Canadian Feminists in the International Arena
A Retrospective

by Philippa Schmiegelow

There was a hope that the story of Flora’s contribution to feminism in this country be remembered.

The Sunset of Bon Echo is a little magazine, edited by one of Canada’s ablest women, Flora MacDonald, and coming from one of the most beautiful places in a region famed for beauty—“Bon Echo.” (Gilman)

Bon Echo lies deep in the Canadian Shield. An extraordinary Canadian triad, suffragette Flora MacDonald (1867–1921), her son, playwright and author, Merrill Denison (1893–1975), and her daughter-in-law, Canadian representative on the United Nations First Women’s Advisory Committee (1942–46), Muriel Goggin Denison (1885–1954), ran an inn and developed an artists’ colony at Bon Echo in the early part of the twentieth century. The Denison Study: Voices of Bon Echo, is an exhibition which celebrates the personalities, philosophies, voices, and lives of the Denisons and of the land they loved.1

The exhibit came about through the cooperative efforts of several institutions and of a variety of women and men, some professional, others like myself, passionate volunteers.2 Our motives were various, but for those feminists among us there was, and is, a determination and a hope that the story of Flora’s and of Muriel’s contribution to the landscape of feminism in this country be remembered.

This paper offers an exploration of the internationalist role played by these two extraordinary Canadian women. It begins with a brief retrospective of Flora and of her activities in the international arena between 1902–1914 and moves to an exegesis of the recommendations made by Muriel’s committee to the fledgling United Nations Organization (UNO) in 1946.

Flora MacDonald was passionate about women’s rights. Her contribution to the suffrage cause has received limited scholarly attention.3 Hints of that life, and of a closeted lesbian lover can be found in letters to her son and to a mysterious Peter Silver4 as well as in Stuart McKinnon’s resonant poetic revisioning.

Journalist, business-woman, avowed feminist, and suffragette, ardent spiritualist and internationalist, and feisty, raven-haired romantic, Flora became an articulate writer and speaker for the Canadian woman’s suffrage movement. Her newspaper articles and editorials are marked by an increasingly radical feminism.5 They remain one of her major contributions to the history of early feminism in Canada.

Flora was introduced to the suffragist cause and to leading U.S. suffragist, Susan B. Anthony by Dr. Emily Stowe, friend and founder of the Canadian suffrage movement. In the first issue of her Whitmanite journal, published at Bon Echo in 1916, Flora refers to her initial suffragist speech, delivered at the spiritualist resort at Lily Dale in western New York State, in February 1902 (MacDonald 1916). Flora records that she was introduced to her audience of over 5,000 by Anthony whose Quaker friends had founded the spiritualist centre in western New York State in the closing years of the nineteenth century.

Americans, Susan B. Anthony and Charlotte Perkins Gilman were only two of the more illustrious woman’s rights activists listed as frequent speakers at the Woman’s Suffrage Day celebrations held at Lily Dale (Braude 193–197). Both women were friends of Flora’s. Gilman visited her at Bon Echo on at least twice. Flora’s proud association with American radicals provides early evidence of Canadian women’s networking north and south of the Canadian/American border.

In 1903, Emily Stowe introduced Flora to the Toronto Suffrage Association. By 1906 she had become the secretary of the Dominion Women’s Enfranchisement Association, forerunner of the Canadian Woman’s Suffrage Association. That summer she paid her own way to represent Canada at the Third World Conference of the International Suffrage Alliance in Copenhagen. Her travels elated her, opening her eyes to the possibilities of international alliances and broadening her understanding of issues beyond her own borders. In 1909, she played hostess to Emmeline Pankhurst at her home at 22 Carlton Street when she came to address the Quinquennial Congress of Women held in the University of Toronto’s Convocation Hall.6 As at the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, China in 1995, the Congress provided a forum for women, albeit less diversified, to share information and build solidarity through international partnerships. Women’s organizations in France, Germany, Italy, Greece, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Britain, Argentina, Australia, the United States, and Canada were represented at the Congress by the International Council of Women. Russian Anna de Philosofoff, vice-president of the Council, reported that she had finally obtained...
government permission to form a council in Russia. Preliminary work
to establish councils in Egypt, South
Africa, Turkey, India, and Japan had
begun ("Women of All Nations Meet-
ing in Conference"). To Flora’s
shame, despite intense political lob-
bying, every country represented at
the Congress, with the exception of
Canada, voted for equal suffrage.

