

***"Just an Ordinary Person":
The History of Dr. Ethel Taylor***

Doris MacKinnon

When Dr. Ethel Taylor was elected to Red Deer City Council in 1961, the news made national headlines.¹ Taylor was the first woman to sit on this particular municipal council. In the years that followed she was re-elected five times, topping the polls in 1974. This was quite an accomplishment for Dr. Taylor, not only because of her gender, but because she described herself as a “very shy and inarticulate woman” when she first arrived in Red Deer in 1940.² The “shy, inarticulate woman” obviously overcame this characteristic, working diligently throughout her lifetime for many social causes. Ethel Taylor referred to herself as “just an ordinary person”. The area of women’s history has recently discovered many “ordinary” women, not unlike Ethel Taylor, who accomplished so much in the process of settling the West. The history of the prairies owes a debt to women like Taylor, who were not only very socially active, but who had the foresight to retain so many of their personal papers, eventually making them accessible to researchers.

According to Michael Dawe, Red Deer City Archivist and Taylor’s friend, her energy appeared to know no limits. Dawe recalls Ethel’s frustration when she found that age robbed her of the energy for the many projects and causes that still interested her. Ethel Taylor was dedicated to improving the lives of people. For that reason, her story is

of historical significance. One of Taylor's causes, for which she realized many of her goals, and which had a lasting positive impact on her community, was improved literacy. According to her eldest son, Dr. Laughlin Taylor, Ethel's childhood had a great deal to do with her lasting desire for improved literacy. He recounts that Ethel's father, originally a member of the North West Mounted Police, later drafted into military service in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), married her upper middle-class English mother, whom he met while on leave in England. The family returned to Canada when Ethel was a young girl. Ethel was only twelve when her mother died and her father left the family, supposedly for a brief time, to find work in the United States. However, her father did not return and, even after moving in with an aunt, Ethel found herself fulfilling the role of parent to her younger siblings, a role that continued for the rest of her life. Despite the difficult circumstances of her childhood, her personal papers attest to the fact Ethel still considered herself fortunate, mainly because she had access to books throughout that time. She remembered that her mother had taught her to read by the time she was five and her English aunts provided her with a constant supply of books. Taylor's desire was that all people should have the access to books that she had been fortunate enough to have. She noted that "not only were we extremely well read for Prairie children but (we) were innocuously led to evaluate the pros and cons of history and to develop a probing attitude toward society as a whole".³

Taylor's probing attitude toward society led to the discovery that there was much work to be done. When Taylor came to Red Deer, it was at a time when there were very few public libraries in Alberta. The desire to improve libraries was one of the influences

that led to her decision to run for Red Deer City Council in 1961. At that time, Taylor stated as her platform that “there were no recreation facilities for women and girls, an inadequate library, no parks policy and social services here were deplorable...I decided that somebody should get in there where the decisions were made and do something”.⁴

The authors of Canadian Women: A History write that the 1960s saw a new dimension in women’s lives, that of “greater participation in conventional and protest politics”.⁵ Ethel Taylor’s decision to seek a seat in municipal politics no doubt was her vehicle to incorporate protest politics into conventional politics, thus enabling the social change she saw as vitally important to a civil society. The fact that the need for libraries was one of the reasons she sought public office led to her appointment to the Red Deer Public Library Board as soon as she was elected to council.

Taylor’s dedication to libraries and literacy, a fanatical dedication according to her son Laughlin, remained a priority throughout her lifetime. According to Dr. Taylor, his mother always regretted not being able to pursue higher education. Because she was unable to pursue formal education, Ethel felt she had a responsibility, as did all women, to educate herself through improved literacy. Not only was the value of literacy to improve one’s education, but Laughlin makes the observation that the world of books which Ethel felt was so important from a very young age, presented a magical world to her that provided an escape from the difficult situation of her childhood.⁶ Perhaps Ethel Taylor best summarized the priority she felt literacy deserved in a personal letter dated December 1982: “By Canadian standards I am poor—my income is below poverty level...indeed...I live in an absolute palace...the treasures of books...I am rich beyond

compare!”.⁷ Her friend Mattie McCullough, commenting during the eulogy at her funeral service, said that Ethel “never deviated from her belief that libraries were vital to a comprehensive educational and cultural experience,” a belief held by many women who pioneered the west.⁸ McCullough remembered that Taylor’s coffee table was constantly piled high with books. The Red Deer Public Library currently holds Taylor’s collection of over 400 of those books. Bob Weber of the Red Deer Advocate agreed with McCullough’s evaluation of Taylor, writing that her drive for better libraries was a major reason for her leaving a “lasting mark on (the) city”.⁹

Indeed Ethel Taylor was instrumental in applying the pressure needed to eventually construct the Red Deer Public Library. Taylor reminisced in a speech to the Red Deer Home Economics Association in 1981 that: “the appalling lack of libraries in Alberta and the pittance provided for them by both provincial and municipal government (*sic*) compared to all other provinces led to some involvement in organizing a W.I. library which was housed in Eaton’s to encourage rural women to pick up reading when shopping”.¹⁰ The authors of Many and Remarkable: The Story of the Alberta Women’s Institutes, write of the appeal in 1946 for books on the part of that organization. They continue that the ads reading “Country people in need of books” resulted in over 6000 books coming from Edmonton and Calgary Libraries, as well as from the T. Eaton Co.¹¹ At the same time as organizing the Women’s Institute library in Eaton’s, Taylor was helping to initiate associate public libraries throughout the Red Deer area, something that led to the eventual formation of the Parkland Regional Library service.

