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Department of History

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## PEI Women Attending University Off and On the Island to 1943

ALTHOUGH THE MARITIMES IS CONSIDERED to have been a leader in the higher education of women, with the first woman graduating from a New Brunswick university in 1875 and the first woman graduating from a Nova Scotia university in 1884, no woman graduated from a PEI university until 1941.<sup>1</sup> St. Dunstan's University, a Catholic institution founded in 1855, was the only university on PEI until 1964, and did not accept any women during its first 84 years.<sup>2</sup> In considering the history of PEI women and university, a myopic focus on the extension of St. Dunstan's admittance policy obscures the initiative of the approximately 500 PEI women who sought university education off the Island before 1942 as well as the leadership of the Sisters of St. Martha in bringing coeducation to PEI.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the history of higher education in Canada was criticized for focusing on institutions rather than students.<sup>3</sup> This bias was corrected somewhat by a proliferation of studies that concentrated on students within specific universities. The experience of women from PEI, however, has escaped examination, perhaps because they had no institution of their own. Prince Edward Island women constituted a unique group of students and provide a unique perspective on the history of higher education in Canada. Perhaps because of the relative poverty of PEI and the absence of a university that accepted women, it has been assumed that PEI women were unlikely to pursue higher education.<sup>4</sup> This assumption may have been fostered by the dominance of

- 1 Grace Anne Lockhart graduated from Mount Allison with a BSc in English Literature in 1875 and was also the first woman to earn a university degree in the British Empire; see John G. Reid, "The Education of Women at Mount Allison, 1854-1914", *Acadiensis*, XII, 2 (Spring 1983), p. 3. Clara Belle Marshall graduated from Acadia University with a BSc in 1884; see Patricia Gallant, e-mail correspondence, 4 February 2003, Acadia University Archives. PEI's only other post-secondary institution, Prince of Wales College, was raised to university status in 1965 and "granted degrees to . . . both its first and last graduating class in 1969". St. Dunstan's also conferred its last degrees in 1969 as the following year the two institutions began the amalgamation process. See Olga McKenna, SCH, "The History of Higher Education in the Province of Prince Edward Island", *Canadian Catholic Historical Association Historical Studies* (1971), pp. 45, 47. I would like to express my appreciation to John G. Reid, Elizabeth Smyth, Gail G. Campbell, G. Edward MacDonald, Jill MacMicken-Wilson and the three anonymous *Acadiensis* peer reviewers for their very useful comments on various drafts of this paper. Many thanks as well to Marisa Ferraiuolo, Mairead Berry, Catherine Enserink and Melanie Yugo for research assistance and to the dean of arts and science, University of Lethbridge, for financial support.
- 2 Olga McKenna, SCH, "Higher Education in Transition, 1945-1980", in Verner Smitheram et al., eds., *The Garden Transformed: Prince Edward Island, 1945-1980* (Charlottetown, 1982), p. 214.
- 3 Jo LaPierre, "The Academic Life of Canadian Coeds, 1880-1900", in Ruby Heap and Alison Prentice, eds., *Gender and Education in Ontario* (Toronto, 1991), p. 304.
- 4 G. Edward MacDonald, *The History of St. Dunstan's University, 1855-1956* (Charlottetown, 1989), pp. 414-15.

Heidi Macdonald, "PEI Women Attending University Off and On the Island to 1943", *Acadiensis*, XXXV, 1 (Autumn 2005), pp. 94-112.

institutional histories in the historiography of higher education in Canada. Studies of early women students at Dalhousie, Queen's, McMaster, Western and the University of Toronto, for example, note the higher enrolment of middle-class women whose origins were in the vicinity of a university, usually within city limits.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, this paper examines the extent to which PEI women sought university education in five different universities off the Island before 1942. It seems the assumption about Island women should be turned on its head: PEI women appear to have been particularly motivated to seek university education. Moreover, the process through which women were finally admitted to St. Dunstan's illuminates a rarely considered contribution of women religious to higher education: the first women to penetrate the men-only admittance policy at PEI's only university were two members of the Sisters of St. Martha. Because they were viewed as a kind of third sex, they provided a transition between a men-only admittance policy and full-scale coeducation at St Dunstan's. Both arguments – PEI women's significant rate of university attendance and the women religious' contribution to PEI coeducation – dispel the conjectures of several historians over the past few decades and extend the scope of the existing literature on women and higher education.

The appropriateness of post-secondary education for women became a matter of debate in the second half of the 19th century. Opponents argued that such education was not only unnecessary, but also endangered women's reproductive health. Physicians explained that the proper formation and operation of the female reproductive system between the ages of 12 and 20 required so much energy that girls and women could not endure the added pressures of studying, which could lead to sterility. To lessen the danger as well as to complement the traditional ideals of womanhood, experts developed a menu of female-appropriate subjects that included art, music and the Romance languages, and discouraged the study of such subjects as anatomy, mathematics and physics. In addition to the physical dangers of studying, experts also worried about the possible repercussions of educating women with men. Men could have a negative, vulgar and immoral influence on women students while women students, knowingly or unknowingly, could tempt, distract or seduce their male classmates.<sup>6</sup> The latter was a great concern in institutions such as St. Dunstan's in PEI, which was founded not only to provide undergraduate education, but also to provide candidates for the priesthood. In addition, whether women were educated in coeducational or women's universities, according to Barbara Solomon, "fear lingered that education might unfit a girl for her subservient role as a wife".<sup>7</sup> Other

5 Judith Fingard, "College, Career, and Community: Dalhousie Coeds, 1881-1921", in Paul Axelrod and John G. Reid, eds., *Youth, University and Canadian Society: Essays on the Social History of Higher Education* (Montreal and Kingston, 1989), pp. 27-8, 34; Lynne Marks and Chad Gaffield, "Women at Queen's University 1895-1905: A 'Little Sphere' All Their Own?" *Ontario History*, 98, 4 (December 1986), pp. 338-9; Nicole Neatby, "Preparing for the Working World: 'Women at Queen's' During the 1920s", in *Gender and Education in Ontario*, p. 332; Alyson E. King, "The Experience of the Second Generation of Women Students at Ontario Universities, 1900-1930", Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1999.

6 Vern Bullough and Martha Voight, "Women, and Menstruation, and Nineteenth Century Medicine", *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 47, 1 (January-February 1973), pp. 69-70, cited in Wendy Mitchinson, *The Nature of their Bodies: Women and Their Doctors in Victorian Canada* (Toronto, 1991), pp. 83n26, 84n30, 86n34 and 86.

