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## Our Activist Past: Nora Bateson, Champion of Regional Libraries

*In memory of Veronica Calderhead*

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### Abstract

The struggle to establish regional library systems in Canada was won slowly, province by province, beginning in the 1930s. This article traces the story of one of the colourful leaders of the library profession, who established a regional library system in Prince Edward Island and set the stage for regional libraries in Nova Scotia. Grounded in adult education and a passion for social justice, Nora Bateson championed a vision of libraries as agents of personal and community development. Her zeal, commitment and clashes with those in power speak of the qualities needed by activists today, and of the challenges faced by those who see libraries as centres of change.

### Keywords

Library history, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Nora Bateson, Father Tompkins, Activism

Popular representations of the library professional rarely invoke rousing terms such as "dynamic" or "activist." In recent years, film-maker/provocateur Michael Moore's admiring description of librarians as a "dangerous group" <sup>1</sup> provided a brief boost to our somewhat pallid reputation, but this revolutionary image just doesn't seem to stick. A glance through Canadian library history, however, reveals activist roots that run deep. Researching our professional past, one encounters a succession of militants, strategists and agitators whose fervour in advancing the cause of information for all, particularly for the less advantaged, can still serve as an

inspiration. Aspiring library activists of today can learn much from the successes – and the failures – of these pioneering figures.

This article will focus on the story of Nora Bateson, who worked to establish regional libraries in Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia in the early part of the twentieth century. She did not, of course, labour alone: her dynamic assistant Marion Gilroy and the enthusiastic members of the Maritime Library Association were vital supporters. More surprisingly, perhaps, Bateson also formed a lasting partnership in activism with Rev. James John Tompkins (fondly known as Father Jimmy), the fiery inspiration behind the Antigonish Movement <sup>2</sup>. They had a good deal in common: both were short, feisty, principled and passionate adult educators – and both were fired at the age of about 50! While Father Tompkins' story has been recorded in full-length biographies (Boyle; Lotz and Welton), Nora Bateson's is not well known. Eminent library historian Peter McNally has called her "one of the great under-appreciated figures in Canadian library history" (11).

### ***"A Shining Sword"*** <sup>3</sup>



Photo courtesy of Vanessa and Michelle Osgood

Nora Bateson's story began in 1896 in Westhoughton, a working class town not far from the city of Manchester in England. Westhoughton was a centre of coal mining, spinning, and textile manufacture, and had distinguished itself historically as a site of radical sentiment: Luddites destroyed one of the world's first power loom mills in the town in 1812 (Beevers 7). Westhoughton was surrounded by some of the most productive coalfields in England, and the men in Nora's family worked for the collieries, most as foremen, surveyors, and engineers. After finishing secondary school in nearby Bolton, Nora earned a BA Hons History at the University of Manchester in 1917; quite an impressive achievement for a young woman of that time.

The records suggest that she had an adventurous spirit. In September of 1920 she

boarded the S.S. Metagama, along with several other educated young women bound for Canada to teach at King's Hall, a girls' school in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. <sup>4</sup> Perhaps Nora concluded that teaching was not her *métier*, however, because by August of 1922 she had moved on to the Ontario Legislative Library as a temporary clerk (Annual Report 1923).

Here she stayed for six years, typing most of the correspondence for Legislative Librarian Arthur Wilgress, learning library procedures and working her way through duties as a cataloguing and reference assistant. Dr Wilgress described his protégée as having "a flair for library work" and as "a young lady of strong individuality" having "broad views ... and of great courage". She was "naturally bright and witty", "fond of the out-door life and the open road and the hinterland." She was also "not afraid of hard work," a comment that would in later years prove to be a masterful understatement. Having learned library skills on the job, in 1928 Nora decided to obtain professional qualification from the Pratt Library School in Brooklyn, New York. Her co-workers sent her off with genuine fond wishes and the gift of a sports bag.

After receiving a Diploma in Librarianship Nora applied for jobs in Canada, and though a position was open in the Legislative Library of Alberta for which she was seemingly well qualified, her application was not successful. In a letter that reveals her acerbic side she notes rather pointedly "it seems they need a man for it" (Bateson 1929). Despite this initial rebuff, she was soon hired to teach a summer school course at McGill University. Following that she was offered a position as reference librarian at the University of British Columbia. After a year at UBC she joined Dr. Helen Gordon Stewart in the now-legendary Fraser Valley Library Demonstration Project funded by the Carnegie Corporation. In 1931 Nora was once again on the move, taking up a teaching position at the McGill University Library School, as well as picking up a Master of Arts in History (apparently in her spare time) in the spring of 1933.

