

Dr. Agnes C. O'Dea, 1911-1993

ANNE HART

AGNES O'DEA, A LIBRARIAN both distinguished and much loved, died in St. John's on January 26, 1993. In 1987, in an address to the Bibliographical Society of Canada, she said:

When Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, a sense of identity emerged as never before. Newfoundlanders became rabid Newfoundlanders — "I'm a Newfoundlander, not a Canadian," some would cry — and we began to take pride in our heritage, in our long and continual struggle for survival, and in the literature which tells our long and interesting story.

Hunting and gathering the literature of Newfoundland was at the heart of her remarkable career. Some people are blessed with a life work they truly enjoy. Agnes was one of these.

Agnes graduated from the University of Toronto in 1932 with a Diploma in Library Science and returned home, Newfoundland's first professional librarian, to become Assistant Head of the infant St. John's Gosling Public Library. In addition to actually building its collection of Newfoundlandia, she began as well to work on something she called "the Bib," the record, in her memorable words, "of everything ever published in Newfoundland, about Newfoundland, and written by Newfoundlanders." In 1939 she obtained a Bachelor of Library Science degree from the University of Toronto and stayed on to work first with the Toronto Public Libraries system and then the Ontario Research Foundation.

Being part of Canada was still a novelty when Agnes returned to Newfoundland in 1952 to take up a position as a reference librarian at Memorial University. Memorial, a college since 1925, had recently become degree-granting. What would its new role be? In the words of historian Dr. Peter Neary:

The answer given by a gifted generation of scholars who appeared on the scene at Memorial in the 1950s was that regional work characterized by the highest standards of scholarship would ipso facto be of transcending interest and importance. Thus, in the interest both of the province and of learning in general, a number of major and long-term scholarly projects were started at Memorial in the 1950s.

One of these, with the aid of a Carnegie grant, was to identify the printed records of Newfoundland. In 1955 Agnes was appointed to the task. It would be 1985 before the *Bibliography of Newfoundland* would be published in two large volumes by the University of Toronto Press, but in the thirty-year interval Agnes, seemingly always with time to talk about other things, performed a major feat of detection and compilation. In its published form "the Bib," whittled down to monographs published to 1975, lists over 6,000 publications on Newfoundland and Labrador and provides detailed indexes by author, title and subject.



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In 1965, with the bibliography well underway, Agnes was given a second mandate: the establishment of a Newfoundland collection at Memorial University Library. Beginning with forty volumes, by the time of her retirement she had built the Centre for Newfoundland Studies to a collection of some 20,000 volumes. It must have been like seeing her bibliography come to life. In return, the Centre, with the people who work there, has become an ongoing support system for Newfoundland bibliography. After Agnes's retirement in 1976, the editing and preparation of the monographs portion for publication became the work of her colleague, Anne Alexander. Today Joan Ritcey of the Centre is readying for publication a bibliography, already at 41,000 citations, from the Centre's data base of Newfoundland periodical articles. All this continues to be part of Agnes's legacy.

Many honours came to her. In 1976 she was awarded the Canadian Historical Association's Certificate of Merit in Local History, in 1977 she was presented with the Newfoundland Historical Society's Annual Heritage Award, in 1980 she was awarded the Atlantic Provinces Library Association's Merit Award and a lifetime membership in recognition of her outstanding contribution to librarianship, and in 1987 she received the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, from Memorial University.

In the course of receiving these awards, she was often called a pioneer. Sometimes this word conjures up a person in a sun bonnet and forever at toil, the antithesis of Agnes, whose hats — when she wore them — were very elegant, and whose time was a wonderful mix of significant scholarship, numerous close friendships, and many pleasures, travels and interests. For her beloved family, for her many friends and colleagues, and for the province of Newfoundland, her death came as a great loss.