7 Barbara Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven and London, 1985), p. 6.

historians have substantiated this fear; Judith Fingard, for example, has shown that as many as 55 per cent of women who attended Dalhousie between the 1880s and 1920s never married, a rate that is very high given that in the general population only 10 per cent of Canadians never married.<sup>8</sup>

Despite such opposition, significant numbers of women attended and graduated from Canadian universities throughout the late-19th century. The first woman to earn a bachelor's degree in the British Commonwealth was Grace Annie Lockhart, a Saint John, New Brunswick woman who received a Bachelor of Science degree from Mount Allison in 1875.<sup>9</sup> Within a decade, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Quebec had at least one university that admitted women. When universities were opened in the western provinces of Manitoba (1886), Alberta (1907), Saskatchewan (1909) and British Columbia (1906), they all accepted women from the outset.<sup>10</sup> Thus, by 1909 all Canadian provinces except PEI possessed at least one degree-granting university that accepted women.<sup>11</sup> By 1920 women accounted for 16.5 per cent of the enrolment in Canadian universities, a proportion that rose to 24 per cent by 1940.<sup>12</sup>

### **PEI Women's Rate of University Attendance before 1942**

It has been assumed that poverty, conservatism and the absence of a local option deterred PEI women from attending university. In his 1989 history of St. Dunstan's, Edward MacDonald wrote that "if [PEI women] demanded a university education, they sought it off the Island. Few did. Far into the twentieth century, Island society

8 Fingard, "Dalhousie Coeds", p. 31; Solomon, *Educated Women*, p. 31; Peter Ward, *Courtship, Love, and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada* (Montreal and Kingston, 1990), p. 51.

9 Many of the earliest Canadian universities followed the American tradition of separate colleges for women, including Mount Allison Ladies Academy, founded 1854, and St. Bernard's Young Ladies Academy, founded 1886 and which became affiliated with St. Francis Xavier in 1894. See Reid, "Education of Women", pp. 3-6 and James Cameron, *For the People: A History of St. Francis Xavier University* (Montreal and Kingston, 1996), pp. 76-8, 97-9. The University of Toronto was a notable exception to this trend, becoming a fully coeducational institution in 1884, although the university threatened to funnel women students in the Faculty of Arts into a separate college in 1909. See Sara Z. Burke, "'Being unlike Man': Challenges to Co-education at the University of Toronto, 1884-1909", *Ontario History*, 93, 1 (Spring 2001), pp. 12-31.

10 See University of Manitoba, "Historical Chronology", <<http://www.umanitoba.ca/libraries/units/archives/history/UYEAR.htm>>; Laurie Mook, "Women At University: The Early Years", *Alberta History*, 44, 1 (1996), pp. 8-14; Patrick Hayes, University of Saskatchewan Archives, e-mail message to Marisa Ferraiuolo, 14 May 2003 and Chris Hives, University of British Columbia Archives, e-mail message to Marisa Ferraiuolo, 14 May 2003. British Columbia had a branch of McGill in Vancouver, which accepted women between 1906 and 1915 (when the University of British Columbia opened). By 1915, the debate over higher education for women had waned a great deal and thousands of women in Canada had already received undergraduate degrees, and women were immediately admitted to UBC. See Robin S. Harris, *A History of Higher Education in Canada, 1663-1960* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 226-7.

11 Newfoundland did not enter Canadian Confederation until 1949. Memorial University of Newfoundland, a coeducational institution, began to grant degrees the same year. Although Newfoundland offered degrees to women later than PEI did, I say that in the early 1940s, PEI was the last province in which women could receive bachelor degrees because when St. Dunstan's began to admit women in 1939 Newfoundland was not yet a Canadian province. See Malcolm MacLeod, *A bridge built halfway: a history of Memorial University College, 1925-1950* (Montreal, 1990).

12 Harris, *Higher Education in Canada*, p. 352.

continued overwhelmingly rural and crushingly conservative. Housewifery remained, not a profession, but a station in life; woman was queen of the family, but also its maid".<sup>13</sup> MacDonald's summary seems self-evident, but it is not true. A review of student calendars or registers at Acadia, Dalhousie, McGill, Mount Allison and St. Francis Xavier universities from 1880-81 to 1941-42 shows that, proportionate to the provincial population, PEI women attended university at a significant rate.<sup>14</sup>

Table One  
Number of PEI women enrolling for the first time at Acadia, Dalhousie, McGill, Mount Allison and St. Francis Xavier universities, 1880-81 to 1941-42

	1880-89	1890-99	1900-09	1910-19	1920-29	1930-39	1940-42	Total
Acadia	0	4	7	3	7	24	8	53
Dalhousie	0	8	11	4	24	27	2	76
McGill	2	4	3	5	15	14	6	49
Mount Allison	6	21	16	19	37	72	18	189
St. F. X.	0	0	1	5	3	9	2	20
Total	8	37	38	36	86	146	36	387

Source: Watson Kirkconnell, *The Acadia Record, 1838-1953* (Wolfville, 1953), pp. 27-279; Dalhousie student registers, 1885-1943 (Dalhousie University Archives or DUA); Mount Allison calendars, 1875-1943 (Mount Allison University Archives); McGill University calendars, 1884-1943 (McGill University Archives); St. Francis Xavier University calendars, 1894-1943 (St. Francis Xavier University Archives).<sup>15</sup>

From 1890 to 1920, the number of PEI women beginning their university courses in these universities averaged 3.7 students per year. Consistent with national post-First World War increases in university enrolment, the number of PEI women

13 MacDonald, *History of St. Dunstan's*, pp. 414-15. MacDonald's assumption supports E.R. Forbes' argument that contemporary stereotypes rather than research have led some historians to label the Maritimes "conservative". See Ernest R. Forbes, "In Search of a Post-Confederation Maritime Historiography, 1900-1967", *Acadiensis*, VIII, 1 (Autumn 1978), pp. 14-16.

14 I also looked at records at Mount Saint Vincent (MSV) and the University of New Brunswick (UNB) but they were not sufficiently complete to include in this study. A fire in 1951 destroyed MSV student records, and student year books do not consistently list students' hometowns. I did identify three PEI women in MSV yearbooks, though, which I consider a sufficient indicator that a number of PEI women did attend that university. Student records at UNB before 1924 do not contain home addresses, so I could not include UNB in this study.

15 Only six of the 387 PEI women enrolled in the five universities earned two degrees, sometimes at different universities: two received a BA and an MA, one received a BA and a BEd, one received a BA and a BSc, one received a BSc and a social work degree and another received a BSc and a medical degree. Each woman student is counted only once in the total number of women who left PEI to attend university.

beginning a university career increased to an average of almost nine per year in the 1920s, with the years 1925, 1928 and 1929 seeing between 13 and 17 PEI women entering these universities for the first time. During the 1930s, the number of PEI women attending university for the first time averaged almost 15 a year with never fewer than seven (1934) and an all-time high of 27 in 1938. With the exception of the early 1920s, the steady increases in the number of PEI women attending university mirrored rising national rates. In fact, PEI women attended university at a rate that was relatively consistent with the national rate, despite having to leave the Island.