Just four years after completing library school, Nora was preparing to head to Charlottetown to teach in McGill's Library Summer School when she was appointed Director of a new Carnegie initiative, the Prince Edward Island Library Demonstration. Her task was to set up a regional library system for the whole province, based on a plan developed by Dr. Gerhard Lomer of McGill. She had three years to do it, and she was starting from scratch.

It was the "hungry thirties" and grinding poverty had the entire country in its grip. In counterpoint to grim desperation there was also a tremendous energy for social change in the air. This was the time of the radical social gospel and the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, "On Reconstruction of the Social Order." The thirties saw the founding of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the Canadian Association for Adult Education. In the Maritimes there was a dynamic expansion of the Antigonish Movement, with adult education, cooperatives and credit

unions bringing new hope to small rural communities. These initiatives all sought to create a more progressive and more just society.

In this dynamic context, Nora immediately sprang into action, applying tremendous energy, commitment and administrative ability to the task of establishing Eastern Canada's first regional library. Looking back on this period, one can identify three profound influences on her approach to regional library development.

The first was Helen Gordon Stewart, who has been called a pioneer of adult education in Canada.<sup>5</sup> Her method of establishing the Fraser Valley Regional Library was to "go to the people." Dr. Stewart worked tirelessly with community groups, promoting public libraries as "the most potent agency amongst all educational institutions" (Morison 49). Within days of Nora Bateson taking on the Directorship of the PEI Library Demonstration she too was devoting remarkable energy to the community, speaking to Women's Institutes, church groups, parent-teacher associations, service clubs, farmers' organizations – to anyone who would listen to a vision of libraries as agents of social progress and adult education. Nora was – like Dr Stewart – a dynamic, passionate and inspiring speaker, and often left her audiences fired with such enthusiasm that they immediately established a library committee to carry the work forward. She also made frequent use of the media, ensuring that her speaking engagements were reported and contributing an impressive stream of rousing articles to the local press. A colleague of this period called Nora "a vivid personality, intense, socially minded and with great ability," and noted she was very popular with the country people, though not always with government officials (Croteau 17-18).

A second influence was Arthur Wilgress, Nora's mentor at the Ontario Legislative Library. He was known for making "a special effort to provide good service to those who lived in remote corners of the province" (Watson 115), and had a penchant for responding personally to individual reference inquiries. No query was too insignificant or too eccentric for his courteous, thoughtful and informative reply. Nora Bateson carried this practice to new bounds, keeping up a prodigious and engaging correspondence with any patron or inquirer who showed an interest in the library. The Prince Edward Island Archives has a large collection of her very personable letters to community leaders, study group organizers and individual patrons.

Some of these exchanges developed into sagas. In a ten-month period, for example, she exchanged more than 14 letters with Joe R. Smith of Margate who was interested in learning about the use of natural dyes for his hooked rugs (Smith). Nora not only provided him with a range of books on the topic but made connections with the Women's Institutes in Nova Scotia on his behalf, and put him in touch with the Canadian Handicraft Guild in Montreal. She also offered professional advice on his plan to publish some of his dye recipes. Her reference knowledge was encyclopedic, her attention to detail and follow-through impeccable, especially

considering that on any given day she might also be writing to the Carnegie Corporation president, several publishers, the American Library Association's Extension Board, colleagues in Nova Scotia and a few delinquent borrowers.

Nora's two librarian mentors – Stewart and Wilgress – seem to have inspired her ways of working as an adult educator with individual patrons and community groups. A third factor, a significant life event, may have sparked her commitment to libraries as "people's universities" for the education of the working poor, and forged a powerful friendship and collaboration with Father Jimmy Tompkins.

Imagine, if you can, the gritty coal-mining town of Westhoughton in December 1910, when Nora was 14 years old. Four days before Christmas people would have been busy preparing for the holiday in Edwardian fashion. Without warning, an underground explosion at the Pretoria Pit shook the whole town, and was felt for miles around. The townspeople rushed to the pit head and waited in the damp cold for hours while teams of rescuers descended into the mine, but by the end of the day it was known that 344 coal miners – men and boys – were dead. Thirty-two of them lived on Manchester Road where the Bateson family lived. Fourteen year old Samuel Hodgkiss from four doors down was dead; so was 15 year old William Ashcroft from next door but one – young neighbour lads who would have left school for the mines. The funeral processions were reported to have gone on for days over the Christmas period, often criss-crossing each other on the town streets.<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps significant, then, that decades later Nora Bateson was drawn to Nova Scotia, the Antigonish Movement and Father Tompkins, whose passion in the mid-'30s was adult education in the poverty-stricken community of Reserve Mines – with coal miners.

