

# Not so quiet after all: Two outspoken librarians of the Antigonish Movement

Catherine Irving & Sue Adams  
Coady International Institute, St. Francis Xavier University

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**Abstract:** This paper draws on archival studies of two women, Nora Bateson and Sr. Marie Michael MacKinnon, whose work bridged adult education and librarianship within the context of the Antigonish Movement. The authors seek to uncover their motivations to tie libraries to values of social justice and lifelong learning, and their methods of “speaking out” to promote their goals.

At a time when interest in libraries and adult learning is rekindling (Imel & Duckett, 2009), this study examines the lives of two women, Nora Bateson and Sr. Marie Michael MacKinnon, whose work bridged adult education and librarianship within the context of the Antigonish Movement. The Antigonish Movement was a social mobilization program in eastern Canada emerging from the 1930s, whose methods of collective learning and action have been studied extensively by adult educators. However, the Antigonish Movement’s role in the library movement has received less attention. The stories of these two women demonstrate linkages between the two fields.

Nora Bateson was a leader in public library promotion internationally, including the Maritimes during the heyday of the Antigonish Movement. Her librarianship was infused with an understanding of the place of libraries in lifelong learning. Sr. Marie Michael MacKinnon began her career as an educator and fieldworker and became the Movement’s Antigonish-based librarian at St. Francis Xavier University (StFX). Marie Michael’s keen understanding of the people, informed through her fieldwork, strengthened her provision of library-supported learning in the communities.

## Theoretical Framework

Feminist historians have long since decried the underrepresentation of women in written history. Maack’s (1982) survey of librarianship’s historical record clearly demonstrates this imbalance—all the more glaring for such a female-identified profession. Also clear from historical study is that the adult education and library movements developed in tandem, though these parallels rarely surface in the literature (Adams, 2005; Imel & Duckett, 2009). Analyses of libraries as sites of informal adult learning can also guide historical analysis (Irving, 2010) as we examine the motivation and practices of these early educator librarians.

While adult educators are working to uncover women’s biographies in adult education (see English, 2011; McManus, 2006), the record of many women’s stories is still incomplete. Similarly, historical accounts of adult education movements share passing reference to libraries, but the library workers have not received the attention shown to the various movements’ leaders and educators. In writings of the Antigonish Movement, Sr. Marie Michael is readily

acknowledged as the “lady of the books” (Neal, 1998, p.148), but the details of how her library service integrated with programs of adult education and community development is typically overlooked.

The archival research at the heart of this paper involves a critical examination of correspondence and other writings of Sr. Marie Michael, Nora Bateson and their contemporaries from several archival collections. “Feminist recovery projects” are intended to base “any claims about the value and importance of women figures on what the figures themselves have said and done” (Roof, 2011, p.524). Our understanding of women educators is deepened by examining their gendered and cultural contexts (English, 2011). This paper takes the tack that we cannot know their work until we know their biographies. In researching their lives and times, the links between adult education and libraries through their practice become clearer.

### **Profiling Nora Bateson and Sr. Marie Michael**

While Nora Bateson and Sr. Marie Michael MacKinnon developed libraries in the same region and era, they did not collaborate directly. Of interest to their separate biographies are the contrasts and convergences of their mission and practice in librarianship and adult education. This biographical study organizes these women’s stories through three themes: 1) early motivations in social justice; 2) support of lifelong learning in communities; and 3) their “outspoken” approaches to library promotion and advocacy. To begin, a brief chronology of the two women’s lives provides context.

#### *Biographical Sketches*

Nora Bateson (1896-1956) immigrated to Canada from England in 1920 for a teaching post, but soon discovered a passion for librarianship; she devoted the next decade to developing this expertise. In 1933, Bateson was invited to establish the Carnegie Corporation funded library demonstration project in Prince Edward Island (PEI). At this time she met Fr. Jimmy Tompkins and the ideas of the Antigonish Movement. Tompkins’ persistent library advocacy led Bateson to Nova Scotia to replicate her PEI efforts—a task that was interrupted by the Second World War and ultimately hobbled by politics. Other regions welcomed her acumen as she moved on to contribute to the profession in the United States, Caribbean, and New Zealand (see Adams, 2009 for a more detailed biography).