1913 was the climax of Flora’s in-
ternational suffrage career. In March,
as president of the Canadian Suffrage
Association, she led the Canadian
delegation at the suffrage rally held in
Washington the day before the inau-
geration of president-elect Woodrow
Wilson. In June, she visited Amster-
dam, Berlin, Dresden, Prague, and
Vienna before representing Canada
at the Congress of the International
Suffrage Alliance in Budapest. Draw-
ing on the events and the women she
met to contextualize and expand her
perception of women’s cultural con-
ting both at home and abroad,
Flora’s impressions resurface years
later in suffragist speeches recorded
in the American and Canadian local
press.7

That same year Flora, a committed pacifist, attended the Peace Confer-
ence in the Hague. In 1913, women
crossed national boundaries to search
for peaceful ways to divert the path of
war. Women from opposing factions
formed networks to extend their dia-
logue both during and after hostili-
ties in and between their countries
had ended. Eighty-two years before
women from around the world as-
sembled in China, redesigning the
boundaries of North and South,
northern and southern women,
among them Canadian Flora
MacDonald, were making connec-
tions. Newspaper reports record in-
creasing diversity among the delegates:

For the first time in the history of
the women’s movement, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian,
[Islamic], Jewish, and Christian
women will sit together in con-
gress uniting their voices in a
common plea for the liberation
of their sex and from those arti-
ficial discriminations which
every political and religious sys-
tem has directed against them.
("International Woman’s Suf-
frage Alliance”; “Mrs. Flora
MacD. Denison To Head De-
egoration”)

In 1914, Flora’s reign as president
of the Canadian Suffrage Association
ended. Her radical sympathies, com-
bined with her lower middle-class
status, have been blamed for her loss
in popularity. Yet, her position on
the margins of Canadian women’s
history must not only be viewed
through the lens of class and eco-
nomic status, but also possibly, of
sexual orientation. The connection
between early female activists and
sexual orientation in Canada has yet
to be fully examined. Influential mem-
ers among the increasingly conserva-
tive, evangelical, Canadian suffrage
movement may have found Flora’s
independence suspect, an additional
reason to oust their radical colleague
from her position. While Flora
remained a passionate advocate of wom-
ren’s rights until the end of her life, her
ergy was increasingly absorbed by
her growing interest in socialism, in
theosophy, and in the Whitmanite
Club she founded at Bon Echo.8 It
remained for her daughter-in-law to
pick up her mantle 20 years later.

In 1941, Muriel Goggin Denison,
Flora MacDonald’s daughter-in-law
and gifted singer, manager, and main-
stay of the Bon Echo Inn for eight
years, became Canadian women’s
representative at the United Nations
Information Office in New York.
From 1942-46, as a member of the
Women’s Advisory Committee,
Muriel worked with representative
women from eleven allied nations—
China, Australia, Canada, Czechoslo-
vakia, Denmark, France, Greece,
Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway,
and the Union of South Africa—
preparing a report on the role of
women within the newly formed
United Nations Organization (UNO)
(Women’s Advisory Committee).
The report was presented to the pri-
mary session of the General Assem-
bly in February 1946. The opening
paragraph is blunt. It reads:

(1) the support of the women of
the world is essential to the per-
manent success of the UNO;
(2) in order best to gain that sup-
port UNO must assign to women a
basic functional role. (1)

The recommendations of the re-
port are wide-sweeping, integrating
women into every aspect of the United
Nations Organizational body, and
calling for women’s greater participa-
tion in policy making. Briefly the
report calls for: 1) the appointment
of at least one female delegate from
each country to the General Assem-
bly; 2) appropriate representation
in committees, the Secretariate, and
other fields of UNO’s work; 3) a sec-
tion within the information service
devoted to women’s interests (unspe-
cified but family oriented)—
headed and staffed by international
representatives; with equal pay
and equal representation to other sections;
and with authority and funds to pro-
cceed with projects and programs
aimed specifically at women; 4) a
“think-tank” among top-ranking
women in the UNO and the Women’s
Section of the Information Bureau
to be convened on a regular basis.