When one looks specifically at university-aged women, aged 15 to 24, the PEI women in this age group comprise 2.3 per cent of that age group nationally in 1891, falling steadily to 0.8 per cent in both 1931 and 1941.<sup>16</sup> PEI women's attendance at the five universities studied between 1891 and 1941 is consistent with their proportion of the total number of women in the same age group nationally, particularly for the year 1901 (2.0 per cent versus 2.3 per cent).<sup>17</sup> In fact, the rate of attendance of PEI women is undoubtedly higher than noted, given that some women would have attended universities other than the five studied, including institutions in New England. Moreover, compared to PEI men, PEI women attended university at a rate closer to their national counterparts – at least from 1920 to 1940 when the most complete figures are available. Although no statistics are available that distinguish between the number of PEI men and PEI women who attended university before 1943, the total numbers are available by province beginning in 1920, and may be used to indicate the proportion of the total number of PEI university students that are women from the five universities under study – from 5 of 107 in 1920 (4.7 per cent) to a high of 35 of 93 in 1935 (37.6 per cent) (see Table Two). That PEI women accounted for a higher proportion of university students in their province than the national average in 1930, 1935 and 1940 is consistent with late-20th-century trends in higher education, which show that PEI women university students outnumbered their male counterparts at a higher proportion than in any other province.<sup>18</sup>

16 I am using the wide range of age, 15 to 24, because I combined the census categories of 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 from *Census of Canada, 1941*, vol. 3, *Ages of the Population* (Ottawa, 1946), p. 5. While the population of Canada grew from less than five million in 1891 to more than 11.5 million in 1941, the population of PEI dropped 13 percent, from 109,078 to 95,047, in the same five decades. Residents of PEI as a percentage of Canadians thus dropped significantly in this period, from 2.3 per cent to 0.8 per cent.

17 F.H. Leacy, ed., *Historical Statistics of Canada*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa, 1983), table W340-438; *Census of Canada, 1941*, vol. 3, "Ages of the Population", p. 5; Kirkconnell, *Acadia Record Book*; Dalhousie student registers, 1885-1943; Mount Allison calendars, 1875-1943; McGill University calendars, 1884-1943; St. Francis Xavier University calendars, 1894-1943.

18 Pan Canadian Educational Indicators Program, "Chapter 3: University Enrolment [1999]", in *Educational Indicators Canada*, <http://www.emec.ca/stats/pceip/1999/pceipmac/english/pages/page1e.html> Education (accessed on 4 August 2004).

Table Two  
 Full-time undergraduate enrolment of PEI women at Acadia, Dalhousie, McGill, Mount Allison and St. Francis Xavier universities as percentage of total enrolment of PEI university students and compared to national rates of women's enrolment, 1920-1940

	PEI women in five universities as percentage of total PEI university students (numbers in parentheses)	Women as percentage of total university undergraduates, Canada (numbers in parentheses)	Percentage difference between PEI women's attendance at five universities and national women's rate of attendance
1920	4.7 (5 of 107)	16.3 (3,716 of 22,719)	-11.6
1925	17.6 (19 of 108)	21.2 (5,273 of 24,852)	-3.6
1930	31.4 (32 of 102)	23.5 (7,428 of 31,576)	7.8
1935	37.6 (35 of 93)	22.4 (7,494 of 33,522)	15.2
1940	25.8 (33 of 128)	23.3 (8,107 of 34,817)	2.5

Source: Kirkconnell, *Acadia Record Book*; Dalhousie student registers, 1885-1943; Mount Allison calendars, 1875-1943; McGill University calendars, 1884-1943; St. Francis Xavier University calendars 1894-1943; *Historical Statistics of Canada*, Series W340-438.<sup>19</sup>

Studies of the first two generations of women in higher education in Canada emphasize that the majority of students were white, middle class, Protestant and lived near the university. Lynne Marks and Chad Gaffield have shown that, between 1895 and 1905, 68 per cent of women students at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario had fathers with "higher status occupations" while only 21 per cent of the women's fathers were farmers. They also note that 75 per cent of the women originated from Kingston or eastern Ontario. Compared to men at Queen's, significantly more women were from the middle class and twice as many women were from Kingston.<sup>20</sup> Nicole Neatby confirms that, in the 1920s, the middle class was still overrepresented among Queen's women to a greater degree than among the men.<sup>21</sup> Alyson King notes that four Ontario universities – McMaster, Western, Queen's and the University of Toronto – drew most of their female students from their respective communities and that "few students traveled from their home city to attend university in another city" between 1900 to 1930.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, two-thirds of the women who attended Dalhousie University between 1881 to 1901, and half those who attended between 1901 and

19 I have double-checked the accuracy of these numbers against MacDonald's figures for St. Dunstan's enrolment in selected years and believe the historical statistics are accurate and included PEI students attending university off the Island. For example, MacDonald notes that enrolment was 141 in 1925 and, by the late-19th century, one-third of students were not from PEI. See MacDonald, *St. Dunstan's*, pp. 179, 303.

20 Marks and Gaffield, "Women at Queen's", pp. 338-9. Thirty-five per cent of women were from Kingston while 16 per cent of men were from Kingston.

21 Neatby, "Women at Queen's", p. 332.

22 King, "Experience of the Second Generation", p. 75.

1921, were from Halifax.<sup>23</sup> While all these authors are careful to note exceptions, it is clear that from 1880 to 1930 most female university students were firmly middle class and lived with or near their families while attending university. For PEI women with no university on the Island to accept them and a relatively small middle class (due to the lack of a manufacturing sector and the preponderance of farming), the decision first to attend university and, second, to choose a particular institution, had to be based on criteria other than physical proximity.

The most obvious explanation for choosing a particular university was the programmes of study offered. Of the five universities studied, Acadia, Mount Allison and St. Francis Xavier provided primarily undergraduate programmes and courses, while Dalhousie and McGill also provided graduate programmes in medicine and law. Thus, a student who wanted to remain in the Maritimes and study medicine or law had to attend Dalhousie and ignore other preferences such as denominational affiliation, kinship ties or propinquity. Although information on their chosen programs was not available for all of the women in the five universities, most studied arts and science, echoing the national experience which saw 82 per cent of women university students across Canada enrolled in these fields in 1920.<sup>24</sup> Even at Dalhousie, 50 of the 71 Island women whose program of study can be ascertained were registered in the Bachelor of Arts programme and five were registered in the Bachelor of Science. Only eight chose programmes that could not be obtained at other Maritime universities: four were in pharmacy, three were in medicine and one studied law.<sup>25</sup> With arts dominating the studies of so many Island women, it would seem that only a handful selected a university based on its programmes.

Geography played a larger role in selecting a university than the programmes offered. Most notably, 189 of the 384 PEI women university students at the five universities registered at Mount Allison, the university closest to PEI. Although propinquity to a university did not determine whether a PEI woman attended university, it was highly likely to influence which one she attended, just as Fingard, King and Marks and Gaffield have noted for one university in Nova Scotia and four in Ontario. Moreover, for PEI women, propinquity often trumped other preferences including denominational affiliation. Clearly it was the prospect of saving a few dollars in transportation and making more frequent trips home, rather than religion, that attracted almost half of the PEI women to attend Mount Allison, given that in 1901 only 13 per cent of Islanders shared the university's Methodist roots.<sup>26</sup> The impact of Mount Allison being closer to PEI than the other universities should not be overemphasized, however, as students at any off-Island university could be shut off

23 Fingard, "Dalhousie Coeds", pp. 27, 34.

24 The national rate of enrolment of women in arts and sciences dropped to 70 per cent by 1940 as more women enrolled in professional programmes such as education and social work, but only a few PEI women seem to have branched into these areas in the inter-war era. See Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women, 1919-1939* (Toronto, 1988), p. 23.