Mary Sarah MacKinnon (1905-1991) grew up in Beaver Cove, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. In 1927, she entered religious life with the Sisters of St. Martha. After graduating from StFX in 1933, she joined the University’s Extension Department as the director of the Women and Work program. She also worked on the Department’s library to support demand for information from the hundreds of study clubs. As the library became her primary focus, she eventually received formal library training in the late 1940s. Msgr. Smyth (1961) invited her to live at the Martha convent at the new Coady International Institute to work with the students. She continued as librarian of the Extension Department until its closure in 1964, and established the Coady library (later named in her honour), before moving to Toronto in 1972 as librarian at St. Augustine’s Seminary until her retirement (O’Reilly, 1987).

### *Early Motivations in Social Justice*

Nora Bateson's upbringing near Manchester coincided with the rise of labour politics and suffragism. Nora and her sisters "were expected to be career women and not marry," (V. Osgood, personal correspondence, April 8, 2008) suggesting her family had embraced the growing feminist spirit of the day. An academic award allowed her to study history at the University of Manchester, where her professors were leaders of the Settlement Movement and the Workers' Educational Association (Tout, n.d.). Pheobe Sheavyn, the matron of Nora's Hall, was noted for progressive views and suffragist sentiments (S. Griffiths, personal correspondence, October 7, 2008). Yet, for all the feminist influences, Nora's career options were strongly gendered. Her librarianship reconnected with education when she obtained a position with Helen Gordon Stewart (Bateson, 1945), who was developing a regional public library system in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia using adult education methods in a context of community engagement (Morison, 1952): this approach became the defining characteristic of Nora's work.

Marie Michael's awareness of social justice had more rural origins. Fr. Michael Gillis, her parish priest, was "a key proponent of social action in the diocese" (Cameron, 1996, p. 214), and introduced her to St. FX and to the Sisters of St. Martha. His inspiration led her to request the name Michael when she entered the Congregation (O'Reilly, 1987). Many young women in rural Cape Breton would have lacked opportunities such as Nora Bateson enjoyed, except through the Church; though, the future of a young nun at this time was also strongly gendered. Marie Michael was initially sent to MacDonald College in Quebec to study household sciences (MacKinnon, 1982).

Marie Michael's strong community ties, fieldwork exposure and renowned ability to remember everyone she met, undoubtedly strengthened her conviction to work to improve life in the rural areas. One example of her class-awareness emerged in a presentation on the women of the Antigonish Movement with colleague Sr. Irene Doyle. When asked if her women's programs collaborated with existing groups, she somewhat dismissively described the education efforts of a local Women's Institute holding sessions on preparing fancy sandwiches—they clearly represented a different social class (MacKinnon & Doyle, 1990).

Marie Michael may not have had as extensive exposure to feminist ideas as Nora, but she saw sharply the gender injustice evidenced by male control of co-operative administration. The initial premise of women's study clubs focused on domestic skills, but the primary goal was "to expose them to ideas which in turn would fit them for positions of leadership" (MacKinnon, 1982, p.9). These leadership efforts were repeatedly thwarted (Delaney, 1985).

### *Lifelong Learning and Community: The Role of Libraries*

When Nora Bateson led the PEI library demonstration project, she integrated adult education practices she had learned from Stewart in British Columbia. As the Antigonish Movement spread to PEI, libraries were a natural complement. Nora criss-crossed the Island in a modified Chevrolet coupe, with a custom-fitted portable library to illustrate the potential of community libraries. She established strong connections with the Island's nascent study groups (Bateson, 1933-36a). Her rousing presentations to school and church groups, Women's Institutes, and farmers' assemblies quickly developed rapport with community members. Her colleague John

Croteau (1951) hailed Nora as “a vivid personality, intense, socially minded and with great ability,” though her popularity “did not extend to high government levels” (pp. 17-18).