By 1956, Taylor was serving as the Alberta Women's Institute Library Convener. The Institute was successful in its resolution, asking the Alberta government to "formulate a progressive library program," including the employment of graduate librarians and sufficient grants to ensure "up-to-standards service".¹² Mrs. L.H. Taylor (Ethel) warned Institute members that success of the act depended on the promotion of public interest, telling them that: "As you pioneered the little district and community libraries, so your efforts now are needed to bring them to full fruition, in a regional library integration program in *your area of Alberta*".¹³

Although the Women's Institutes highlighted the need for libraries throughout Alberta as conditions fell below national standards, the situation in Red Deer was particularly acute when compared to other similar centers. When Taylor was first elected to City Council and became a member of the library board in 1961, the budget for the Red Deer Library was \$26,000. At the same time, the budget for the Medicine Hat library was \$70,000. In a letter from that library in 1962, Phyllis Lagworth confirmed to Taylor the desire to help with Red Deer's struggle for improved service, concluding that "It is indeed a challenging task in any community to make people aware of their own needs for a good library".¹⁴ Lagworth's comments were accurate, evidenced by the difficulty in convincing many in Red Deer of their own needs. The new library, proposed by Taylor and the Women's Institute as a commemoration of the Centennial celebrations, was turned down in the first plebiscite, and only won approval when the budget was reduced by \$126,000 in 1965.

In her appeal on behalf of the Red Deer Public Library Board, Taylor eloquently stated the goal was:

“Books for every man’s and every child’s needs in a Centennial Library—at hand for each day of each year of each century...what other centennial commemoration could afford such satisfaction to all of our citizens for today and for tomorrow? The humanities, the sciences and arts, the techniques of industry and commerce, the philosophies, depiction of places and people, the gamut of imagery, and plain ‘know-how’ in diverse fields—all are accessible in a truly fulfilling library”.¹⁵

Ethel’s involvement in politics came at a time when few women considered this a realistic option. Indeed the authors of the history of the Women’s Institutes in Alberta, writing in 1997, still referred to Ethel as Mrs. L.H. Taylor, her husband’s initials, clearly indicating that, as a woman, she was a pioneer in the political and public arena. A report compiled by Michael Palamarek, “Alberta Women in Politics: A History of Women and Politics in Alberta,” indicates that, when Ethel was elected to Red Deer City Council, only 3.2% of the Members of Alberta’s Legislature were women. This number showed slightly lower representation than in 1917, shortly after women gained the right to vote.¹⁶ Despite the fact Albertans had chosen the first woman to sit in an elected house in the British Empire shortly after women obtained the suffrage, “official” political activity did not make gains quickly.¹⁷

By working with organizations like the Women’s Institute, Alberta Status of Women, International Development and Peace Movements, Library Association of Alberta, Advisory Committee of the Indian Association of Alberta, Indian Eskimo Association, Red Deer Community Welfare Group, and Health Unit Board, Ethel Taylor

was indeed politically active well before she was ever elected to political office. In this sense, Taylor was undoubtedly aware, just as early suffragists were, that she should not restrict herself to the party system of traditional politics, and that politics was not an end in itself but rather a “means to accomplish specific goals”.¹⁸ The success of Alberta’s Women’s Institutes in pressuring the government to enact the Libraries Act in 1956 demonstrates that the rather dismal statistics of female representation in the “official” political arena cannot be relied on when researching and writing the history of women’s involvement in the politics of the province.

By 1963, the persistent unfortunate condition of Red Deer’s library was addressed by Barbara Schammell in the Red Deer Advocate: “Red Deer citizens, who turn their attention to their library, will discover that it is a disgrace to the city and to themselves as members of the community...our City fathers have claimed over and over that Red Deer is the fastest-growing city in Canada, boasting that the population this year will rise over Medicine Hat and...exceed that of Lethbridge. A comparison of library facilities offered in the three cities indicates the Red Deer Library is completely inadequate”¹⁹

