Introduction

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This collection of essays in honour of Margaret Wade Labarge (18 July 1916 - 31 August 2009) marks the passing of a remarkable scholar, but it also stands as a sentinel to the passing of a generation of noteworthy Canadian medievalists. Dr. Labarge (yes, it was honorary and a title she tended not to use, but she received three and they were certainly well merited) was part of that remarkable efflorescence of Medieval Studies that distinguished the Canadian academy in the 1970s and 1980s. The list of names reads as a Who's Who of medievalists: Bertie Wilkinson, Michael Sheehan, Ambrose Raftis, Leonard Boyle, John Leyerle among many others. There with them, but not really part of their circle, was Margaret Wade Labarge, a married woman, without an academic appointment, a resident of Ottawa rather than Toronto. Yet she fits with them nonetheless as a leader and a leading light for Canadian Medieval Studies.

Although not every medievalist was privileged to address her intimately as Polly, as a result of her humane warmth and accessibility, especially while serving as the inaugural President of the Canadian Society of Medievalists / Société canadienne des médiévistes, most of us did refer to her as Polly behind her back. Indeed, the Society's award to recognize the best book written by a Canadian medievalist was instantly dubbed "The Polly." What more appropriate way to acknowledge a scholar renowned for producing accessible books distinguished by a firm scholarly grounding and clear narrative style?

Polly was an enigma to many in the scholarly community. I first met her at one of the Centre for Medieval Studies annual conferences in the early 1980s. These were exuberant events, populated by visiting speakers, graduate students, and newly

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minted PhDs, as well as by the senior members of the Toronto medieval community. There, standing off to the side, was a white-haired grandmotherly figure that few recognized, except perhaps for the elders in our midst. She and I struck up a conversation over coffee that blossomed into a friendship. The memory of that Toronto conference stands in contrast to watching her at the Kalamazoo Medieval Congress, a few years later, after the publication of *Women in Medieval Life*.[1] There she was surrounded by young women medievalists eager to talk to her about the emergent field of study: women in the Middle Ages. It is difficult to convey the excitement that greeted the publication of *Women in Medieval Life*. It was the first monograph, the first introductory overview of a field that has now burgeoned to the point that it is sometimes hard to remember that once upon a time the study of women was tangential and marginal. Through her book, at once engaging and substantive, Labarge played a significant role in introducing the study of medieval women into the classroom, into the mainstream of scholarship, and to a general audience.

Margaret Wade Labarge was a multifaceted role model. She modelled how to be a successful independent scholar. Her choices may have been motivated by familial responsibilities rather than by a shrinking job market that is now curtailing the aspirations of many medievalists, but her strategies to sustain a productive scholarly career might provide encouragement and inspiration. Once, when I enquired how she had ever produced so many books, Polly replied that she fit her research and writing into odd hours here and there among her many other responsibilities. Hers was a career based on captured moments. It was the discipline of consistency rather than long stretches of scholarly solitude that underlay her prolific publication record. Similarly, if a full-time university appointment eluded her, she nevertheless established formal ties with academic institutions and personal ties with fellow scholars, most significantly Sheehan, Raftis, and Boyle, but also Mary Rogers, Joanne Norman, and numerous other colleagues, particularly in the United Kingdom. She forged relationships with the local universities and taught a course a year, ensuring that she experienced the joys and challenges of the classroom. Polly was interested in other people's work, especially that of newer scholars who were moving in different directions. All of this activity provided the intellectual foundation that allowed her to flourish outside the usual structures of university life and to be elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, this country's highest academic honour.

1 Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life: A Small Sound of the Trumpet* (1986).

Although she was not included in *Women Medievalists and the Academy*,[2] perhaps because she was a contemporary scholar without institutional affiliation and living in Canada, Margaret Wade Labarge has been the topic of three encomia. The first was written by her friend Naomi Griffiths as the introduction to a collection of her essays and conference papers, published as *A Medieval Miscellany*.[3] The second was Lisa Fitterman's tribute in the *Globe & Mail*, and the third a memorial essay by Andrew Taylor that appeared in *Florilegium*.[4] Griffiths provides an insightful overview of her life, while Taylor discusses her scholarly impact. Rather than revisiting well-rehearsed topics, I shall instead concentrate on the essays presented here, as a tribute and true memorial to our remarkable friend and colleague.

Susan Mosher Stuard begins this collection, appropriately enough, with an essay about independent women medievalists. She places Labarge among a cadre of women that included such luminous precursors as Lina Eckenstein, Mary Bateson, Hope Emily Allen, Bertha Phillpotts, Helen Waddell, and Mary Martin McLaughlin. Stuard outlines how formidable a scholar each woman was in her own right. Each, however, made her career outside the traditional paths open to women, some because of social structures, others due to the systematic exclusion of women from the academy. What unites these trailblazers is that they were determined to be scholars, taking advantage of their independence from the strictures of the academy to focus on research questions of personal interest. In the process, they all made enduring contributions to our understanding of women in the Middle Ages.