25 Dalhousie student registers, 1885-1943, DUA.

26 *Census of Canada, 1901*, vol. 1, "Population", p. 144. The high rate of attendance at Mount Allison might be expected after church union in 1925, when the United Church became the largest Protestant denomination in PEI, but, in fact, Mount Allison drew the highest number of PEI women in every decade, as is indicated in Table 1.



## *PEI Women Attending University 101*

from PEI during the winter months; until 1917, winter transportation between the Island and the mainland was regularly interrupted by ice packs in the Northumberland Strait. Nevertheless, beginning in the 1870s, summer steamer service from Summerside to Shediac, and rail service from Shediac to Sackville on a 38-mile spur line, made Island students' transportation to Mount Allison relatively convenient.<sup>27</sup> In addition to its propinquity to Prince Edward Island, Mount Allison's position in a small town, its early acceptance of women and its fine reputation for both its ladies college and university were surely influential in attracting PEI women.

While PEI women were tenacious in obtaining higher education despite the obstacles of access and cost, it is certain that poverty did prohibit many women from pursuing higher education, from staying away from home as long as they wished or from choosing a university farther away from home. For L.M. Montgomery, cost was the greatest obstacle to obtaining a degree and the reason she attended university for only one year. In April 1895 she wrote in her diary that she had received a letter from the Reverend Mr. Lacey of the Halifax Ladies College advising her that she was too far advanced for their courses and should take "a selected course at Dalhousie if she did not care to enter as an undergraduate". "Care to enter", she continued, "there is nothing in the world I would care to do so much but there is no use in thinking of it, for I could not afford to complete the B.A. course. I shall likely take the selected course if I go at all. I am anxious to spend a year at a real college as I think it would help me along in my ambition to be a writer".<sup>28</sup> For Montgomery, and undoubtedly for many other Island women, a lack of money rather than social conservatism was the greatest barrier to attending university. Ultimately, Montgomery chose the slightly higher costs associated with attending a school farther away from home. Although her published journals do not indicate why she chose Dalhousie, one suspects that the Montgomery's family's strong identification with the Presbyterian faith and her cousin's attendance at the Halifax university affected her decision.<sup>29</sup>

Of the five universities examined, only Dalhousie recorded students' religion with any consistency.<sup>30</sup> Before church union in 1925, all Island women who gave their religion indicated they attended a Presbyterian church or were Presbyterian, although 5 of the 25 women left that field blank. After church union, most Island women registered at Dalhousie were United Church. Overall, of the 76 female students who attended between 1893 and 1942, 52 were Presbyterian, Methodist or (after 1925) United Church. Another seven were Anglican. Only six women listed their religion as Roman Catholic; four of them were enrolled in pharmacy and another in a special course. Of the six Catholics, two were women religious probably seeking specialized medical training that would enable them to work in a Catholic hospital; for the women religious, program choice had to eclipse religious affiliation. Of the remaining eleven students, one listed

27 Mary K. Cullen, "The Transportation Issue, 1873-1973", in F.W.P. Bolger, ed., *Canada's Smallest Province* (Charlottetown, 1873), pp. 252, 256.

28 Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston, eds., *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery*, vol. 1: 1889-1910 (Toronto, 1985), p. 136.

29 Kevin McCabe, "Dalhousie University, 1895-96", in Alexandra Heilbron, ed., *The Lucy Maud Montgomery Album* (Toronto, 1999), p. 110.

30 Until 1908, their registration form requested which church the student attended and, after 1908, which religion they identified with.

her religion as Baptist and ten did not list their religion. The religious affiliation of the PEI women was in keeping with the university being, in Judith Fingard's words, "essentially Presbyterian".<sup>31</sup> Religious preference was clearly a major determinant among the PEI women who chose Dalhousie, as King has noted for the women who chose any of the four Ontario universities she studied.<sup>32</sup> One suspects the same case could be made at other denominational universities such as the Maritime Catholic universities; St. Francis Xavier and Mount Saint Vincent, which began to accept women in degree programmes in 1893 and 1914 respectively, presumably had a high proportion of Catholic students, but evidence is not available to support this.<sup>33</sup> Four of the five universities included in this study – all but McGill – were founded with denominational affiliations, as was common in the 19th century. Although each school under study was open to students of any faith, many students were drawn to a university because of its denominational affiliation. For those families concerned about the potentially negative impact of higher education on women, attendance at a university sponsored by one's church may have been linked to the lingering idea that preparation for Christian motherhood was a worthy reason to obtain higher education.<sup>34</sup>

The weight that PEI women and women elsewhere put on attending a university that matched their religious affiliation is inconclusive. Marks, Gaffield and Laskin note that, even by 1900, the majority of students who entered Queen's were not Presbyterian,<sup>35</sup> a blurring that Dalhousie, the Maritimes' unofficially Presbyterian university, certainly did not share. King similarly notes that a significant number of Baptist students traveled a considerable distance to attend McMaster.<sup>36</sup> It seems that, although most universities maintained denominational affiliations before the Second World War, some had stronger religious ties than others, with Dalhousie and McMaster exhibiting strong religious connections and Mount Allison and Queen's with relatively weak connections.

As in other provinces, a large proportion of Prince Edward Island's female university students were from urban areas. The evidence also, however, suggests much more. The hometowns of the 386 women covered the whole Island. Not surprisingly, given their populations, Charlottetown and Summerside sent the most women to university, 148 and 54 respectively.<sup>37</sup> The smaller towns of Alberton,

31 Fingard, "Dalhousie Coeds", p. 34.

32 King, "Experience of the Second Generation", p. 83.

33 Beginning in 1914, Mount Saint Vincent students could obtain the first two years of a bachelor's degree at that university and then finish their degree at Dalhousie. In 1925, MSV began granting its own degrees.

34 Solomon, "Educated Women", p. 16.

35 Lynne Marks, Chad Gaffield and Susan Laskin, "Student Populations and Graduate Careers: Queen's University, 1895-1900", in Axelrod and Reid, *Youth, University and Canadian Society*, p. 6.

36 King, "Experience of the Second Generation", p. 270.

37 The population of Charlottetown was 7,872 in 1871, 10,345 in 1881, 10,098 in 1891, 10,718 in 1901, 9,883 in 1911, 10,814 in 1921 and 12,361 in 1931. The population of Summerside was 2,853 in 1881, 2,822 in 1891, 2,875 in 1901, 2,678 in 1911, 3,228 in 1921 and 3,759 in 1931. See *Census of Canada, 1931*, vol. 2, "Population Local Subdivisions", (Ottawa, 1933), p. 7. PEI's absence of industrialization, and consequently urbanization, is clearly illustrated in the lack of population growth in the province's only city. Charlottetown fell from being the 11th largest city in the country in 1881 to the 50th largest city in 1931. See *Census of Canada, 1931*, vol. 2, "Population Local Subdivisions", p. 22.

Bedeque, Kensington, Montague and Souris each sent between 8 and 11 women between 1885 and 1942. The remaining 137 women came from 76 different communities, none of which sent more than 6 and 44 of which sent only 1 student. Fifty-two per cent of the women who left PEI to attend these 5 universities before 1942 came from what the census defined as an urban area, either Charlottetown or Summerside, and 48 per cent came from rural towns and villages. Given that PEI was overwhelmingly rural – its proportion of rural residents decreased only marginally from 87 per cent of the population in 1891 to 74 per cent in 1941 – a disproportionately high number of women who entered the 5 universities under study were from the province's two urban communities.<sup>38</sup> Fifty-two per cent of the women, in other words, came from the approximately 20 per cent of the population that lived in Charlottetown and Summerside.