In a 1963 speech to the Alberta Library Association convention, Alberta’s Library Supervisor, Ted Wiltshire, commented on the state of library service available to all Albertans. He pointed out that the number of community libraries had actually declined, that the inadequate financing led to excessive burdens on municipal libraries, and one quarter of Albertans had no local library service nearby.²⁰ Although the Red Deer Public Library Board finally managed to hire its first Professional Librarian, MacDonald Coleman, in 1964, he agreed that Red Deer’s investment in library facilities was much

lower than in most comparable cities.²¹ Even as a member of council who, in 1965, had adopted a seven year plan to build a library, Taylor feared that the capital work objective could “fall prey to the whims of councils”.²² Nonetheless, a second plebiscite eventually granted approval of a new Centennial library for Red Deer, at a reduced cost of \$275,000. The Minutes of the Library Board dated November 8, 1967, state that “an outstanding event in the history of the Red Deer Public Library Boards was the meeting of November 8/67 when the members of the Library Board gathered for the first time in formal session in the Canada Room of Red Deer’s new Centennial Library”.²³ The general budget for 1967 had risen to \$74,000.

The achievement of this milestone for Red Deer’s library system did not mean that Ethel Taylor would cease to be active for improved literacy. The minutes of the Library Board meeting of February 14, 1968 show that her concern remained for the literacy of all Albertans. Her motion reads:

“be it resolved that the Red Deer Public Library Board evolves a long range plan for development of library service to adequately provide for the needs of the different areas of the City...to establish a dialogue...being a part of a continuing education and community centre facility contained with school complexes...Moved that the Red Deer Public Board carry on an investigation of the possibility of becoming part of a Regional Library servicing a Central Alberta area”.²⁴

In that same year, Harry Newsom, the Saskatchewan Provincial Librarian, speaking at the Conference of the Alberta Library Association in Red Deer, acknowledged the continuing struggle faced by Prairie libraries. Newsom said that a

recent library survey revealed the Prairie provinces had 1 librarian per 15000 population, while the rest of Canada operated with 1 librarian per 6500 population. In fact the Canadian Library Association standards called for 1 librarian per 1000 population.²⁵

Meanwhile, the Red Library's tentative budget for 1969 still revealed a lack of commitment on the part of that municipality in comparison to other Alberta cities.

Although showing a circulation rate that was 40% higher than that of Medicine Hat, the Medicine Hat budget requisition for 1968 was \$113, 647, while Red Deer's was almost half that amount, at \$65,713.²⁶ By this time Ethel had left her position as member of Red Deer City Council. It is unclear why she left politics at that time, however Bob McGhee, who was city engineer when Ethel served on council, and who was later elected as Red Deer's mayor, speculates that perhaps she felt she could accomplish more while not held to a particular political organization.²⁷

In fact, many of the early suffragists maintained that women should not affiliate themselves with any political association, for fear of losing their effectiveness if drawn into partisanship. Veronica Strong-Boag writes that Nellie McClung, like many feminists and progressive reformers, favoured ending the party system altogether. Strong-Boag continues that McClung envisioned a "great body of independent, intelligent women who would judge political issues solely on the basis of the public interest".²⁸ Clearly, activists such as McClung and Ethel Taylor, were successful in achieving a great deal of social change outside of the official political arena. Strong-Boag notes that when McClung did agree to enter provincial politics, likely more as a "sense of gratitude for the

conferral of suffrage than any strong sense of partisanship,” she found herself as a member of the opposition, with a limited opportunity to press for women’s rights.²⁹

When Ethel Taylor lobbied for the establishment of more libraries as a way of improving the lives of women, she adhered to mandates developed by earlier Women’s Institute societies. The authors of Canadian Women: A History write of rural women who belonged to Women’s Institutes in the decade following the second World War. They note that stories abound about the lengths to which women went to attend these meetings where they “continued to expand their activities in an attempt to improve the quality of life for women.”³⁰ Taylor recognized that, in order to improve the quality of women’s lives, those women had to first be literate in the language of one’s own country. Indeed “until the late 1980s...the majority of women immigrants were ineligible for the benefits and programs, such as government-sponsored English-language courses, that were available to adult male immigrants”.³¹ Red Deer resident, Mattie McCullough’s eulogy in honour of Taylor described her “discovery of an immigrant mother isolated because although her children and husband were learning English, she did not have a chance. Ethel found that opportunity for her”.³²

Evidence can be found throughout Ethel’s papers of her expressed concern for the literacy of Albertans in remote parts of the province. Taylor’s son maintains that his mother identified herself as African and always had empathy for the black people of Africa, just as she did for the Native Indians of Canada. In 1973, Taylor was instrumental in starting a program that saw libraries and individuals donate books that they no longer required to Indian and Métis settlements in the northern parts of the

province.³³ In correspondence from the Director of Preventative Social Services for the Slave Lake area, the Red Deer Board was told that “the library project was most successful and greatly appreciated”.³⁴ Ethel once again displayed a progressive attitude, when she and fellow Library Board member, G.H. Dawe, recommended that a young person from High School be invited to serve on the Board. When sixteen year old Betty Lauritsen was appointed in 1969, Taylor wrote on her copy of the minutes that “so far as we know Betty is first (*sic*) student in Canada appointed to library board”.³⁵

By 1958, Taylor’s actions, along with those of other activists, particularly the Women’s Institutes, had led the government to draft a new act with the mandate to study the Alberta public library system, hire a provincial librarian, and improve grants. However the frustration grew for Taylor as Alberta remained at “the bottom of the ladder in provinces (*sic*) library development for another 16 years”.³⁶ The Libraries Act of the Statutes of Alberta, instituted in 1956, stated that “the maximum grant payable under section 59” was \$12,500 for a city or town with a population under 40,000 and \$25,000 for a city or town with population of over 40,000.³⁷ When the government proposed changes to the Act of 1956, Ethel expressed her concern.

