

1.1.d. Roberta MacAdams and the “New Woman”

In 1912, the Alberta provincial government hired [Roberta MacAdams](#), a recent Home Economics graduate of the Macdonald Institute at the Ontario Agricultural College (OAC), to offer short “institute” courses for rural women across Alberta. Later that year, partly in response to petitions by women such as [Martha Graham](#), who had started the first WI club in Alberta in 1909, the Department of Agriculture asked Miss MacAdams to conduct a survey to determine the viability of a provincial women’s institutes organization in Alberta.

The conclusions of the MacAdams’ report led the Dept. of Agriculture to hire Georgina Stiven, another graduate of domestic science from OAC, to serve as the first Superintendent of Women’s Institutes in Alberta. Both Stiven and MacAdams then toured the province assisting rural women to form AWI branches (Wood 7).

Roberta MacAdams was a remarkable person. She represented what was then called the “new woman”: someone who participated in society outside the home in non-traditional ways, through education, employment, and civic engagement. Synonymous with the period of Modernism, which extends for about two decades before and after the year 1900, the notion of the “new woman” was fuelled by new opportunities for higher education, meaningful work during the war, and anticipation of the right to vote.

After working on the Women’s Institutes program from 1912-13, MacAdams moved to the Edmonton Public School Board in 1914 to establish another milestone for women: the first department of Domestic Economy in Alberta public schools. When she left the school system two years later, the domestic science program was fully functioning with four full-time teachers. In 1916, MacAdams joined thousands of other Canadians who were fighting overseas in

the First World War. As a lieutenant, Roberta MacAdams assumed the post of dietician in the Canadian military hospital at Orpington, in England, the only position of its kind at the time (Furniss n.p.).

Throughout her working career, others recognized Roberta MacAdams for her ability, despite her gender. In the 1917 provincial election, suffragist and agent for the Alberta government in England, Beatrice Nasmyth, encouraged her to run for a legislative seat as a soldier's representative. The campaign poster read, in part: "Give one vote to the man of your choice.... the other to the Sister." Of the 21 people nominated for the seat, two were returned; one of them was Roberta MacAdams.

It was an extraordinary achievement for someone so young, and a woman at that! She was sworn in just days after [Louise McKinney](#); together they made history as the first two women elected to sit in a legislature in the British Empire. MacAdams then became the first woman in the Empire to introduce legislation when, in 1918, she brought forward a bill to incorporate the war veterans' next-of-kin association.

After her election, she toured the battlefields as the soldiers' Member of the Provincial Parliament (MPP) and organized the women's staff for the Khaki University, an institution that provided continuing education to Canadian Forces Overseas. Returning to Alberta in 1919, MacAdams served as district director of the soldier land settlement board (Furniss n.p.).

Sources

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