

Carrie Derick

by Fiona Sarazin and Ingrid Birker

Carrie Matilda Derick was born January 14, 1862 in Clarenceville, Quebec, to mother Edna Derick (maiden: Colton) and father Frederick Derick. Carrie is of American ancestry on her mother's side, and United Empire Loyalist, Dutch, German, and Scotch on her father's¹. Her grandfather, Philip Derick, was a United Empire Loyalist who settled in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, Canada, early in 1783. Carrie began school at the Clarenceville Academy in her hometown, where she later taught at the age of 15. This was followed by teacher training at the McGill Normal School in Montreal, after which she was awarded the J.C. Weston Prize and the Prince of Wales Medal². Fully preserved botanical sketches found in Carrie's childhood home indicate an early interest in plants. However, regardless of the subject matter, Carrie excelled in her studies by all accounts. In a letter written by her mother describing Carrie's studies, she notes that "I expect that [Carrie Derick] will get to be a Miss Professor". As predicted, Carrie would go on to become Canada's first female geneticist and professor at McGill, and would later found McGill's Department of Genetics. Carrie was praised for her wit and intellectual acumen, as pioneer of gender equality throughout her life, as well as an excellent botanist. At the age of 79, having never married or had children, Carrie died at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, Quebec, on November 10, 1941³.

At 25 years old, Carrie enrolled in the McGill University Faculty of Arts in 1887. She graduated as a first class honours student in 1890, earning the highest grade point average of her class, as well as various prizes in zoology, classics, and the Logan Gold Medal in Natural Science. Her first employment post-graduation was as a teacher at the Trafalgar Institute for Girls², which she undertook concurrently with a position as a part-time demonstrator of botany at McGill. She was first hired by David Penhallow, professor of botany, as a part-time assistant, and was promoted to demonstrator in 1892, where she became the first female member of McGill's instructional staff¹. That same year, Carrie started a Master's degree in Botany under Professor David Penhallow. She completed her degree in four years, all the while simultaneously working two jobs, and spending her summers at Wood's Hole Marine Biology Laboratory, in Massachusetts⁴.

After receiving her MA in 1896, Penhallow recommended her for appointment as a full-time demonstrator, but the Board of Governors rejected this idea and offered her the lower rank position of "Demonstrator" at \$750 a year¹. This was unacceptable for Carrie, as it was the starting salary of young men who had just received their B.A. However, Sir Donald A. Smith, an advocate of women's education at McGill, authorized Carrie to be paid an additional \$250. This allowed the Board of Governors to appoint her as Lecturer in Botany and Demonstrator in the Botanical Laboratory, a position she held for 8 years. Meanwhile, her summers were split between Wood's Hole, Harvard University, and the Royal College of Science in London. She also received a grant from McGill University, allowing her to take a leave of absence from 1901-1902 to study at the Universities of Munich and Berlin, and the University of Bonn in Germany. Despite having completed worth of a Ph.D., she was not awarded a degree because the

¹ Gillett, M., *We walked very warily : a history of women at McGill*. 1981, Montreal, Canada: Eden Press Women's Publications.

² Local Council of Women of, M., *Montreal Local Council of Women : 21st anniversary, 1893-1915*. 1915, Montreal.

³ *Carrie M. Derick, Educator, is Dead*, in *The Montreal Gazette*. Montreal. p. 14.

⁴ Pasztor, V.M., U. McGill, and B. Department of, *Biology @ McGill : a history of the Biology Department at McGill University*. 2010, Montreal: Biology Department, McGill University.

University of Bonn did not grant doctorates to women. She returned to McGill University and continued to work, teach botany and administer in the Botany Department.

After 8 years of lecturing and assisting Penhallow with his classes, research, and publishing, without any pay increments or offers of promotion, she wrote directly to Principal Peterson and was promoted to assistant professor in 1904 with a salary of \$1,250¹. This increase in rank placed Carrie on the track for tenure, whereas her former position of lecturer was often reserved for faculty that haven't finished a terminal degree⁵. In the same year, Stephen Leacock was teaching Economics at McGill, receiving an annual salary of \$3,000 in 1906. Accounting for inflation, that's a difference of over \$47,000 in a modern annual salary⁶.

Carrie developed an international reputation for her research in heredity, despite the field of genetics having not yet received recognition¹. She created a course in "Evolution and Genetics" that became the first of its kind in Canada. Evolution had been an extremely controversial topic during her own undergraduate education, as genetics was still an emerging field. The Molson family endowed a Chair in Genetics and a separate Department of Genetics – the first in Canada – which was established in 1934⁴. She published many articles in journals including *The Botanical Gazette*, *The Journal of Royal Microscopical Society*, *Science*, *The Canadian Record of Science* (etc.), and was notably acknowledged in *American Men of Science*¹. Some examples of her work include "The Early Development of the Florideae", "Heredity and Environment", "Anabiosis", "Nuclear Changes in Growing Seeds". One booklet she published in 1927 was in fact about McGill University's trees; wherein she elaborates on the genetics of inheritance and recommended landscape management strategies for the campus⁷. In terms of her recognition, Carrie became a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and held memberships with the Botanical Society of America, the American Genetics Association, and the Canadian Public Health Association, where female membership was highly uncommon¹.