So it transpired that in the midst of setting up PEI's 22 branch libraries, hiring caretakers, administering a regional headquarters in Charlottetown, ordering, cataloguing and distributing more than 41,000 books (with a staff that seldom exceeded three), Nora Bateson found time to make numerous forays to Nova Scotia as an ambassador for the regional library idea.

In June of 1935, just before leaving on a trip to Denver to address the American Library Association conference, Nora spent several days in Reserve Mines as Father Tompkins' guest. He was busy setting up "The People's Library" in the rectory of his parish to serve the local miners' study clubs. Father Tompkins' correspondence following her visit gives us the flavour of their growing friendship and paints an almost irresistible picture:

Miss Bateson arrived here on Tuesday morning and will leave on the train this evening Friday from Sydney Mines after having talked at Sydney Mines up to the moment of the train's departure. We had meetings at Reserve, Sisters at Glace Bay (to all the Sisters of around about), Glace Bay itself, New Waterford & twice at

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

The intense little woman from Westthoughton and the fiery little priest from Margaree had recognized their kindred spirits and begun their "subversive" collaboration.

### **Knowledge for the People**



Photo courtesy of St. Francis Xavier University Archives

Father Tompkins, like Nora Bateson, had started out as a school teacher. After being ordained to the priesthood in 1902 he took up a post as professor of Greek and Mathematics at his alma mater, St. Francis Xavier's College in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. He was also (almost incidentally) appointed university librarian, his lack of experience in this field notwithstanding. By 1906 he was vice-president of the university and in 1920 published his manifesto on adult education, "Knowledge for the People." With the help of his younger cousin Father Moses Coady he began offering adult education programs to the ordinary working people of Eastern Nova Scotia through a campus-based "People's School." But Father Tompkins' outspoken enthusiasm for a plan of university amalgamation was unpopular with his administration colleagues. In 1922, at the age of 52, he was unceremoniously "removed" from his position at the university to a small and rather isolated community as parish priest. Although this was a blow, it also proved to be a turning point. Tompkins found new scope in developing community-based adult education through study groups and libraries for the fisherfolk of Canso and Little Dover, and later with the miners of Cape Breton.

Combining forces with Nora Bateson in the 1930s gave added impetus to Father Tompkins' growing campaign for public libraries. Between them they carried their message of libraries and adult education abroad: to the Carnegie Corporation, the

Rockefeller Foundation, and to national and international conferences. Father Tompkins became a director of the Canadian Association for Adult Education, and spoke at the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. Nora Bateson was named to the American Library Association's Extension Board, and later was one of five founding members of the Canadian Library Council, precursor to the Canadian Library Association. They were relentless in advocating that "Rural Canada Needs Libraries."<sup>7</sup> Nora inundated the popular press with articles, and in late 1936 she and Father Tompkins co-authored a pamphlet "Why Not a Co-operative Library?" making the case for establishing a network of ten regional libraries in Nova Scotia, starting with Cape Breton.

## Laying the Groundwork for Regional Libraries

When the PEI Library Demonstration concluded in 1936 Nora left the Maritimes but stayed in touch with Father Tompkins. She was invited back to Nova Scotia to conduct a library survey of the province in 1937, and in November 1938 she was appointed Director of Libraries. Backed by a Regional Libraries Commission that included Tompkins, she began a province-wide crusade for regional libraries, while at the same time making suggestions for revising the Province's rudimentary Libraries Act.

Guy Henson, Nova Scotia's first Director of Adult Education, says Bateson cut "a gallant figure as she carried her message and sense of urgency from one end of Nova Scotia to the other" (Henson 5). She also made good use of the media. In one week of January 1939 alone she contributed four articles to the Halifax Herald newspaper on the merits of libraries.<sup>8</sup> A year later, Bateson and Tompkins had persuaded the Carnegie Corporation to commit \$50,000 toward purchasing the book stock for regional libraries in Nova Scotia. Enthusiasm began to build throughout the province.

Alas, Canada's entry into World War II in 1939 quickly rearranged government priorities, and development of regional libraries came to a standstill. In 1940 Nora and her assistant, Marion Gilroy, were loaned to the Canadian Legion Education Services to establish libraries for armed services personnel in the Atlantic Command. As in PEI, Nora demonstrated her extraordinary ability to get projects moving on a tight timeline. Within ten months 7,000 books had been selected, obtained, processed and distributed to 23 small libraries set up at bases throughout the Atlantic Provinces. These collections were supervised by officers' wives, Red Cross staff, educational officers and volunteers. Smaller collections were also sent to forts, outposts, and Navy vessels. The books supported the Canadian Legion's educational courses on technical topics, but also provided recreational reading and works on timely topics: democracy, war, peace, and "the great changes that are taking place under our eyes ...literally a social revolution that ... will mean a freeing of the spirit and an opening of the mind."<sup>9</sup> Even in the midst of war Nora Bateson

never lost hope or sight of the longer goal.

