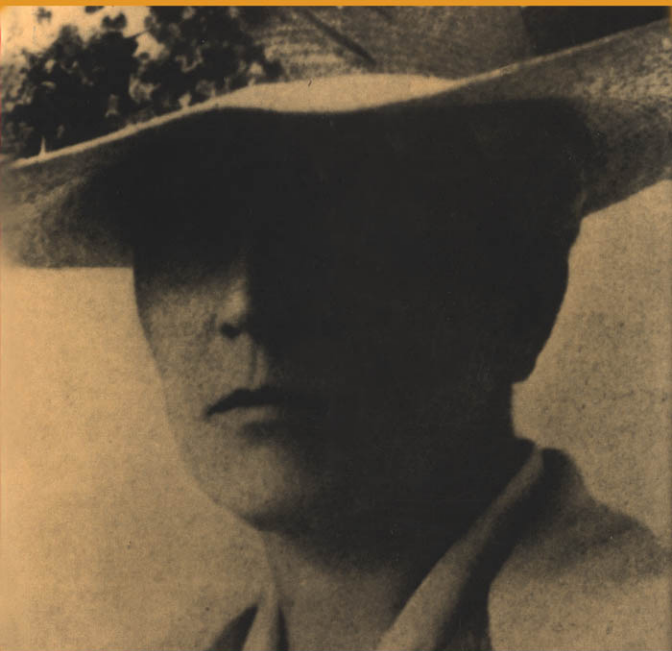


MARGARET McWILLIAMS



AN INTERWAR FEMINIST

MARY  
KINNEAR

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*Margaret McWilliams*

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*McWilliams*

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An Interwar Feminist

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MARY KINNEAR

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## *Acknowledgments*

Margaret McWilliams's career as a public woman began in 1910, just before the enfranchisement of women in Canada, and continued until her sudden death in 1952. With a degree in political economy from the University of Toronto, she earned her living as a journalist for five years before her marriage. Working for the community in women's organizations, she was a founder and first president of the Canadian Federation of University Women. Through her vice-presidency of the International Federation of University Women, McWilliams came to meet educated women from Europe and the English-speaking world, forming associations that would contribute to the strengthening of her feminist views as she grew older. An historian and political analyst, she was dedicated to the notion of an informed democracy and continually stressed the obligation of university graduates to serve society. During the Depression years, she was elected as alderman for the city of Winnipeg, only retiring when her husband was appointed lieutenant-governor of the province of Manitoba.

The public record of her career is documented in the four books McWilliams wrote, in newspaper reports of her activities, and in the minutes of the many organizations in which she participated. I found considerable material to support my theme that hers was one of the faces of feminism during the interwar years. Less easy to come by was material that would provide insight into her feelings. McWilliams left no diary, memoir, or collection of letters. Still, members of her family kept some correspondence, and many people who knew her retain vivid memories of her personality.

To McWilliams's great-nephew Jack Stovel of Williamstown, Massachusetts, to her great-niece and namesake Margaret Stovel of Montreal, and above all, to her niece by marriage, Velma McWilliams, of Peterborough, Ontario, I am immensely grateful for their generosity in sharing letters, photographs, and impressions. Their material supplemented the public record and allowed me to begin to understand McWilliams's continuing reputation, forty years after her death. I am also indebted to the many other women and men who shared their memories with me. Their names are in the bibliography, and I want especially to acknowledge the comments of Doris Saunders, Douglas Campbell, and Mrs W.L. Morton. I would also like to thank the archivist of the University Women's Club, Joyce McFarland, who showed me the McWilliams library and memorabilia kept at the clubhouse.

Librarians and archivists facilitated my research, and I am particularly grateful to Patrick Wright of the St. John's College library, Vera Fast and Jocelyn McKillop of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Sharon Larade of the University of Toronto Archives, Mary Jacomb of the City of Winnipeg Archives, and David Fraser at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa. I thank Kate Hamerton and Wendy Parker for their research assistance. Betty Jane Wylie, Helen Norrie, and Rosemary Malaher, who had already worked on aspects of McWilliams's career, gave me their insights into her character.

I have been fortunate in my colleagues. My department head, Ed Moulton, encouraged me from the outset, and A.M.C. Waterman, Angela Davis, Jean Friesen, John Kendle, Michael Kinnear, and Karen Ogden critically commented on various parts of my study. Above all, I benefited from the forthright comments of Susan Jackel of the University of Alberta, who read the penultimate draft.