In 1909, when Penhallow became ill, Carrie temporarily assumed his role as Chair of the Botany Department. When he died a year later, Carrie was formally asked to run the department, earning an annual sum of \$3000. The 1910-11 McGill Calendar lists Derick as one of 248 Officers of Instruction of which only seven were women, teaching classes of entirely male students⁸. Carrie is listed as a "Part-time Lecturer in Genetics," and the other five women have titles ranging from "Warden," to "Registrar," or "Demonstrator." Although Carrie had filled in for Penhallow for roughly 3 years by 1912, she learned that she would have to apply to a trans-Atlantic competition for official appointment as professor and chair of the department. This position ultimately went to another candidate, but the support Carrie received (particularly by two deans and a member of the Board of Governors), prompted her promotion to professor of Morphological Botany that same year, receiving a salary of \$2000 annually. With that, she became the first woman in Canada to receive the title of full professor. However, this position was unmistakably inferior to Chair of Botany; with no seat on Faculty, little prestige, and a title that poorly reflected her research interests⁴. Her title was later changed to Professor of Comparative Morphology and Genetics, crediting her expertise as a geneticist.

⁵ Pamela Gravestock, E.G.G. *Overview of Tenure and Promotion Policies Across Canada*. 2008.

⁶ Carter, S.B., et al., *Historical statistics of the United States: millennial edition*. Vol. 3. 2006: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Derick, C.M., *In the 80's*. 1927: Old McGill.

⁸ *Annual Calendar of McGill College and University*. 1910, Montreal: Gazette Printing Co., Limited.

Carrie did not limit her involvement to the academic realm of flora and genetics. She publicly supported birth control, a contentious issue which was illegal in Canada from 1892 to 1969⁹. She was part of a group McGill Alumnae who, in 1891, organized the Girls' Club of Montreal, which was later the parent of the University Settlement¹⁰. She was a Life Member of the Red Cross Society; one of the organizers of the Serbian Relief Committee in Montreal (for which she received the Decoration of the Serbian Cross of Mercy) and during World War I took an active part in the various patriotic works of the Montreal Local Council of Women and of the Montreal Suffrage Association. She served as president of the former, during which time she created the Montreal Suffrage Association (under the umbrellas of the Montreal Local Council of Women) and served as its president from 1913-1919¹¹.

Carrie also served as a Member of the Advisory Committee of the Montreal Women's Liberal Club and the Convener of the Study Group of the Club. In 1915, she even dared to challenge Quebec's premier Sir Lomer Gouin's criticism of birth control, after which he reportedly complained: "How she makes me blush, that old maid from McGill"⁴. In the first decades of the 20th century, discussions surrounding birth control were very limited, as it was controversial issue that was deemed cowardly and likened to "racial suicide"¹². Carrie's boldness in supporting birth control, which illegal at the time, displays her strength of character and commitment to women's rights advocacy. However, she also publicly promoted eugenic philosophy and sterilization, a movement supported by many prominent Canadians of the early 20th century¹³.

As Canada's first woman geneticist, and the founder of the Genetics Department at McGill, she made a tremendous contribution to human rights, and especially to the rights of Canadian women. By the time she retired from McGill in 1929, she had widened the professional and occupational fields for Canadian women, improved the social and educational aspects of their lives, and helped them to gain political rights. She was president of the Montreal Suffrage Association from 1913-1919; and in her "witty" public lectures she urged that the "domestic service" be given the status of a profession, as well as encouraged women to pursue careers in agriculture. In 1914, she led the support group to allow Annie Langstaff, the first woman to graduate in law at McGill, in her unsuccessful bid to be admitted to the bar in Quebec. Carrie and her colleague Maude Abbott, McGill's pioneer female cardiologist, and Curator of the Medical Museum, were both founders of and lifelong members of the National Council of Women¹⁴.

Carrie Derick retired from McGill in 1929 due to her deteriorating health. The university awarded her the honorary title of 'Professor Emerita' before her death in 1941. One obituary stated that Carrie Derick "had gained knowledge for herself, and . . . believed that her knowledge was a possession to be used for the service of mankind"¹³.

⁹ Bishop, M.F. *Birth Control*. The Canadian Encyclopedia [Web] 2009 10 Dec 2009.

¹⁰ Ainley, M.G., *Despite the odds : essays on Canadian women and science*. 1990, Montréal; Buffalo, N.Y.: Véhicule Press ; U.S. distributor, University of Toronto Press.

¹¹ Baillargeon, D. and W.D. Wilson, *A brief history of women in Quebec*. 2014.

¹² McLaren, A., "What Has This to Do with Working Class Women?": *Birth Control and the Canadian Left, 1900-1939*. *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 1981. **14**(28).

¹³ Marsh, J. H. (1999). *The Canadian Encyclopedia*: The Canadian Encyclopedia.

¹⁴ Byers, A., *The late Miss Carrie Derick*, in *McGill News*. 1942, Graduate's Society of McGill University: Montreal

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