In 1972, as part of the Alberta Library Trustees Association, Taylor presented a brief to Horst Schmid, Minister of Culture, Youth and Recreation. Taylor argued her group opposed the changes to the Library Act of 1956 as proposed, on the basis that “none is satisfactory for strengthening or the extending of library services on a sound basis...The alleviation offered by these revisions is only temporary and fails to resolve the major problems of libraries working within a legal framework almost twenty years

old”.³⁸ The Library Association urged the minister to undertake a comprehensive study of library services. Ethel Taylor was later reportedly chosen as chairperson of the Downey Commission study because of her experience, and partly due to her non-partisanship. Perhaps it was her frustration which led her to comment in her own personal notes, with some degree of partisanship, that she had a “theory that the S.C. (*Social Credit*) government remained so long in power because Albertans, especially in the hinterland, have remained comparatively unread, uninformed”.³⁹

Taylor’s continued frustration was evident in a letter sent in December 1972 to Jim Foster, Red Deer MLA and Minister of Advanced Education. Despite her perceived non-partisanship, Taylor’s comments reflected her frustration with the previous Social Credit government, and were clearly political. She argued that “we have the poorest library service of any province in Canada, with still 80 to 80% (*sic*) of the rural areas of Alberta not yet served by any kind of library...it is a very great shame that nothing has happened in Alberta...the anti-intellectual climate of Alberta over the past 35 years cannot be separated from the lack of library service”.⁴⁰ In early 1973, an article appeared in the Red Deer Advocate that showed Taylor, along with her fellow library champions, had been successful in their continuous pressure on the current government. The Advocate reported that Helen Hunley, herself a political pioneer as the first female cabinet minister to hold a full government portfolio, and eventually Alberta’s first solicitor general, announced that a study into library services, programs, administration and funding would get underway immediately.⁴¹

Red Deer Public Librarian, Mac Coleman, was able to report to the Board that the government of Alberta had succumbed to the pressure, approving a study with a budget of \$40,000 to be conducted by the Downey Research Institute Association. Coleman further reported to the Library Board that “It was an honour to the City to have Mrs. Taylor on the committee”.⁴² Taylor was very optimistic, commenting in her letter to the Minister that “exciting things undoubtedly will ensue for the people of Alberta from this thorough and encompassing survey”.⁴³ When Taylor accepted the position as Chairman of the Downey Research Committee, her desire to help the truly underprivileged in her society was again evident. In a letter from the Director of the study, it was acknowledged to Taylor that “you also indicated that you would be interested in working with Indian and Métis. We do definitely want to consider library service for these people”.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, Taylor was disappointed when the study was suspended only three months and three meetings after its inception, apparently due in part to lack of cooperation among the committee members. However, given the hesitation of the government to enact the recommendations of the eventual final report, one can only speculate about the reasons for the suspension. Taylor urged optimism, asking all library boards to “strongly and immediately urge the...ministers...to renew the study in the immediate future”. Taylor, as chairperson of the Downey Commission, agreed that re-organization may be necessary, but that without this study, there would “not be improvement in public library service”.⁴⁵ Taylor continued to pressure members of the government to reinstate the study. In expressing her concern to the local paper and to the Honourable Horst Schmid in late 1973, Taylor acknowledged that the response to the

survey Facts Sheets from public libraries, many of them now found in Taylor's Archive collection, had been immense.⁴⁶

By the spring of 1974, the pressure applied was enough to convince the government to reinstate the study. The report that eventually resulted from the study, detailed the main objective, that "the government of Alberta affirm the 'right to know' as the cardinal value governing the development and delivery of library service".⁴⁷ Essentially the report, entitled "Right to Know," sought to ensure equal access to libraries for all Albertans. The suggested organization would be referred to as the Alberta Library and Information Network, or ALINET. The report called for the organization to be led by a professional librarian, and one resource centre with either two or ten regional library systems. In order to ensure equal access, the funding was to come primarily from Provincial grants from a budget of ten million dollars. Not surprisingly, the Red Deer Public Library Board, with Ethel Taylor as member from City Council, urged the government to immediately initiate steps to implement the "Right to Know" recommendations.

