

## The “Women” in my Professional Life

After reading about the contributions and accomplishments of Katharine McLennan, I realized that throughout my career I have been inspired and encouraged in my work by a number of admirable women. And so, respecting the legacy of the remarkable woman who inspired the establishing of this award, I thought it might be appropriate to reflect for a few moments on the women in my professional life.

Some of you may remember **Mary “Scotchie” MacDonald**. She oversaw the productions of the famous Rotary Musicals in Sydney during the 60s and 70s. In the early 1960s it was because of Mary that I began making frequent trips across the “still new” Canso Causeway. And because Mary convinced the Sydney Rotary Club to offer me the task of directing several of those musicals, my love for choir work became well-known in Cape Breton musical circles.

Somewhere around 1965 I received a phone call from a respected Cape Breton activist by the name of **Nina Cohen**. Nina was one of the driving forces behind the building of the Glace Bay Miners’ Museum (now the Cape Breton Miners’ Museum). Nina invited me to attend a rehearsal of a newly-formed choir of coal miners from Industrial Cape Breton. I’ll never forget her persuasive line: “Their story has a heartbeat; it should not be allowed to die!”

Also attending that early rehearsal was Nova Scotia’s famous folklorist, **Dr. Helen Creighton**. Nina had invited her to assist in establishing some early repertoire for the newly-formed choir. Both Nina and Dr. Creighton suggested that I might be interested in coming on board as conductor of the choir. Steve MacGillivray, a talented musician from Glace Bay was the initial director of the ‘coal miners choir’, but he was soon to relinquish that responsibility.

I was somewhat startled when Nina informed me that the choir had already been accepted to perform at Canada’s upcoming World’s Fair, Expo ’67, in Montreal.

To abbreviate the story of my early involvement with the choir, suffice it to say that, at the urging of Helen Creighton, I accepted the responsibility. Helen was to remain a source of encouragement until her death in 1989. I’ll be ever grateful for her inspiration and support.

My early commitment was to be a short one, however, because I had already made plans to further my graduate studies in music at the University of London's King's College. Expo '67 came and went, and it was a wonderful experience and a great success. The group recorded its first LP recording shortly before I left for England in 1968 where I pursued my career in Musicology. The final production of the recording was overseen by the capable accompanist for the group, Aubrey Boone. Aubrey took over the direction of the choir after I left.

While I was studying in England, the Cape Breton miners' love for singing kept them going under several capable directors, and it wasn't until early 1973 that I again became affiliated with this unique group of men. (I still give credit to one of those interim directors, **Sister Rita Clare**; it was she who instilled into the choir members the importance of 'good diction'! – which I think lingers on to this day!)

Another special female Cape Breton personality – **Ann 'Terry' MacLellan** – familiar to Cape Bretoners particularly because of her radio and television work and her frequent appearances on one of Canada's most successful television talk shows, *Front Page Challenge*. (Terry, of course, had also been one of the early supporters and promoters of the Cape Breton Miner's Museum.)

In 1973, 'Terry' had become Corporate Affairs Manager at the Cape Breton Development Corporation. DEVCO, she informed me, had expressed an interest in sponsoring the miners' choir, now known as The Men of the Deeps. Soon after I returned from London I had become involved again in Sydney's Rotary Musicals. I got to know Terry well during those days, and she asked if I would consider returning to direct The Men of the Deeps. She explained that DEVCO would like to encourage the preservation of the singing tradition of Cape Breton miners.

I knew that to accept the challenge meant that I would have to provide a repertoire that featured the preservation of traditional and newly-composed songs about mining in Cape Breton – a task in which I received much encouragement from Helen Creighton.

I accepted the challenge and soon found myself deep into researching the depths of the music of coal miners from Cape Breton and around the world. My research and publications soon led to an active association with the Canadian Folk Music Society – a national body of scholars, folk singers and researchers; in the late 70s I served as president of that association.

Through my affiliation with the Canadian Folk Music Society I met many scholars who encouraged me in my work of researching songs of the mining industry. One of the most influential of those scholars was **Dr. Edith Fowke** – a prominent folklorist and expert in the traditional music of Ontario. Like Dr. Helen Creighton, Edith encouraged my work with the group, and I was able to dedicate a song to her when she showed up at our debut concert in Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall.

More recently I've been inspired by three wonderful women from the entertainment world: Springhill's **Anne Murray** gave *The Men of the Deeps* its first experience on international television when we performed with her on her Christmas Special back in 1982. And British actress **Vanessa Redgrave** entered our lives in 1999 when she unexpectedly showed up at one of our Nova Scotia concerts. She gave us dignity by including us in an array of famous artists entertaining the returning refugees in the former Yugoslav Republic of Kosovo.

And, of course, the late **Rita MacNeil** was a very special friend to me and to all the members of the group. We will always remember our North American tours featuring Rita MacNeil and *The Men of the Deeps*. And with her recording of *Working Man* she brought our voices around the world. I was always inspired by Rita MacNeil's humility and professionalism. We all cherish her memory.

Finally, it would be unthinkable for me not to mention the **wives of The Men of the Deeps**. They have all been a special inspiration to me. Over the past 47 years it is they who have sacrificed so much. For most of the past 47 years our rehearsals have been held on Sunday afternoons – a time when most families spend time together. Sacrificing so many of those family Sundays was – and continues to be – a noble sacrifice which has contributed to the success of the choir. . .

I'm grateful for the encouragement which I received from the 'women in my professional life' – And I like to think that maybe Katharine McLennan would give

a nod of approval. I'm grateful for the opportunity to express my respect for the women who influenced my career as I stand here in this room dedicated to Katharine McLennan's memory.

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