While a majority of PEI women students came from urban areas, the remainder came from so many different communities that they were clearly not motivated by local tradition. This corroborates Fingard's finding that early Dalhousie women students were "self-motivated". "With no tradition of higher education for girls", she noted, "the pioneer female students, particularly those from the country, tended to be women of ambition with clear-cut goals and a degree of independence".<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Nicole Neatby concluded that Queen's University women and their families in the 1920s used higher education to guarantee economic independence.<sup>40</sup> In addition to concern for bettering financial prospects, PEI women's interest in higher education may also have been a product of PEI's long tradition of free education.

In 1852, only a year after achieving responsible government, PEI became the first colony in British North America, and probably the first in the British Empire, to implement a free education act that paid teachers out of the colonial treasury and did not require any fees from students. According to Ian Ross Robertson, although the impetus for educational reform usually comes from the elite, the land tenure system in PEI created a unique situation that made basic literacy indispensable to "ordinary Islanders". In Robertson's words, "in no other colony was the ordinary resident virtually certain to be confronted by a similar situation, in which he had to decide upon signing an irrevocable contract with such sweeping consequences". Robertson identifies the free education act as the beginning of 25 years of substantial progress that transformed the mid-19th-century PEI educational system into "an early modern system which virtually guaranteed a minimum level of opportunity and quality to each [school] district".<sup>41</sup> The attendance of 185 PEI women from rural communities in PEI at one of the five universities under study substantiates Robertson's argument for the widespread impact of educational reform in the second half of the 19th century. Moreover, Robertson's argument regarding the urgency for educational reform among ordinary tenants shows the predisposition among many Islanders to view education as a means to improve their lives. Robertson and John Reid have also tied the Maritimes' dedication to formal education to the large Scottish population who

38 Census of Canada, 1941, vol. 2, "Rural Subdivisions", p. 177.

39 Fingard, "Dalhousie Coeds", p. 27.

40 Neatby, "Women at Queen's", p. 335.

41 Ian Ross Robertson, "Reform, Literacy and the Lease: The Prince Edward Island Free Education Act of 1852", *Acadiensis*, XX, 1 (Autumn 1990), pp. 62-3, 70.

subscribed to the notion that education encouraged democracy. With PEI being 45 per cent Scottish in 1881 and 37 per cent Scottish in 1931, the Scottish notion of viewing education as an avenue to “social mobility” may have been especially prevalent in the province.<sup>42</sup> The evidence is not sufficient to conclude that a majority of the Island women under study were of Scottish descent, as none of the universities under study have records available that consistently indicate students’ ethnicity. On the other hand, the vast majority of surnames of the 387 Island women who attended one of the five universities under study are associated with British ancestry. About 15 per cent of the surnames began with either “Mac” or “Mc”, which are most associated with Scottish ancestry today. Conversely, there is a lack of French or Acadian names; Acadians comprised 15 per cent of the population in 1931. Only one woman had a traditionally Acadian surname (Gaudet), although some or all of the five women religious, whose surnames were not given, could have been Acadian or French. Still, it is clear that women of Scottish, Irish or English descent dominated the group of women who obtained higher education off the Island in this period. This is consistent with Island Acadian men who, according to Edward MacDonald, were less likely than their British counterparts to enrol at St. Dunstan’s on PEI during the same period, and only went to bilingual universities such as St. Joseph’s College in New Brunswick in small numbers. Acadians, believed to be more cash-strapped than any ethnic group of British ancestry on PEI in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, were less likely to have attended university; when they did, the families may have prioritized by sending their sons to university rather than both sons and daughters. This practice would be in keeping with Marks and Gaffield’s supposition regarding higher numbers of men than women from working class families attending Queen’s: “One explanation for this difference might be that less affluent families were less prepared to make financial sacrifices to send daughters to university than they were for sons”.<sup>43</sup> While evidence is insufficient to say that more women of Scottish ethnicity obtained university education than other ethnic groups, it can be said that it was extremely rare for an Acadian women to go to one of the universities under study.

Women who were able to leave PEI to obtain university education – and who in many cases did not return permanently – must be placed in the context of the province’s high rate of out-migration, which has been linked to personal ambition. While most provinces were affected by out-migration before the First World War, particularly to the United States, the Atlantic region was hit the hardest. Between the 1860s and the 1920s, the four provinces lost, in total, more than 500,000 people, the slight majority of whom were women. PEI’s rate of out-migration reached an all-time high of 17 per cent in the mid 1890s; at this time, the PEI rate of emigration far surpassed rates in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, which were both at 10.5 per cent in the mid-1890s.<sup>44</sup>

Historians and geographers have argued about whether emigrants, who tended to

42 John G. Reid, “Beyond the Democratic Intellect: The Scottish Example and University Reform in Canada’s Maritime Provinces”, in Axelrod and Reid, *Youth, University and Canadian Society*, p. 279; Robertson, “Reform, Literacy and the Lease”, p. 71.

43 Marks and Gaffield, “Women at Queen’s”, p. 338.

44 Patricia Thornton, “The Problem of Out-Migration from Atlantic Canada, 1871-1921: A New Look”, *Acadiensis*, XV, 1 (Autumn 1985), pp. 3, 16.

be better educated and more highly skilled young, urban adults, were pushed out of the province by the lagging economy and lack of opportunity or pulled toward the tantalizing prospects of the “Boston States”.<sup>45</sup> PEI women seeking a university education before 1941 represented only a small proportion of migrants, far outnumbered by those seeking employment in factories or domestic service.<sup>46</sup> We can consider these university women to have been pushed to leave PEI, yet that seems insufficient, given that they did not all go to the nearest university, Mount Allison. They made particular choices about the universities they attended based on numerous circumstances, including family ties, religious denomination, living expenses and reputation. Some of these Island women would not have been satisfied attending a university on PEI had there been one. Even if Roman Catholic St. Dunstan’s had accepted women earlier, many Protestant, middle-class women would never have darkened its doors, but would have selected a university better suited to them. This is indicated by the numerous women who continued to seek a university education off the Island after 1942, pulled toward universities in other provinces or countries. Moreover, many women did not return to PEI permanently after leaving the province to seek a university education because they were drawn to other opportunities; surely they would have returned to the province once they obtained the education not available on PEI if that was the only thing pushing them out of their home province. Judith Fingard notes a disproportionately high rate of out-migration among Dalhousie women graduates; 65 per cent of first-generation female students and 45 per cent of second-generation female students lived outside the region, most of them in the United States.<sup>47</sup> The majority of these students were from Nova Scotia, so they did not have to leave their province to obtain a university education as PEI women did, but they nevertheless chose to leave after attending university due to marriage or better career opportunities. Further study on the proportion of PEI women who attended university off the Island and did not return could help to illuminate other aspects of PEI women’s history.