Taylor, quite familiar with political process, cautioned people to be patient with, not only the study process, but also the ensuing report. She argued that, although it may not have been set up the way everyone wanted, it was indeed "the only study we are going to have—for a very long time". She urged people to "realistically focus on the tremendous demands being made on many of the Cabinet Ministers".⁴⁸ This expression of tolerance for people who she had struggles with was a common part of Ethel's character, according to her son Laughlin, who comments that his mother truly liked most

people and was never strident. By the same token, Laughlin points out that his mother never accepted defeat. Evidence of that tenacity and patience is found in much of her correspondence. For example, she cautioned fellow library supporters that “it took a long time for the Hon. Mr. Schmid to be sold on the study. Really no one really cared about Alberta libraries”.⁴⁹ For this reason, she believed that if people rejected immediately the results of the study and failed to recognize it as a starting point, that starting point may indeed be lost. As it turned out, the recommendations of the Downey Associates study did not yield immediate results. In fact, it took many more years of lobbying for the government of Alberta to give the conditions of Libraries the attention Taylor thought they deserved.

In a December, 1974, submission regarding the library study, Taylor expressed her disappointment at the lack of support given the report by the Minister who had commissioned it. She remembered that, after the original government study of 1958, the Alberta government, unlike other provinces, had not moved ahead in “instituting library development adequate to the multi-faceted Alberta people’s needs in a changing situation from agricultural to industrialization and technological and social change”.⁵⁰ Because the government had not budgeted money for any publicity of the Downey Institute study, many organizations and citizens were not only unaware of the report, but certainly were not aware of it’s “dire findings”. In addition to the lack of publicity, the government allowed a short period of time for response. What resulted was an apparent apathy, which, as Taylor noted, had not been apparent at all during the study process, when there had been such a high return from the public, library boards, and librarians. Undoubtedly,

the government's hesitation in allowing the public full access to the findings of the report was that the evidence provided was "pretty damning," according to Taylor.⁵¹ Her own notes indicate her frustration, when she concluded that the "Right to Know" study had unfortunately not included a study of the effects of library deprivation in Alberta. That issue, she suggested, might make a "challenging topic for a sociologist's thesis".⁵²

The deprivation of Albertans in regard to library services was still apparent two years after the release of the Downey Commission report. In Taylor's notes prepared for presentation to the Cabinet of the Alberta government in May 1976, she noted that Alberta still provided the lowest grants to libraries. That year, the grants still remained at 1964 levels, and the budget called for a further cut of 2.6% to library funding. This lack of regard for libraries came at a time when the government proposed increases to most other departments of between 8 and 11%. In fact, 1975-76 reflected library grant amounts in Newfoundland and New Brunswick of \$1,500,000, Nova Scotia offered grants of \$2,000,000, Saskatchewan \$3,435,000, and British Columbia \$2,750,000. Alberta grant amounts of \$467,000 were conspicuously "pitiable" and "heartbreaking," as Taylor referred to them, and indeed resulted from many years of "lack of appreciation for libraries".⁵³ Former Red Deer Mayor, Bob McGhee, seems more willing than Taylor to forgive the lack of funds provided by the province to library service. He points out that Alberta was a much younger province with less people than the eastern Canadian provinces, and therefore had less funds available for many services, not only libraries.⁵⁴

Clearly Taylor remained optimistic that funds were available for adequate libraries in Alberta, but that successive governments had failed to recognize literacy as a

priority. Taylor's optimism led her to continue to urge patience. In comments to the Red Deer Advocate following a meeting of the Provincial Cabinet in June of 1976, Taylor said that a "province-wide library system is an inevitability, we'll just have to be more patient. They promised that they would give much more consideration to libraries. There was a warm understanding on the part of cabinet, and an appreciation that Libraries have not been given any great support".⁵⁵ It would seem that Taylor had some understanding herself of the changing tides of government. A 1977 newspaper report praised a recent grant to the Parkland Regional Library, a "response to Downey Report Recommendations of June 1974," acknowledging that it was no longer just a book service, but a library service.⁵⁶ Also in that year the Minister of Culture invited representatives of the Alberta Library Trustee Association to join a tour of British Columbia libraries.⁵⁷

Despite the changes, improvements for Alberta libraries were slow and by 1979, comparisons with other provinces showed that Alberta was still far behind even the smallest of provinces. The per capita contribution from the government of one of those provinces, Prince Edward Island, was \$5.96, while Alberta's figures showed a contribution of only \$1.48 per capita.⁵⁸ It was only in 1982, after Taylor had retired from public office, that a new library act incorporated many of the recommendations brought forward by the "Right to Know" report.⁵⁹