I am grateful to the editors of McGill-Queen's University Press for their painstaking editorial work.

I acknowledge the financial help of the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, particularly for its award of a research time stipend, which allowed me to devote a year full-time to the completion of my project.

Finally, I thank my family for their companionship and good humour.



Tassie Callaway Stovel with Russell, Hodder, and Margaret. Courtesy of Jack Stovel.



Tassie Callaway Stovel. Courtesy of Velma McWilliams.



Margaret Stovel (seated on left) with the other members of the Executive Committee of the Harbord Collegiate Institute Literary Society. Courtesy of Harbord Collegiate Institute.



Harbord Collegiate Institute graduating class. Margaret Stovel is in the second row, second from left. Courtesy of Toronto Board of Education.



Ladies' Glee Club, University College, University of Toronto, 1897-98 with Margaret Stovel, its president, third from left. University of Toronto Archives.



Board of *Torontonensis*, University of Toronto, 1898. Margaret is in the front row, third from right. University of Toronto Archives.



Margaret Stovel in Montreal, ca. 1900. Courtesy of Margaret Stovel (great-niece of Margaret McWilliams).



Margaret Stovel in her wedding dress, 1903. Courtesy of Velma McWilliams.



Margaret and Roland McWilliams, hiking, 1912. Courtesy of Velma McWilliams.



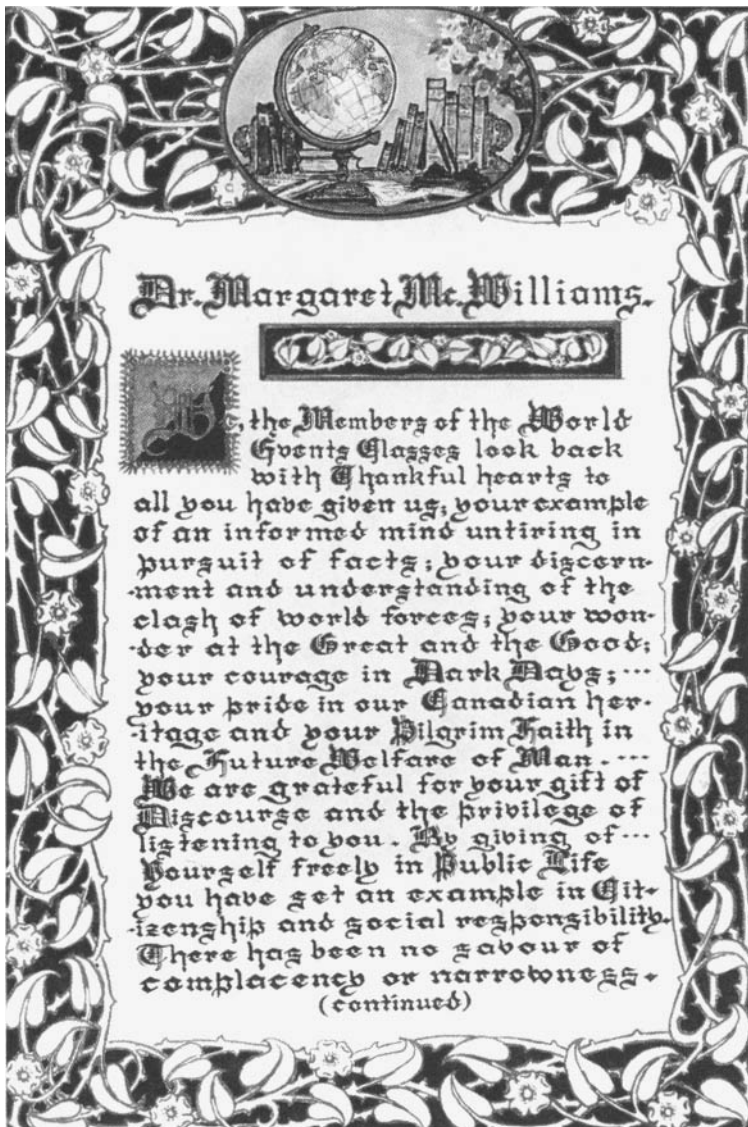
McWilliams, front row, fourth from left, with the Canadian delegation to the 1922 conference of the International Federation of University Women (IFUW), Paris. Provincial Archives of Manitoba.



