war. It is in remembrance of these unsung women that we each bring a flower of compassion and solidarity to this place on this day. We remember expressly that the rape of women marches like a dark shadow in the ranks of every army and lingers long in every female consciousness as an inevitable reality of women and war.**

Toronto women will be at the Old City Hall again this year at 11:00 a.m. Join us there. Bring a flower. This tradition should continue. May the idea spread to other cities, towns, and villages. People must not be allowed to ignore or forget that women are the spoils of war and the victims of both winner and loser.

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