Taylor's frustration had been shared by female activists of previous times. Many have argued that "Women's organizations were often ahead of governments. They established and maintained innovative programs until governments were ready to assume responsibility".⁶⁰ As early as 1915, the United Farm Women of Alberta encouraged its

members to undertake local projects, such as the construction of libraries.⁶¹ The fact Ethel Taylor still found it necessary to be lobbying for this cause in the 1960's and 70's clearly illustrates the reality of the progressive thinking of many women's organizations in comparison with governments. Taylor, commenting in a speech to the Red Deer Home Economics Association in 1981 about the struggle for libraries, said that the noticeable change in library progress only came when Mary LeMessurier was appointed as Minister. LeMessurier, who Taylor referred to as her "heroine," was raised in Nova Scotia, a region which could boast of the existence of a province wide library system for over 30 years.⁶²

The accomplishments of women like Taylor were often overlooked when studying the history of the prairies, particularly because little attention was given to oral sources or the types of material Ethel felt compelled to keep and pass on for preservation. The successful campaign of the suffragists in obtaining the vote is often viewed as the biggest, and at times the only worthwhile accomplishment of female social activists. Indeed, as R.G. Marchildon argues in her article "Improving the Quality of Rural Life in Saskatchewan: Some Activities of the Women's section of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers, 1913-1920," the achievements of the suffragists are often the best documented, even though many women were very active in improving other areas of prairie life, including cultural, social and health amenities.⁶³ She writes that, as early as the start of the century, Saskatchewan women were active in improving rural education and developing libraries.⁶⁴ The Women Grain Growers Association of Saskatchewan recognized, as did Ethel Taylor, that "rural residents, in order to reap all the benefits of

modern society, had to become and remain informed of current developments”.⁶⁵ Interestingly, just as Ethel Taylor’s vast exposure to books led her to devote much attention to libraries and literacy, most suffragist groups began as Literary Clubs. The groups, who met regularly to discuss literary works, inevitably discussed the lack of freedom, equality, and opportunities for women. Many of the clubs evolved into activist organizations, addressing social concerns, from temperance to women’s rights.

One of Western Canada’s most famous suffragists, Nellie McClung, began her career as a teacher and, like Taylor, always maintained a belief in the importance of literacy and education. Indeed, had she lived at the same time as Taylor, the two women would likely have shared many platforms. McClung, sometimes referred to as a “maternal feminist,” always maintained that access to literacy was tantamount to a civil society. According to her biographers, Mary Hallett and Marilyn Davis, McClung believed that women, blessed with a genteel nature, needed to be active politically to ensure civil societies. As the authors of Canadian Women: A History write, in the nineteenth century “everywhere the socially concerned were promoting more regular and improved schooling for both sexes as a solution to many of the social ills of their time”.⁶⁶

Whether or not McClung or Ethel Taylor inherited the stereotype of maternal feminist does not appear to have been important to either of them. Catherine Cavanaugh writes in Chapter Five of her Ph.D. Dissertation, that often women activists rarely made such distinctions for themselves, preferring to concentrate on advocating a “variety of reforms”.⁶⁷ Clearly both Taylor and McClung felt it important for women to gain an education and both felt it important to be positive role models. Cavanaugh continues that

the perception of women, like Violet McNaughton, often portrayed as the “mother” of Saskatchewan’s farm movement, were distorted by “inherited stereotypes”.⁶⁸ Quite likely, Taylor simply viewed herself as an activist, committed to improving society, particularly in Alberta where she found herself living most of her adult life, and particularly for women whom she saw as disadvantaged. Indeed, in her case she may have even thought it helped her causes to be seen as a “mother figure”. In a letter to the Commissioners in 1973, while serving on City Council, Ethel commented her contributions to society might be a result of being viewed “an enabler assisting people and bodies to gain greater insights...to interpret needs...As a kind of mother figure in the community I am called on by all kinds of people”.⁶⁹

Obviously, Taylor shared some of McClung’s views of woman as the genteel civilizer and enabler. Indeed, fellow council member, Morris Flewelling was quoted as saying that Ethel “might be having dinner with a cabinet minister but in the morning baking muffins for a shut-in down the street”.⁷⁰ Whether or not Taylor’s outreach and activism qualifies her as a feminist, or social activist in the same way as this type of outreach did Nellie McClung, the two shared an admirable heritage. Elizabeth Jameson, in her article “Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West,” argues that women in western history have often been stereotyped as either “genteel civilizer...or...oppressed drudge,” and reluctant pioneer.⁷¹ She continues that the problem of these stereotypes has been partially the result of a lack of sources. Because Ethel Taylor was so very diligent in retaining much of her correspondence, one can obtain a realistic history of the challenges and successes of her involvement in the

social issues she encountered in her society, without restricting her to a pre-conceived stereotype.

