

Canadian Feminists in the International Arena

A Retrospective

by *Philippa Schmiegelow*

L'auteure se penche sur l'Étude Dennison, une exposition célébrant un regroupement d'artistes de Bon Echo—idée qui a été développée par la suffragette

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canadienne Flora MacDonald et sa famille et explique le rôle que celle-ci, ainsi que d'autres femmes de l'époque, ont joué sur la scène politique internationale.

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 Filosofoff, 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 Meeting in Conference"). To Flora's shame, despite intense political lobbying, every country represented at the Congress, with the exception of Canada, voted for equal suffrage.

1913 was the climax of Flora's international 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 inauguration of president-elect Woodrow Wilson. In June, she visited Amsterdam, Berlin, Dresden, Prague, and Vienna before representing Canada at the Congress of the International Suffrage Alliance in Budapest. Drawing on the events and the women she met to contextualize and expand her perception of women's cultural conditioning 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 Conference 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 dialogue both during and after hostilities in and between their countries had ended. Eighty-two years before women from around the world assembled in China, redesigning the boundaries of North and South, northern and southern women, among them Canadian Flora MacDonald, were making connections. Newspaper reports record increasing 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 congress uniting their voices in a common plea for the liberation of their sex and from those arti-

ficial discriminations which every political and religious system has directed against them. ("International Woman's Suffrage Alliance"; "Mrs. Flora MacD. Denison To Head Delegation")

In 1914, Flora's reign as president of the Canadian Suffrage Association ended. Her radical sympathies, combined 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 economic 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 members among the increasingly conservative, 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 women's rights until the end of her life, her energy 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 mainstay 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, Czechoslovakia, 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 primary 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 permanent success of the UNO;
- (2) in order best to gain that support UNO must assign to women a basic functional role. (1)

The recommendations of the report are wide-sweeping, integrating women into every aspect of the United Nations Organizational body, and calling for women's greater participation in policy making. Briefly the report calls for: 1) the appointment of at least one female delegate from each country to the General Assembly; 2) appropriate representation in committees, the Secretariate, and other fields of UNO's work; 3) a section within the information service devoted to women's interests (unspecified but family oriented)—headed and staffed by international representatives; with equal pay and equal representation to other sections; and with authority and funds to proceed 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 document in light of the industrialized world's post-war frenzy to redomesticate women. It concludes:

There have been many weaknesses in the efforts for world organization which have preceded 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 determining 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.

¹Bon Echo Provincial Park, Cloyne, Ontario. The exhibit is housed in Merrill Denison's old study.

²Algonquin 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.

³See McMullin; Gorham 1976, 1979; Lacombe; Prentice *et al.*; and Cooke.

⁴Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library (TFRBL), University of Toronto.

⁵See particularly her ongoing columns in *Toronto World*, "Under the Pines" (1909–11), "Open Road To-

wards Democracy" (1911–13), "Stray Leaves From a Suffragette's Notebook" (1913), Bon Echo Park Archives and Denison Manuscripts, Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library (TFRBL), Toronto.

⁶22 Carlton Street doubled as headquarters of the Canadian Suffrage Association until 1910.

⁷In 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").

⁸In 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.

⁹Muriel 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.

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