Her correspondence at this time, however, reveals growing impatience at dealing with the boondoggle of military bureaucracy. Despite this frustration, she resisted the attempts of McGill University to "poach" her away. She apparently felt bound to Nova Scotia, saying "I feel obliged to stay here until I am certain that nothing whatever can be done to keep our service libraries going" (McGill University Archives RG 40).

Perhaps to ease her frustration she published four articles and several pamphlets, contributed to the newspapers, addressed the nation on CBC radio and worked vigorously with the Canadian Library Council to establish a professional association for Canadian librarians. Her international reputation had grown to the extent that in 1944 she was asked to undertake a library survey for the Government of Jamaica, and Nova Scotia granted her a year's leave of absence for the task.

Nora travelled to the Caribbean and took up this new challenge with her customary enthusiasm. The Jamaican press of the day reported her "ardent advocacy" for libraries, and her promotion of the adult education and community development methods used by Fathers Tompkins and Coady ("Let People Read" and "Rapid Strides"). She also managed to spend a week in Trinidad reconnecting with her old mentor Dr. Helen Gordon Stewart, who was setting up a regional library for the Eastern Caribbean islands. Clearly, these dynamic women let no moss grow beneath their feet, even during the most inhospitable of times.

Having completed a library plan for Jamaica, Nora returned to Nova Scotia in March 1945. The war was coming to an end, and people's thoughts were turning to libraries as war memorials. Excitement was in the air and Bateson sprang into action, trying to rekindle the enthusiasm for regional libraries that had been sidelined by the war. Inspired by her experience in Jamaica, where progressive politicians were eager to implement libraries, Nora was perhaps exasperated by the apparent lack of political will in Nova Scotia.

On April 15, she gave way to unguarded and imprudent comments at a meeting of the Middleton Home and School Association. Her reference to Nova Scotia as a "library desert" in contrast to Jamaica, where people were eager to study world affairs so as to become "too intelligent to swallow election propoganda" was reported in the newspapers ("Literary Desert"). Days later, Premier Macmillan demanded her resignation. She refused. He fired her. In a public letter to the press, Macmillan stated "Miss Bateson has devoted her time to this work since 1938 ... and has not succeeded in establishing a single library in the Province of Nova Scotia." At the age of 49 and the height of her career, Nora Bateson was subjected to the humiliation of a very public dismissal.

Dr. John Croteau, who had worked with Nora in the PEI days said, "Her trouble was



that she had no awe of persons in high places," and as there were few women in responsible administrative positions "perhaps the men resented her outspoken remarks more because she was a woman than because of what she actually said" (Croteau 18). Others have suggested that her socialist political leanings may have played a part (Coughlin 169).

Whatever the reason, the deed was done. Protests rained in from around the province and across North America: from universities and the Canadian Library Council, from credit unions and miners' groups, and from the American Library Association. Even former premier Angus L. Macdonald attempted to exert some diplomatic persuasion, to no avail. Premier MacMillan would not reconsider. Nora Bateson was removed from her position by Order in Council, and the development of regional libraries in Nova Scotia was sadly delayed for years. Although Father Tompkins remained on the Regional Libraries Commission, it was not until three years later that a new Director of Libraries was hired. Bateson and Tompkins' dream finally began to come to fruition with the establishment of Nova Scotia's first regional library in the Annapolis Valley in 1949.

Nora Bateson left Nova Scotia to direct the Home Reading Department of the Detroit Public Library, then she traveled to New Zealand where she became Director of the New Zealand Library School, and shaped library education in that country. Despite these achievements, David Wylie, a colleague who remembered her in those later years said "Of all the places she was in, one felt that it was in Nova Scotia that she had been the happiest" (qtd in McEldowney 231).

When Father Tompkins died in May 1953, the month of Bateson's own retirement, Father Moses Coady cabled the sad news to her in New Zealand. In her reply, Nora spoke of her "thankfulness and wonder that such a man had lived" and added rather poignantly, "I hope he was not unhappy in his last years." Nora herself returned to the UK shortly thereafter, and died in Wales two years later at the age of only 59.