The 1946 report is a daring docu-
ment in light of the industrialized
world’s post-war frenzy to
redomesticate women. It concludes:

There have been many weak-
nesses in the efforts for world
organization which have pre-
ceded UNO and have failed. One
weakness has been the lack of
recognition of the ability, power,
and importance of women. This
weakness can be overcome in
UNO only if women are given a
share in the responsibility of de-
termining policies which mean
life or death to them and to their
families.9 (6)

The editorial of the “Post-Beijing”
issue of Canadian Woman Studies
notes the central place within the
United Nations of the international work of women (5). The volume begins with an historical overview of the fight for global rights for women. The Denison Study at Bon Echo allows us to open a window on the past that illuminates the contemporary feminist internationalist discourse. As contemporary Canadian feminists continue to expand global connections and partnerships among women, and to redefine the boundaries of North and South, the exhibit at Bon Echo reminds us that Canadian women’s efforts to influence action and policy, both locally and globally, has a long history.

Philippa Schmiegelow was introduced to Bon Echo and Flora MacDonald Denison by her daughter, wildlife ecologist Dr. Fiona Schmiegelow. Like others before her, Philippa quickly succumbed to the magic of Bon Echo and all it represents. It has given her great pleasure to write this article in response to a request by filmmaker Denice Wilkins, for seven years Natural Heritage Education Coordinator at Bon Echo Provincial Park.

1 Bon Echo Provincial Park, Cloyne, Ontario. The exhibit is housed in Merrill Denison’s old study.
2 Algonquin College Theatre and Museum Technology Programs; staff of Bon Echo Park; volunteers among The Friends of Bon Echo; National Archives of Canada; Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library (TFRBL), University of Toronto; Queen’s University Archives; the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Concept, design, research, and construction for the exhibition: Mark Allston, Renee Dias, Jean Dupont, Carol Hopp, Donna McGregor, Fiona Poole, Jenni Walker, and Tracey Whalen. Text was provided by Denice Wilkins.
3 See McMullin; Gorham 1976, 1979; Lacombe; Prentice et al.; and Cooke.
4 Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library (TFRBL), University of Toronto.
6 22 Carlton Street doubled as headquarters of the Canadian Suffrage Association until 1910.
7 In Berlin, Flora was shocked to see a woman and a dog hitched to the same vehicle and driven by a man with a whip. In Budapest, she noted with interest the presence of two female members of the Parliament of the Canton Republic among the delegates to the Congress (“Address on Reconstruction After the War” Given by Mrs. F. McDonald Denison); “Mrs. Denison on Woman Suffrage”).
8 In 1916, Flora moved temporarily to New York State and worked as a paid speaker and organizer for the woman’s suffrage campaign. In 1918, she helped to organize the Social Reconstruction Group of the Toronto Theosophical Society. That same year she attended the convention that launched the Ontario Section of the Canadian Labour Party and became an official speaker for the cause. In 1920, an inscription to Walt Whitman was carved into a large granite boulder at Bon Echo.
9 Muriel Denison forwarded a copy of the report to Eleanor Roosevelt. She received a letter of thanks dated October 21, 1946, and an invitation to meet Roosevelt. A photograph of this meeting with copies of the letters and the report is also in the Bon Echo Archives.

References

“Address on ‘Reconstruction After the War’ Given by Mrs. F. McDonald Denison.” Brantford Expositor 17 June 1918. (Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library (TFRBL), University of Toronto.)


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