45 According to Patricia Thornton, there was no real need for people to leave in such numbers. In fact, despite a Canadian recession that affected the Maritimes no more than the rest of Canada in the 1880s-90s, the Maritime economy was relatively healthy in the period 1880-1920. Thornton argues that people did not migrate out of the region because of a lack of opportunity or a dissatisfaction with the quality of life in the Maritimes but rather because of the tantalizing “pull” of the “Boston States”. Furthermore, heavy out-migration was not a result of the Maritimes’ inability to industrialize but more likely a cause of that inability. See Thornton, “Problem of Out-Migration”, pp. 3, 8, 30. Another view, expressed by Larry McCann and others, is that Maritimers were pushed out of the region due to a lack of opportunity: “A more substantial out-migration was that of the younger sons of farmers with little hope of inheritance, as well as the daughters of fishermen, lumbermen or farmers with limited work or marriage proposals so long as they stayed at home”. See Larry McCann, “The 1890s: Fragmentation and the New Social Order”, in E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto and Fredericton, 1993), p. 137 as well as A.H. Clark, *Three Centuries and the Island* (Toronto, 1959), p. 141.

46 Betsy Beattie has found that of the 3,713 single Maritime women in Boston in 1880, 65.4 per cent worked in domestic service and 18 per cent in the sewing trades. The most common categories of work for the 4,595 single English-Canadian women living in Boston in 1920 were domestic service (27.1 per cent) and professional work (18.7 per cent). See Betsy Beattie, *Obligation and Opportunity: Single Maritime Women in Boston, 1870-1930* (Montreal and Kingston, 2000), pp. 131-6, 139-43.

47 Fingard, “Dalhousie Coeds”, pp. 37, 45.

### **Achieving University Coeducation in Prince Edward Island**

University coeducation was implemented in PEI later than in any other province and it was the Catholic Sisters of St. Martha who provided the initial leadership. Historically, women religious played a significant role in higher education for women by founding more than half the women's colleges in the United States and more than a dozen in Canada.<sup>48</sup> At St. Dunstan's, located in Charlottetown, the Sisters of St. Martha led the movement for higher education in an existing institution when, in 1939, two women religious were admitted to that Catholic university. They not only became the first women to attend university in PEI, but their strong academic performance provided a bridge between the men-only and subsequent coeducational admittance policies.

The first college on PEI, St. Andrew's, was founded by the bishop for Charlottetown in 1831. The college was succeeded by St. Dunstan's College, which opened in 1855 and offered a classical education that could be continued in Quebec City, Montreal or, for the most gifted students, Rome. St. Dunstan's attracted primarily Scottish, Irish and Acadian Catholic men from the Island who pursued various careers, but the college was most interested in fostering vocations to the priesthood. Laurence Shook suggests that "no Catholic college in English-speaking Canada has a finer record of such vocations, nor has any college been more happy in its ecclesiastical orientation".<sup>49</sup> Although it struggled at times, St. Dunstan's educated 780 men in its first century. After 25 years of affiliation with Laval University, St. Dunstan's was elevated from college to university status in 1917, but continued to grant Laval degrees. A post-Second World War enrolment increase to 292 students further strengthened the college. It was not until 1941, however, that St. Dunstan's granted its own degrees and "really got underway" with a physical expansion and broadening of its academic programme.<sup>50</sup>

The opening of a Catholic college in PEI in 1831 was followed five years later by the opening of Central Academy, whose name was changed in 1860 to Prince of Wales College. The college was government-sponsored and non-sectarian, although many Catholic Islanders associated it with Protestantism. The intense debate between Protestants and Catholics over Bible-reading in district schools during the 1850s, as well as their almost equal numbers in the province, solidified the separateness of Catholic and Protestant education. In keeping with the division, according to Sister Mary Olga McKenna, "the two colleges [St. Dunstan's and Prince of Wales] emerged in the post-Confederation era as rival institutions representing distinctive philosophies of education rooted in their cultural pasts".<sup>51</sup> Marian Bruce notes, however, that the rivalry had lessened significantly by the end of the 19th century. Prince of Wales

48 Tracy Shier and Cynthia Russett, "Introduction", in Shier and Russett, eds., *Catholic Women's Colleges in America* (Baltimore and London, 2002), p. 1.

49 In Laurence Shook's words, St. Andrew's College was established partly to "demonstrate that [the diocese] was . . . ready for its ecclesiastical emancipation from the Archdiocese of Quebec" that had occurred two years earlier. See Laurence Shook, *Catholic Post-secondary Education in English-Speaking Canada, A History* (Toronto, 1971), pp. 36, 41, 42.

50 Between 1917 and 1941, students could obtain all their courses at St. Dunstan's, but they had to apply to Laval for the degree; between 1941 and 1956, St. Dunstan's gave students the option of receiving either a Laval or a St. Dunstan's degree, but most students chose the St. Dunstan's degree. See Shook, *Catholic Post-secondary Education*, pp. 44, 47, 49.

51 McKenna, "Higher Education in Transition", p. 206.

amalgamated with the provincial Normal School in 1879 and students overwhelmingly pursued teacher training rather than a general education until the 1930s. To the great disappointment of many, in 1907, Prince of Wales was refused permission from the legislature to affiliate with McGill University, whose principal considered two years at Prince of Wales ““admirable preparation, either for further work in Arts or as preparation for professional training in Applied Science or Medicine or Law””.<sup>52</sup> In 1932, Prince of Wales extended its program beyond the final two years of high school and a normal school and became a very well respected junior college for men and women. Students were able to complete the final two years of an undergraduate degree at virtually any university, including, for men, St. Dunstan’s.<sup>53</sup>

Yet St. Dunstan’s, the province’s only university, did not admit women until two Sisters of St. Martha’s broke the barrier at the beginning of the Second World War. Their status as women religious and their reason for wishing to obtain a degree warranted the university’s acceptance of them. Even more significantly, their strong academic performance made the university administration more amenable to accepting lay women at a later date. At the outset, several issues made the sisters’ applications to St. Dunstan’s difficult for the rector to refuse. Most notably, their congregation had been serving St. Dunstan’s in domestic service since their founding in 1916, quietly and efficiently providing virtually unpaid labour to the university. Edward MacDonald quoted a St. Dunstan’s professor’s explanation: “There was nobody going to object to having our helpful Sisters take courses in a Catholic institution”.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the sisters’ reason for wanting to attend St. Dunstan’s was amenable to the college hierarchy: their congregation wanted to offer grades 11 and 12 at the district school they operated in Kinkora, and the Department of Education policy required teachers for that level to have undergraduate degrees. It was extremely difficult for such a young and impoverished congregation, however, to send one of its members outside the province to obtain an education. The mother general explained this situation to the university rector several times in the 1930s before he relented in 1939.<sup>55</sup>

52 Marian Bruce, *A Century of Excellence: Prince of Wales College, 1860-1969* (Charlottetown, 2005), pp. 82, 126, 102n34.

53 Acts were passed in the PEI Legislature in 1829 for the establishment of both St. Andrew’s College and Central Academy. Grades 11 and 12 were only offered on PEI at the two colleges until 1932, when districts schools very gradually began to offer grade 11, which became the standard for university entrance. By the end of World War I, the major distinction between the two institutions, aside from religious association, was that Prince of Wales offered teacher training and St. Dunstan’s offered bachelor’s degrees. Each desperately wanted to expand into programmes the other school offered. See McKenna, “Higher Education in Transition”, pp. 204-7.