Marie Michael and Irene Doyle (1990) stated, “It is hard to overestimate the importance of the small study groups.” Providing information to support these energetic groups was a daunting task. They produced countless pamphlets and the periodicals *The Extension Bulletin* and *The Maritime Co-operator*, and scoured the continent for free material produced by agricultural extension offices and other agencies, readily adapting documents for local purposes. Portable library “book boxes” circulated among the study clubs, and books were mailed individually to members—this was a library system in microcosm.

In 1936, St.FX obtained a \$30,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation. One third of this was devoted, as Carnegie secretary Robert Lester (1936) explained, “to the development of the library in relation to the demands of the adult education program.” The Antigonish library expanded, and a second library in Glace Bay opened with small branches added in nearby communities—often in credit unions to assist member education. (St.FX Extension Department, 1944).

By the 1940s, the women’s program wound down due to chronic underfunding. The study club model also gave way to more formal training. Marie Michael and Irene Doyle (1990) recognized the criticism that this shift weakened Extension’s link to the grassroots. In 1947 Marie Michael worked to maintain that link by expanding direct library service, welcoming anyone interested in reading. In industrial Cape Breton people had access to Fr. Jimmy Tompkins’ “People’s Library”, whose activities were expanded by Sr. Francis Dolores Donnelly (Neal, 1998). Marie Michael’s priority focused on rural communities where no library service existed.

Like Nora Bateson, Marie Michael believed that exposure to library services through her program would whet an appetite for more local libraries. She shared Coady’s belief that community ownership was key. As with the development of co-operatives, people had to come together, decide what was best for their community, and work to achieve their goals. Even if a benevolent government lavished a community with a free library, it would only succeed if it was created in people’s interests (MacKinnon & Doyle, 1990). Many of the programs initiated by the Extension Department were intended to be taken over by the organizations created by the people themselves. She hoped this too would happen with library service.

### *Speaking Out for Libraries*

Nora Bateson and Fr. Jimmy Tompkins ardently promoted libraries as “the people’s universities,” in line with a liberal view of adult education. Tompkins took advantage of Nora’s visit to Reserve Mines in 1935 to arrange speaking engagements with community groups to promote the idea of libraries. In typically vivid style, Tompkins (1935) describes the impact of the many presentations in a letter to his cousin Moses Coady:

Now we have excogitated things revolutionary and she is wild and she has set me wild...She is trying to get them standing on their hind legs for reading.

Nora's growing connection with the Antigonish Movement led to invitations for her to speak at the Rural and Industrial Conference in Antigonish. These annual conferences attracted illustrious speakers including Charles Beard, President of the American Association for Adult Education, Ned Corbett, and Roy Bergengren, pioneer of the US credit union movement. In 1934, Nora spoke to an assembly of 200 on the topic "Library Service for the People." (St.FX Extension Department, 1934). Her ability to inspire led to return invitations to speak in 1935 and 1936—the only speaker other than Moses Coady to score this metaphorical "hat trick." Notably, while the (very few) female speakers were usually restricted to the "Women's Section" of the conference, Nora Bateson was invited to address the full audience.