McWilliams, seated, third from right, with other IFUW delegates, Paris, 1922. Courtesy of University Women's Club, Westgate, Winnipeg.



IFUW conference, Paris, 1922. Vice-President McWilliams (on left) with President Caroline Spurgeon and Secretary Theodora Bosanquet. Courtesy of University Women's Club, Westgate, Winnipeg.



Scroll presented to McWilliams by her current events class in 1948. Courtesy of University Women's Club, Westgate, Winnipeg.



You have impressed the members  
of your Classes with your...  
sense of the breadth and grasp  
of Events and with your firm and  
equitable Judgment. These Things  
and many more we will remember  
as we think of you standing before  
us week after week through the  
years. No one can ever take  
these Memories from us for they  
are Ours. You have given them  
to us and They are ours to  
Keep...

January 27<sup>th</sup>  
1948.





IFUW conference, Christiania (Oslo), Norway, 1924. McWilliams is in the front row, sixth from left. Courtesy of Velma McWilliams.

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*Margaret McWilliams*

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## *Margaret McWilliams: An Interwar Feminist*

Margaret McWilliams was recognizable to her contemporaries as a public woman. From the perspective of the 1990s, she can be seen as an interwar feminist.

McWilliams's career was launched when, at the age of thirty-five, she arrived in Winnipeg with her husband in 1910. It was built on the firm foundation of a university education: in 1898 she was the first woman to graduate with a degree in political economy from the University of Toronto. For five years she earned her living as a journalist in Minneapolis and Detroit, then married a barrister, an old university friend. She spent seven barren and unproductive years in Peterborough, Ontario, but on arrival in Winnipeg, she joined the Women's Canadian Club (wcc) and the Local Council of Women (LCW). A charter member of the Winnipeg University Women's Club, she was first president of the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) and first vice-president of the International Federation of University Women (IFUW). She produced a book of women's history, *Women of Red River*, in 1923, a book on her impressions of Russia in 1927, a history of Manitoba in 1928, a blueprint for Canadian social and economic reform in 1931, and a book on the political institutions of Canada in 1948.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1930s, McWilliams served four consecutive terms as Winnipeg's second woman alderman, becoming chair of the important Health and Unemployment Relief committees. During the 1940s, after her husband was appointed lieutenant-governor of the province, she helped revitalize the Manitoba Historical Society, serving as its president when it sponsored

more research than at any other time, before or since. She chaired the Subcommittee on the Post-war Problems of Women, a subcommittee of the federal Advisory Committee on Reconstruction. For over thirty years, until 1947, she maintained a unique Winnipeg institution – her “current events” classes for women, which involved continuing education in politics. She died in 1952 at the age of seventy-seven.

Margaret McWilliams’s career as a public woman spanned forty-two years. Her feminism developed slowly until about 1922, and then more urgently thereafter. At first, with enormous confidence, she appeared to recognize no effective barriers to women’s participation in public life. Writing of the period around 1910, she noted that “things were prospering and there was plenty to occupy [women’s] minds and hands. They did not see the necessity for the suffrage – the world was theirs anyway.”<sup>2</sup> McWilliams’s practical experience working with and for other women soon brought the realization that the public world by no means belonged to women. Her career is the story of her growing feminist consciousness, and it is also a window onto the little-known scene of interwar feminism in Canada.

The nineteenth-century women’s movement sought to open public life to women, although participants embraced a variety of causes and were rarely united on priorities. Some feminists were concerned with the problems women were experiencing in the labour force, where young and single working-class women worked mainly as domestic servants and factory workers. Other feminists were concerned with women’s control over their own sexuality, believing they should have access to birth control. Some worked to eliminate the dual sexual standard whereby women were punished more severely than men for sexual transgression. The early feminists’ overall lack of unity was masked by an apparent unanimity over the claim that each woman had the right to serve society, to be involved in public life.

Most activists were middle class and understood the public sphere in terms of politics, property, and the professions. The slogan “Votes for Women” constituted both a symbol and a major practical tool of the movement. In a modern parliamentary democracy, the vote signified the acknowledgment of the full identity of an individual person. In acquiring political power, women might be able to promote legislation that would