54 “Interview with Mgr. J.P.E. O’Hanley”, quoted in MacDonald, *St. Dunstan’s*, p. 147. Naming the congregation after the Biblical Martha, best known for her preoccupation with housekeeping, suggested a mission of domestic service. In a letter dated May 1915, however, O’Leary wrote that “when numerous enough, it is possible they would take over the hospital. . . . There are several other institutions, which later, might also be confined to their care”. See “Dream of Henry O’Leary”, n.d., series 8, vol. 3, file 5, Sisters of St. Martha Archives (SSMA), Charlottetown. As very few aspirants came to the congregation with a formal education, the congregation needed to educate them before they could work in these fields.

55 MacDonald, *St. Dunstan’s*, pp. 416, 434n39. MacDonald writes in a footnote that the request was not formal and did not make it onto the board of governor’s agenda. He confirmed that the Sisters of St. Martha made the request, though, in a phone call to Sister Mary Henry, 16 March 1988.

The most common objections to women attending university were concerns about residency and morality. In other men's colleges, it was argued that there would be nowhere on campus to house a woman student. Because the Sisters of St. Martha provided domestic service to the college and were already living on the campus of St. Dunstan's, residency was not an issue. Sisters working as domestics at the university would welcome sister-students to live with them in their convent on campus and to participate in their community life of prayer and communal meals. It was also argued that female students would "distract" male students. Given that St. Dunstan's was founded largely to foster vocations to the priesthood, the possibility of women on its campus was disconcerting. But a sister, under a vow of celibacy and widely perceived as androgynous, would never pose such a threat.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the applications of two women religious to St. Dunstan's transcended the main objections to coeducation.

The war economy may also have influenced St. Dunstan's to accept women students. The war forced the relaxing of gender barriers in various occupations, largely because of shortages of male labour. Certainly the graduation of one of the two sisters admitted to St. Dunstan's in 1939, was portrayed in her university yearbook as a wartime exception: "The fall of '39—War! Mobilization! And the loss of many of our best students to the ranks! As compensation however, that eventful autumn, S.D.U. gained one of its most outstanding students, Sister Ida Mary, daughter of the late James Coady".<sup>57</sup>

After considerable lobbying by their mother general in the 1930s, Sister Bernice Cullen (1914- ) and Sister Ida Mary Coady (1900-1979) were both accepted at St. Dunstan's in 1939. Sister Cullen graduated first, due to the exemption she received from her sophomore year because she had graduated from Prince of Wales College with a high honours diploma in 1933. Sister Cullen explained that, for the most part, both students and faculty "ignored" her but seemed respectful of her vocation. The sister-students did, however, face particular challenges. Sister Cullen's ethics professor, a priest, asked her to "stay home" while the class discussed ethics and marriage. Because he did not notify her once this mysterious section was completed, Sister Cullen missed additional classes unnecessarily and was absent from the class a total of three weeks.<sup>58</sup> Sister Cullen took the same courses as the male students and was expected to fulfil the same requirements to graduate. She did so easily and, no doubt to the horror of the rector, proved that male students were not intellectually superior by obtaining the highest marks in both years she studied at St. Dunstan's.

Normally the Governor General's medal was awarded to the student with the highest marks in the graduating year. In 1941, Sister Cullen was the student with the highest marks in senior year, yet the rector at St. Dunstan's changed the rules to exclude her. He justified his action on the basis that Sister Cullen had only attended St.

56 Several feminist historians, including Marta Danylewycz, have made the argument that the religious life afforded women more opportunities and privileges than secular women. See Marta Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood and Spinsterhood, 1840-1920* (Toronto, 1987), p. 108.

57 *St. Dunstan's Red and White*, 24, no. 3 (May 1943), p. 171, Robertson Library, PEI Collection, University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown.

58 Sister Bernice Cullen, interview by author, 22 April 1998, series 12, box 11, file 8, SSMA. Even today Sister Cullen has no idea what the professor deemed inappropriate for her to learn.



Dunstan's for two years, and then awarded the medal to the male student with the highest marks averaged over four years. In Sister Cullen's words, "They made arrangements for me not to receive the Governor General's medal but I can understand that. I guess [my high marks were] quite a shock to the boys".<sup>59</sup> Anticipating controversy over a sister getting higher marks than the men, the rector instituted a policy whereby the sisters were asked to not accept university prizes. Perhaps he suspected another sister would be in line for the prize and, in fact, he was right; in 1942, Sister Coady led her class. The congregation's annalist remarked of Sister Ida Mary's successful graduation: "The boys hope the supply of sister-students is about drained out. But competition is an incentive to application which is a quality lacking in the average student".<sup>60</sup> The sisters were not aware of their high marks until many years later because their report cards went directly to the mother general of the congregation. No doubt to avoid an implied hierarchy in the congregation, Mother Paula did not allow the sister-students to see their final marks. It was not until 14 years later, when she applied for graduate school and required a transcript of her marks, that Sister Cullen realized how high her final marks were.<sup>61</sup> The policy whereby sisters could not receive university prizes was finally reversed by Bishop James Boyle in the late 1940s. He argued that "if the men students wanted prizes, let them work for them". From that point the sisters' prize money went into the mother house building fund.<sup>62</sup>

Remarkably, the main student publication, a historian of higher education and an early female student do not credit Sister Cullen with the honour of being the first women to graduate from St. Dunstan's; they focus instead on Gertrude Butler, the first female lay graduate, who graduated from St. Dunstan's three years after Sister Cullen. This error demonstrates how the university community as well as some historians viewed masculinity and femininity. They presumed that having a religious vocation subtracted from a woman's femininity, and therefore that women religious did not constitute an exception to the men-only admittance policy. Alternatively, the sisters may have been so associated with the Roman Catholic Church that administered St. Dunstan's that they were not viewed as "new". Regardless of whether women religious were stereotyped as a kind of third sex, neither male nor female, or viewed as human extensions of the Catholic Church, Sister Cullen's time at St. Dunstan's was undoubtedly an audition, the outcome of which would determine whether lay women would be admitted.

The disregard of Sister Cullen's accomplishment is highlighted by comparing her graduation entry in the university's student publication, the *Red and White*, to that of the first woman lay graduate, Gertrude Butler. Sister Cullen's biography in the 1941 edition states, "In '39 she resumed her studies and is the first Sister to complete the college course at St. Dunstan's".<sup>63</sup> Gertrude Butler's biography in the 1944 edition

59 Sister Cullen, interview by author.

60 Motherhouse Annals, 1943, series 8, box 4, SSMA.

61 Sister Cullen understood that lauding one sister over another was dangerous for the community and that furthermore, in her words, "I considered the sisters in the kitchen as contributing just as much as I was to God and our community. It may look ridiculous now not to have shown me my marks, but it was reasonable at the time". See Sister Cullen, interview by author.

62 Ellen Mary Cullen, CSM, "The History of the Sisters of St. Martha of Prince Edward Island, 1930-1960", vol. 2 (Charlottetown, n.d.), p. 98.