Meanwhile, on PEI, Nora established a regional library system that was an integral support for thriving study clubs. She ensured her community forays received ample coverage in the local press, and embarked on a vigorous campaign of publishing in the island's newspapers (Bateson, 1933-36b). Nora also drafted the PEI Library Act to formalize the regional library. After considerable debate the Act was passed by the legislature in 1934, and then rescinded in 1936. John Croteau (1951), commenting on Nora's open frustration, stated, "Her trouble was that she had no awe of persons in high places; Ministers of the Crown...do not like to hear unflattering descriptions of their intellectual equipment uttered in public meetings (p.17). Croteau may have identified the underlying issue when he continued, "There was on the island no tradition of women in responsible administrative positions. Perhaps the men resented her outspoken remarks more because she was a woman than because of what she actually said" (p.18). Nevertheless, the PEI library demonstration was an inspiring success as documented in Nora's frequent submissions to professional library publications and associations (Bateson 1934a, 1934b, 1935). As she promoted adult education to librarians, Father Tompkins was relentlessly raising the importance of libraries to the Canadian Association for Adult Education. Articles on libraries began to appear in the CAAE journal *Food for Thought*.

In 1938 Nora Bateson was invited to Nova Scotia to develop regional libraries similar to the PEI model. With Father Jimmy on the Regional Libraries Commission, the two pounced on the opportunity to further their formidable collaboration. However, war intervened; Nora was seconded to the Canadian Legion Educational Service, and later undertook a library survey of Jamaica in 1944. As documented in the Jamaican press ("Rapid strides", 1944), she spoke regularly to credit unions about the inspiring lessons of the Antigonish Movement. She returned to Halifax in 1945 to resume her library mission, but her outspoken manner once again ran her afoul of the politicians. At a public meeting she indiscreetly referred to Nova Scotia as a "library desert" ("Bateson says", 1945) in comparison with verdant Jamaica where people were "too intelligent to swallow election propaganda" (Morning Chronicle, 1945). The Premier demanded her resignation; when she refused he dismissed her, despite protests ranging from miners' groups to universities.

Marie Michael also made full use of the media to support adult education efforts and library outreach. She embraced radio to spread library service further by hosting a program on CJFX, "This is Your Library." She discussed books in the library collection and encouraged listeners to write in to request books by mail at no cost to the borrowers (MacKinnon & Doyle, 1990). Early episodes reflect practical concerns of the study clubs: agriculture, housing, and handicrafts. However, she soon expanded the range to entice her audience's broader interests. By the

comments she makes in later broadcasts, this was enthusiastically taken up. Thematic programs on Scottish and Irish history, memoirs extolling the noble virtues of rural life, and travel adventures were recurring topics. Some scripts read as if they were written today, with pleas for a return to organic agriculture, or critiques of capitalist economics. She would also link to other adult education radio initiatives, suggesting books to complement *Life in These Maritimes* (a CJFX study club modelled program), and the CAAE's *Citizen's Forum* (MacKinnon, 1949-1951) on the CBC radio network.

*Speaking out personally.* Marie Michael's libraries had an enduring reputation as friendly places (Cameron, 2000). She readily admitted her aversion to library rules as her goal was to remove barriers to people's use of libraries: people were more important than procedures. Her adult education and community work defined her library philosophy and practice. When Marie Michael passed away, the eulogy highlighted her personal connections with people as an enduring aspect of her life and work (Chisholm, 1991). This librarian was most fondly remembered for talking. Today, as libraries strive to strengthen their roles in community life, many are now learning the lessons that Marie Michael always maintained.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Adult educators have the opportunity to discover anew the potential that community-focused libraries offer as partners in lifelong learning. Library learning environments are not created simply by the provision of material or programs, but through active and intentional connections. Through creative use of media, one-on-one engagement with rural residents and tireless advocacy, Sr. Marie Michael and Nora Bateson very personally demonstrate community-engaged learning.

Nora Bateson made phenomenal contributions to the establishment of libraries around the world that were infused with the library's link to adult education and community development. Nora's increasing roles in oversight positions perhaps took her away from the grassroots, but her early work appears to have had a lasting impression, as evidenced by her ongoing enthusiasm to spread the story of the Antigonish Movement in her later international travels. Marie Michael's contributions to libraries appear more close to home, yet her global impact was on the memories of all who entered her welcoming library domain.

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