Taylor was known for recognizing the value of all her correspondence and anything pertaining to the causes she felt important. The Red Deer Archives attests to this by way of the volume of material Taylor bequeathed to them. With her diligence in keeping so much of her material, Taylor was ahead of her time once again. Researchers in the area of women's history have recently opened exciting new doors by relying on just the type of material Taylor so wisely left with the Red Deer Archives. One of the items that Taylor kept, and that no doubt meant a great deal to her was an article published in January of 1978 in the Red Deer Advocate. It appears Taylor found a kindred spirit in another local pioneer. The article recounts the very generous donation made to the City of Red Deer on behalf of the desired expansion of the Centennial Library. Mr. Norman Bower, an area farmer, donated \$250,000 towards the \$510,000 cost of the project, meaning the library could be built two years ahead of schedule. In his assessment of Bower, long time Red Deer Public Library board member and colleague of Taylor's, Dr. Parsons, remarked that Bower was a man "who has worked hard all his life...But he realizes man does not live by bread alone".⁷²

These comments could just as easily have been used to describe Taylor. The fact that Ethel Taylor was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Alberta in 1982, at a time when only one in four women held such a degree, speaks to the valuable contributions many felt she made to society.⁷³ In 1979, 10 years before her death, Taylor's commitments were again recognized, when the City of Red Deer named a new

roadway system and bridge in her honour. At the time of her death, a group of Red Deer citizens was in the process of nominating Taylor for the Order of Canada.

Clearly, Dr. Ethel Isabella Taylor realized that many of the social ills she encountered had to be addressed, and that the chances of success were increased dramatically if one sought an education, whether it be a formal education or self-education through increased literacy. Dr. Laughlin Taylor believes that his mother's greatest desire was that she would be a positive role model to younger women. Taylor's foresight in retaining so much material, means that she is owed a debt by historians wanting to record the many political and social accomplishments of women pioneering Canadian Frontier settlement. Dr. Ethel Taylor's foresight and desire to be a role model also means that society, and particularly the women in society, indeed owe her a tremendous debt, for this "ordinary" woman is one of the great role models found in prairie history.

¹ Ethel Taylor Fonds, City Archives of Red Deer Accession No. MG29, Folder 1

² Ibid., folder 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Wendy Mitchinson, and Naomi Black, eds. *Canadian Women: A History*. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Canada, Inc., 1988), p.293

⁶ Laughlin H. Taylor, Interview by the author, Red Deer, Alberta, 23 June 2003

⁷ Ethel Taylor Fonds, Folder 2

⁸ Ibid., Eulogy delivered by Mattie McCullough, 5 June 1989

⁹ Ibid., Bob Weber in Red Deer Advocate, 25 May 1989

¹⁰ Ibid., Folder 3.

-
- ¹¹ Catherine C. Cole and Judy Larmour, *Many and Remarkable: The Story of the Alberta Women's Institutes*. (Edmonton: Alberta Women's Institute, 1997), p.73
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ethel Taylor Fonds, City Archives of Red Deer Accession No. MG29, Box xxxiii
- ¹⁵ Ibid., Speech April 1964, Box xxxiii
- ¹⁶ Linda Trimble, "A Few Good Women: Female Legislators in Alberta, 1972-1991," In *Standing on New Ground: Women in Alberta*, edited by Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1993), p.93
- ¹⁷ Nanci Langford, "All That Glitters: The Political Apprenticeship of Alberta Women, 1916-1930," In *Standing on New Ground: Women in Alberta*, p.72
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p.84
- ¹⁹ Ethel Taylor Fonds, Barbara Schammell in Red Deer Advocate, 1963 (undated), Box xxxiii
- ²⁰ Ibid., Ted Wiltshire speech, 1963, Box xxxiii
- ²¹ Ibid., Macdonald Coleman to Red Deer Advocate, 25 June 1964, Box xxxiii
- ²² Ibid., Speech of Ethel Taylor, 1964, Box xxxiii
- ²³ Ibid., Box xxxiii
- ²⁴ Ibid., Box xxxiii
- ²⁵ Ibid., Harry Newsome speech in Red Deer Advocate, 27 April 1968, Box xxxiii
- ²⁶ Ibid., Box xxxiii
- ²⁷ Robert McGhee, Interview by author, Red Deer, Alberta, 12 June 03
- ²⁸ Veronica Strong-Boag, "Ever a Crusader: Nellie McClung, First-Wave Feminist," In *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, edited by Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman. (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1986), p.184
- ²⁹ Ibid., p.185
- ³⁰ Alison Prentice, et. al., Ed., *Canadian Women: A History*, p.334
- ³¹ Alison Prentice, et.al., Ed., *Canadian Women: A History*, p.290
- ³² Ethel Taylor Fonds, Folder 1
- ³³ Ibid., Minutes of Library Board, 9 January 1973, Box xxxiv
- ³⁴ Ibid., Letter to G.H. Dawe dated 14 May 1973, Box xxxiv
- ³⁵ Ibid., Box xxxiii
- ³⁶ Ibid., Folder 3, Speech to Home Economics Association, 27 October 1981
- ³⁷ Ibid., Library Act of Statutes of Alberta, 1956, Chapter 27, Part VI, Section 60, Box xxxvii
- ³⁸ Ibid., Box xxxiv
- ³⁹ Ibid., Box xxxiv
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., Letter 15 December 1972, Box xxxviii
- ⁴¹ Ibid., Article Red Deer Advocate, 1973 (undated), Bx xxxviii
- ⁴² Ibid., Library Board Minutes, 8 May 1973, Box xxxiv
- ⁴³ Ibid., Letter to Horst Schmid, 10 May 1973, Box xxxiv
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., Letter 4 July 1973, Box xxxvii
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., Report to Library Board, 14 December 1973, Box xxxiv
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., Letter to Horst Schmid, 18 December 1973, Box xxxvii
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., Alinet "Right to Know" Report, 1974, p. 70, Box xxxvii
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., Speech to Library Advisory Committee, 6 May 1974, Box xxxviii
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., Speech to Library Advisory Committee, 6 May 1974, Box xxxviii
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., Report to Library Study Hearing, 4 December 1974, Box xxxiv
- ⁵¹ Ibid., Report to Library Study Hearing, 4 December 1974, Box xxxiv
- ⁵² Ibid., Box xxxiv
- ⁵³ Ibid., Notes for presentation to Alberta Cabinet, 8 May 1976, Box xxxiv
- ⁵⁴ Robert McGhee, Interview by the Author, 12 June 2003