In a memorial tribute, Bramwell Chandler, Nora's successor in Prince Edward Island, described her as "a warm-hearted woman with a keen eye for the unusual, the maverick," and added somewhat regretfully, "She never had time to do all she wanted to do. It is difficult to think of her at rest" (20).

## **Challenge to Activism**

What lessons can be drawn for modern practice from Nora Bateson's inspiring yet bittersweet story?

A passion for activism can spring from many sources, but its development is often linked to the formative influence of zealous, principled mentors. Nora learned much about meaningful public engagement from her early work with Helen Gordon

Stewart and Arthur Wilgress, and her ongoing correspondence with both attests to the importance she placed on these relationships. In later years, Nora's conviction that libraries could contribute to a more just world was affirmed by the example of Father Tompkins. His ability to work fervently for economic and social justice, even within institutional constraints, served as a model for what could be accomplished using local resources and professional courage. While these examples express the traditional pattern of learning from an older, more experienced mentor, in activist work today it is often those who are younger and less powerful who inspire acts of principled audacity.

In our profession there is a strong move to renew libraries' relationship with the communities they serve. We need effective library activists who can engage with these communities and ensure that their interests and needs are met through close collaboration. Nora Bateson and Father Tompkins were decades ahead of community development theorists in their grassroots approach. They recognized that projects that don't originate within the community – however well intentioned – will not be sustainable. Community priorities (whether an academic, demographic, or professional community) must shape the library, not the other way around.

As librarians, we also need ambassadors to represent us well to those administrations, foundations, associations and governments whose choices often hold our future in the balance. Bateson and Tompkins had exceptional success working with foundations and professional associations, but we can see from their harsh experience with local administrators that expressing unpopular or critical opinions can have dramatic consequences. Persuasive, strategic and diplomatic communication with those in power is a vital component of advocacy. Librarians must build alliances that strengthen our position in the structures of power, while never losing sight of the need for transformation "from the ground up."

Perhaps Guy Henson summed up the potential of library activism when he delivered a moving tribute to Bateson and Tompkins, and a strong challenge to librarians. In taking an activist role, he charged us, "You will be playing some part, great or small, in the demanding task of remoulding the institutions of a liberal-democratic society into the new institutions of a freer, more just, more participatory, society. There isn't much time to lose" (10).

Henson was speaking three decades ago: his challenge is even more urgent today.

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[1] "I really didn't realize the librarians were, you know, such a dangerous group... They are subversive. You think they're just sitting there at the desk, all quiet and everything. They're like plotting the revolution, man. I wouldn't mess with them." [http://www.buzzflash.com/interviews/2002/03/Michael\\_Moore\\_031302.html](http://www.buzzflash.com/interviews/2002/03/Michael_Moore_031302.html) See also

<http://www.michaelmoore.com/words/mikeinthenews/index.php?id=129> and  
<http://www.michaelmoore.com/words/mikeinthenews/index.php?id=129>

[2] This social movement was a powerful combination of adult education and economic reform that helped the people of the Maritimes re-shape their destinies in the desperate 1930s and '40s.

[3] Philosopher George Grant described Nora Bateson's spirit as "a shining sword, which never faltered in the faith that it is only the truth which makes men free" Chronicle-Herald [Halifax] 26 Jan 1956: 4.

[4] Several sources, including tributes written after her death, mistakenly report that Nora Bateson came to Canada in 1922. Archival records, however, are clear that she arrived in September 1920. Her early career as a teacher has not been recognized elsewhere. Library and Archives Canada. Passenger Lists, 1865-1935. [database on-line]. Original data: RG 76, MF T-14709.

[5] Dr. Stewart was one of only two women, and the only librarian, to be included in Harriet Rouillard's Pioneers of Adult Education in Canada (Toronto: Thomas Nelson, 1952).

[6] Details of the Pretoria Pit disaster, the worst coal-mining accident in Lancashire history, can be found in Trevor Griffiths, The Lancashire Working Classes c.1880-1930 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and on a number of websites, including <http://www.lan-opc.org.uk/Westhoughton/Pretoria/index.html>

[7] This was later the title of a pamphlet written by Nora Bateson for publication by the Canadian Library Council (1944).

[8] The articles, with titles such as "The Value of Libraries," "Libraries and Adult Education," "Youth and Reading" and "The Libraries of Denmark" stress the potential of libraries to supplement the education system and strengthen the economic progress of the province.

[9] This quotation from an unnamed speaker at a 1941 meeting in London to promote wider distribution of books was cited in Nora Bateson's report Canadian Legion War Services Library (1941), 2. MG 10-2/5a. Beaton Institute Eachdraidh Archives, Cape Breton University, Sydney, N.S.



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