63 *St. Dunstan's Red and White*, 32, no. 3 (May 1941), p. 132.

states: “She ventured with intrepid step to challenge masculinity at St. Dunstan’s, matched men in the field of studies, to emerge this spring an honour graduate”.<sup>64</sup> The *Red and White* also recognized the entrance of sister-students and lay women students very differently. While Sister Cullen and Sister Coady’s entrances in 1939 were not acknowledged in the publication at all, in 1942 the *Red and White* included the following enthusiastic proclamation regarding the admittance of lay women: “For the first time in the history of Saint Dunstan’s College, young women have been enrolled. Miss Gertrude Butler and Miss Suzelle Thibault are engaged in the study of Junior Philosophy, while the Misses Mary Henessey, Eileen McPhee and Kathleen McNeely are following the courses prescribed for Freshman year. We take this opportunity to extend a cordial welcome to the young ladies and hope that their stay at Saint Dunstan’s will prove both pleasant and profitable”.<sup>65</sup> The editors ignored the sisters’ admittance in 1939 and portrayed them as genderless when they graduated. Only lay women were recognized as women.

In a book published in 1971 on Catholic post-secondary education in English-speaking Canada, Laurence Shook also minimizes sister-students’ accomplishments at St. Dunstan’s: “From September 1942 women were admitted to lectures on campus and enrolled as regular students. Previously, only a few sisters had taken a BA degree, and this was by way of exception”.<sup>66</sup> In his history of St. Dunstan’s, Edward MacDonald gives the sister-students much more credit for their achievements at St. Dunstan’s and clearly states that Sister Cullen was the first woman graduate. Yet he still gives greater credit to Gertrude Butler for her agency and initiative in bringing about coeducation, writing that “[Butler’s] persistence forced [Bishop] O’Sullivan to take her application seriously”.<sup>67</sup> Shook and MacDonald designate Butler as the main initiator, presenting the sisters as passive recipients of their education, the lucky ones who only had to show up, rather than stage a confrontation. One could easily argue that the mother general of the Sisters of St. Martha was more persistent. She lobbied the rector and bishop for a decade regarding sisters’ admittance to St. Dunstan’s and supported the academic careers of Sister Cullen and Sister Coady who graduated from St. Dunstan’s with the highest marks in the years 1941 and 1942, before Gertrude Butler even began her “persistent” lobbying.

Gertrude Butler herself, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, minimizes the accomplishments of the sister graduates. In response to the publication of Edward MacDonald’s history of St. Dunstan’s in 1989, which she did not believe gave her sufficient credit, Butler deposited a letter and affidavit with the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation.<sup>68</sup> The letter was from Archbishop J.A. O’Sullivan, dated June 1947. It congratulated Butler on her recent graduation from Catholic University [of America], politely declined an invitation to her convocation ceremony and praised her accomplishments: “You have done wonders since that evening when you put the heat on me to allow young ladies to enter St. Dunstan’s and I feel certain you have not

64 *St. Dunstan’s Red and White*, 35, no. 3 (May 1944), p. 153.

65 “College Chronicle”, *St. Dunstan’s Red and White*, 34, no. 1 (December 1942), n.p.

66 Shook, *Catholic Post-secondary Education*, p. 49.

67 MacDonald, *St. Dunstan’s*, p. 417.

68 Edward MacDonald, e-mail correspondence to author, 23 June 2004.

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reached the limits of your ambitions”. The statement at the bottom of the letter, signed by Butler and certified by a Notary Public of the State of Florida reads “Attention: The PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation: Please enter this document into your archives to substantiate the fact that I was responsible for having St. Dunstan’s University open to women in 1942. Under the program, I was the first woman to graduate. [Signed] E.Gertrude (Butler) O’Donnell, PWC 1942, SDU 1944, CUA 1947”.<sup>69</sup>

Gertrude Butler had to be aware of the two sisters who obtained their degrees before she did, but she clearly did not see them as women. She saw coeducation as entirely her initiative, a naive view given that she seems to have had only one conversation with the bishop about it. This is not to devalue Butler’s accomplishments, but rather to place them on the continuum that includes the actions of other women, most notably the mother general of the Sisters of St. Martha and the two sister-graduates whose academic success was so outstanding. Putting a disproportionate focus on Butler also obscures the agency of the hundreds of PEI women who were not deterred from a university education just because they could not obtain one in their home province before 1942.

### **Conclusion**

A conservative stereotype has developed around PEI women and post-secondary education that is similar to the stereotype of Maritime political conservatism against which Ernest Forbes, Margaret Conrad and others have argued.<sup>70</sup> The emphasis on institutional histories has inadvertently encouraged assumptions about the typical female university student before the Second World War being a white, middle-class Protestant who attended a university in or very near her home town.<sup>71</sup> The nature of this historiography, combined with the characterization of PEI as isolated due to geography and poverty, produced a stereotype that few PEI women could have attended university. Research on registration records at five universities, however, has shown that the stereotype is false. Despite financial constraints and the absence of a university in their home province that accepted them, PEI women sought a university education in numbers comparable to the national average for women and in a higher proportion to the national rate than did PEI men in the period 1925 to 1940.

Student registers at Acadia, Dalhousie, Mount Allison, McGill and St. Francis Xavier illustrate that at least 387 women from PEI attended these five universities; other women from the Island must have attended different universities between 1880 and 1941, perhaps making the total greater than 500 female university students. Although PEI women did not have a university that accepted women until 1942, PEI women were clearly not isolated from higher education and sought it out in significant numbers. Whereas institutional histories show that most female students were middle-class Protestants who lived near the university they attended, the group of PEI women

69 Archbishop J.A. O’Sullivan to E. Gertrude [Butler] O’Donnell, June, 1947, accession #4220, Public Archives and Records Office (PARO), Charlottetown.

70 Margaret Conrad, “Addressing the Democratic Deficit: Women and Political Culture in Atlantic Canada”, *Atlantis*, 27, 2 (Spring 2003), p. 87 and Forbes, “In Search of a Post-Confederation Maritime Historiography”.

71 There are notable exceptions to this trend including, for example, Harris, *History of Higher Education in Canada* and Axelrod and Reid, *Youth, University and Canadian Society*.

under study were without a university in their vicinity and were from a predominantly agricultural population.

In 1943, St. Dunstan's University formally adopted a policy to accept female students and, by the early 1950s, almost 10 per cent of students were women.<sup>72</sup> There is no doubt that, despite various attempts to erase their accomplishments, the first sister-students' performance at St. Dunstan's made it possible for PEI women to receive university education without leaving the province. The university community and other historians' assumption that the sisters were not really women helps us understand how 19th- and 20th-century gender boundaries were negotiated and how women religious' accomplishments were minimized. More studies are needed on the two related topics in this article. Not only do we need to continue to move away from institutional histories when examining the history of higher education in Canada, but we also need to consider other ways in which women religious' leadership has been minimized or even erased.

72 "Board of Governors' annual meeting, 1942", quoted in MacDonald, *St. Dunstan's*, p. 504. In 1950-51, 28 of 299 students were female. See MacDonald, *St. Dunstan's*, p. 419.