

# WORK THROUGH TIME

*Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea*



## **A Short History of Katharine McLennan, Honourary Curator of the Louisbourg Museum**

Rosalie Gillis

Katharine McLennan (1892-1975) was a woman who developed and nurtured many interests and causes during her lifetime, most of which were dedicated to the betterment of her community. One of her greatest interests was history, specifically the history of the Fortress of Louisbourg in Nova Scotia.

Born to wealth and privilege, Katharine McLennan was educated through travel in Canada, the United States and Europe, and by private tutors. Until her early 20s, she led a sheltered life of travel with her family in winter, and summers spent on the McLennan estate, Petersfield in Cape Breton. In 1912, after the death of her mother Louise, Katharine took on the role of assisting her father, J.S. McLennan, in his research on the Fortress of Louisbourg that was to be used for his book, *Louisbourg: From its Foundation to its Fall*.

They travelled to London, Paris, Boston, and Ottawa, to find information that could help to tell the story of the Fortress of Louisbourg, including the battles that took place there and the day-to-day life of the people who lived in Louisbourg in the 1700s. During this research, Katharine painstakingly copied by hand all the relevant documents they found so that they would be available to J.S. McLennan in Cape Breton when the book was written. This research gave Katharine a grounding in the history of the Fortress of Louisbourg and probably was the catalyst that sparked her interest in the site.

Shortly after the First World War began, Katharine's only brother, Hugh, was killed in battle. Katharine felt she needed to contribute to the war effort and so joined the Red Cross as a nurse's aide. She went to France to work in Red Cross hospitals located very close to the front lines of the war. From accounts of the war and the photographs and drawings that remain of her three years overseas, the effect of this experience on a young woman from such a sheltered background and Victorian upbringing was profound and lasting. She never married but led a very full life with challenging work and service to the community.

After the war Katharine helped her father and other local supporters, like Archdeacon T.F. Draper from Louisbourg, with their efforts to have the federal

government preserve the Fortress of Louisbourg site. She developed a passion for the ruins of Louisbourg and helped to finance and manage the building of a museum on the site that would serve to show visitors the grandeur of the Fortress and its significance to the history of Canada, England, France and the United States. Their work led to the opening of the Louisbourg Museum in 1936. Katharine was named Honourary Curator of the museum and served in this capacity for twenty years.

The time and effort that Katharine put into the museum was extraordinary. She used her contacts and financial resources to locate and retrieve artifacts from the time of French occupation. One example was her efforts to retrieve the Louisbourg Cross, which was taken to Boston by the Massachusetts Colonial troops in 1745, and came to reside in the Treasure Room of Harvard College Library. In the 1930s, after the Louisbourg Museum opened, Katharine made repeated attempts, through a Boston lawyer she retained, to bring the Louisbourg Cross home. Although there was much correspondence between them, the best she was able to do at that time was get a replica built, using the original as a model. It wasn't until 1995 that Harvard returned the Cross to Louisbourg on a long term loan. Letters held at the James McConnell Library in Sydney show that Katharine spent a great deal of time in correspondence with individuals and organizations, trying to locate material for the Museum and authenticating material that was donated or purchased. The Museum, under her guidance, had a rich collection of materials from the period. Her knowledge of the Fortress of Louisbourg was so detailed that she was able to build a scale model of the site that is displayed in the Old Museum Building today and is a valued part of the Fortress of Louisbourg collection.

As Honourary Curator, Katharine was responsible for cataloguing artifacts, organizing the displays, and coordinating special events. She was also involved in tedious tasks like piecing together fragmented bits of china found at the site and sewing the French and English coats-of-arms into flags that hung over her model at the museum. Katharine wrote the site's brochure, *A Short History of Louisbourg*, and when copies of her father's book became hard to find, Katharine financed several new editions. She helped to educate local people about the Fortress and its history by giving talks to service groups and on radio.

Katharine McLennan worked tirelessly to build the Louisbourg Museum. Often this work was done quietly and efficiently in the background. The results of her work were sometimes not immediately apparent but helped to build on previous and later efforts to reconstruct the Fortress of Louisbourg.

In *A Short History of Louisbourg*, Katharine explains her commitment to the museum: "The museum was built in the belief that a visual memorial is a necessary adjunct to a living past, and it is far more illuminating than the most eloquent words." Today, the visual memorial at Louisbourg is a true 'living past' with a large section of the Fortress reconstructed and animators in period costume there to greet the many national and international visitors.

In a Globe and Mail newspaper article of September 1971, John Lunn, former Superintendent of Louisbourg commented on Katharine McLennan's role in the restoration of the Fortress of Louisbourg. "Single handedly," he said, "she founded and financed the Louisbourg Museum and was the active curator for 20 years. For many more years she was a member of the Committee for Restoration and in her lady-like way she persisted with the authorities until something was done."

Katharine McLennan made many more contributions to the local community in which she lived.

In 1959, she became involved with the newly planned James McConnell Memorial Library as a member of the Cape Breton Regional Library Board. With the plans in the works for a new public library, Katharine used her influence to get funding and was heavily involved in planning. She bought and donated the land on which the library stands today. Katharine continued to support the library through the coordination of special events and the donation of many books over the years. Katharine also donated her father's Louisbourg Collection. Many of her personal notes, journals, albums, and memorabilia were left to the library after her death.

In February of 1951, she was made secretary of the Victoria Order of Nurses local division. During World War II Katharine was involved in starting up the first Red Cross blood donor drives in the area and travelled around the island to supervise other clinics. In June of 1946, she was awarded the Red Cross Award of Merit for her years of service.

She was a founding member of the Old Sydney Society, which was founded in 1966 in order to preserve and restore historic landmarks in and around Sydney. The society collects and preserves its cultural and natural heritage and strives to present it in an accurate and vibrant manner. Katharine's other philanthropic activities included supporting St. Patrick's Museum, the Cape Breton Miners' Museum and donating anonymous gifts of scholarship money to deserving students. She also contributed to the Jewish Fund through the Temple Sons of Israel.

Over her years in service to the community, Miss McLennan was given many honours by various local and national organizations. The National Library Association honoured her in 1960 for her patronage over the years as a board member and patron of the Cape Breton Regional Library. The Cape Breton Miners' Museum and the Sydney Centennial Commission presented her with service awards. The Business and Professional Women's Club of Sydney made Katharine an Honourary Member in 1967.

Katharine was invested as an Officer of the Order of Canada in Ottawa in 1972. This was given for her early efforts to bring to life the history of the Fortress of Louisbourg, her support for the restoration of the Fortress site, and her work in preserving the history of the area.

Her passion for the history of the Fortress of Louisbourg and her independent spirit led her in directions not usually followed by women of her generation, making her a wonderful role model for young women she met.

Her passion for the history of the Fortress of Louisbourg and her independent spirit led her in directions not usually followed by women of her generation, making her a wonderful role model for young women she met.

This portrait of Katharine McLennan's life was provided to us by Rosalie Gillis of the James McConnell Regional Library.

© 2009 Rosalie Gillis, Cape Breton Regional Library