-
- ⁵⁵ Ethel Taylor Fonds, Red Deer Advocate, 9 June 1976, Box xxxiv
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., Red Deer Advocate, 4 June 1977, Box xxxiv
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., Library Board Minutes, 11 January 1977, Box xxxiv
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., Executive Summary of the Financial Assistance to Libraries, 1974, Box xxxiv
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., Folder 2
- ⁶⁰ Alison Prentice, et.al, Ed., *Canadian Women: A History*, p.337
- ⁶¹ Alison Prentice, et.al, Ed., *Canadian Women: A History*, p.268
- ⁶² Ethel Taylor Fonds, Folder 3, Speech to Red Deer Home Economics Assc., 27 October 1981
- ⁶³ R.G. Marchildon, "Improving the Quality of Rural Life in Saskatchewan: Some Activities of the Women's Section of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers, 1913-1920," *Building Beyond the Homestead: Rural History on the Prairies*," edited by David C. Jones and Ian MacPherson, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1985), p.89
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., p97
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., p99
- ⁶⁶ Alison Prentice, et.al, Eds., *Canadian Women: A History*, p.155
- ⁶⁷ Catherine Cavanaugh, "Chapter Five: Women in Politics: a widening sphere?" *In Search of A Useful Life: Irene Marryat Parlby, 1868-1965*, Unpublished PhD. Dissertation, (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1994), p.125
- ⁶⁸ Catherine Cavanaugh, "Chapter Five: Women in politics: a widening sphere?" p.124
- ⁶⁹ Ethel Taylor Fonds, Folder 2
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., Folder 1
- ⁷¹ Elizabeth Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood of the American West," In *The Women's West*, edited by Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p.146
- ⁷² Ethel Taylor Fonds, Red Deer Advocate, 3 January 1978, Box xxxiv
- ⁷³ Alison Prentice, et.al, Eds., *Canadian Women: A History*, p.329



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Manuscripts

Ethel Taylor Fonds, MG29. City Archives of Red Deer, Alberta.

Interviews

Laughlin B. Taylor, Interview by the author, Montreal, Quebec, 23 June 2003.

Robert McGhee, Interview by the author, Red Deer, Alberta. 12 June 2003.

Books

Cole, Catherine C. and Judy Larmour. *Many and Remarkable: The Story of the*

Alberta Women's Institutes. Edmonton: Alberta Women's Institute, 1997.

Prentice, Alison, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Wendy Mitchinson,

and Naomi Black, eds. *Canadian Women: A History*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace

Jovanovich Canada, Inc., 1988.

Articles

Cavanaugh, Catherine. "Women in politics: a widening sphere?" Chapter five of

In Search of Useful Life: Irene Marryat Parlby, 1868-1965. Unpublished Ph.D.

Dissertation, Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1994.

Jameson, Elizabeth. "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in

the American West." In *The Women's West*, edited by Susan Armitage and

Elizabeth Jameson., 145-164. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.

Langford, Nanci. "All That Glitters: The Political Apprenticeship of Alberta Women, 1916-1930." In *Standing on New Ground: Women in Alberta*, edited by Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne, 71-85. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1993.

Marchildon, R.G. "Improving the Quality of Rural Life in Saskatchewan: Some Activities of the Women's Section of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers, 1913-1920." In *Building Beyond the Homestead: Rural History on the Prairies*, edited by David C. Jones and Ian MacPherson, 89-109. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1985.

Strong-Boag, Veronica. "Ever a Crusader': Nellie McClung, First-Wave Feminist." In *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, edited by Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, 78-190. Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1986.

Trimble, Linda. "A Few Good Women: Female Legislators in Alberta, 1972-1991." In *Standing on New Ground: Women in Alberta*, edited by Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne, 87-114. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1993.