Margaret Wade Labarge was as much a public scholar as she was an academician. In today's parlance, she would be considered to have engaged in 'knowledge transfer' of the most significant kind. Her books bridge the ever widening gap that separates academic scholarship from the educated reading public. Labarge eschewed jargon and instead employed a clear and elegant prose style. There is also a marked correlation between some of her scholarly themes and some of her personal causes. Her abiding interest in the lives of medieval women was mirrored by her own concerns about women in Canadian society. It was no accident that her interest in medieval women peaked in the years after she produced a background document for the Royal

2 Chance, ed., *Women Medievalists and the Academy* (2005).

3 Griffiths, Introduction, *A Medieval Miscellany*, 1-14.

4 Fitterman, "Margaret Wade Labarge, 93"; and Taylor, "*In Memoriam* Margaret Wade Labarge 1916-2009."

Commission on the Status of Women (1967-1970).[5] Her interest in the plight of the elderly was reflected not only in her being awarded the Order of Canada but also in research into aging and the aged in medieval Europe. There was, in her work, a consideration for the interested amateur, for the general public that wants to know what happened in the past, free from theoretical excess. In this, Labarge perhaps had more in common with the scholars of the early twentieth century than with those in the early twenty-first.

Labarge's interest in the connections and intersections of past and present are reflected in the essay by Steven Bednarski and Andrée Courtemanche. Beginning with the culturally embedded desire to baptize a dead infant observed in the modern Andes, they segue into the life-and-death tragedy of Caesarean sections, stillborn infants, and maternal death in fifteenth-century Provence. Bednarski and Courtemanche provide an exhaustive, multidisciplinary examination of the case of Nicoulau Fabri, who sought permission for a Caesarean section after his wife, Catarino, had died in childbirth. The case raised legal issues and reveals much about medical care, particularly surgery. But there were complex issues of belief involved, too, surrounding baptism in birthing chambers. Ancient fears about unbaptized infants collided with parental desires to save their child's soul, even in the face of the Church's denial of the efficacy of such postmortem baptism. Moreover, in some circumstances, baptism could carry secular implications, for example, with respect to inheritance. Were a child to have lived, even for a moment, lines of inheritance and family fortunes could be forever altered. Like Labarge, Bednarski and Courtemanche take a topic of rich complexity and render rigorous scholarship both comprehensible and elegant.

Labarge's own research into medieval medicine examined the theoretical advice provided in medical texts and interpreted in its social and cultural contexts. So, for example, she examined Aldobrandino of Siena's *Le Régime du corps*, a thirteenth-century treatise on women's health which, he claimed, was designed for practical application.[6] But the practice of medieval medicine was not without its complications, as Sara Butler reveals in her examination of medicine and the law in late medieval and early modern England. It was only in the fifteenth century that medicine became a regulated profession, and an examination of court records shows that patients or their

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5 Labarge, "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women: The Historical Background," in *Cultural Tradition and Political History of Women in Canada*, i-29.

6 Labarge, "The *Régime du Corps* of Aldebrandino of Siena," 277.

relatives expected certain standards of professional competence and, perhaps more challenging for physicians, professional success. Butler demonstrates that patients and their relatives expected their health care providers to deliver cures; they wanted guarantees and were not hesitant to sue doctors whom they considered negligent or who had failed them, even in extreme or fatal cases of disease or injury. Thus, Butler reveals the tensions occasioned by expensive health care and the vulnerabilities of both patient and physician in a world in which medicine's cures were tentative at best.

Care of the body and cure of the soul coexisted in medieval society, and each captured the scholarly attention of Margaret Wade Labarge. Catherine Innes-Parker refers to the personally inspirational effect of Labarge's work concerning medieval widows who turned to religious life as a "second career."[7] Innes-Parker examines the possible connections between revisions of the *Ancrene Wisse*, an instructional treatise for anchoresses, and the lives of a number of widows of the de Braose family. She argues that these women are representative of the intended audience for the revised treatise which mitigated the rigours of religious life and spoke to a wider audience of widowed recluses. By carefully balancing the historical context of the de Braose sisters with meticulous textual analysis of the *Ancrene Wisse* revisions, Innes-Parker reunites text and context in important ways, suggesting that a consideration of the widowed recluses who were among the audience for such instructional treatises will enhance our understanding of the treatises themselves.

Labarge was an engaging historian because she was a story-teller in the best sense of history that illuminates the past by examining the people and their relationships and activities. This approach is reflected throughout her books and articles which are populated by people, the great and the ordinary, all brought alive for the reader through her elegant presentation. Nowhere was her capacity to bring medieval people to life as clear and as effective as when she wrote about women. This focus on women as individuals who were active and engaged in their society is evident in Kouky Fianu's article on fifteenth-century Orléans. Taking full advantage of the wealth of the notarial records, Fianu examines how women — in particular, widows — were woven into the social and economic fabric of city life. Through their appearances before the notary, exercising their rights, especially with respect to their children's patrimony, these women proved to be every bit as autonomous and confident as the many women studied by Margaret Wade Labarge.

7 Labarge, "Three Medieval Widows and a Second Career."

While the women of Orléans may have restricted their disputes to the notarial arena, the Scottish townswomen studied by Elizabeth Ewan engaged in active, physical violence. Ewan examines cases of assault in late medieval Glasgow, comparing male and female perpetrators. In doing so, she moves us beyond the conventional female transgressions of scolding and gossip. In this essay, too, as in Fianu's, women come to life in the court records as victims laying accusations against their assailants and in the courts' accounts of their violent actions, excuses, justifications, and pleas. Thus, the medieval city comes alive not only peopled by respectable bourgeois matrons and widows but also by querulous and violent women ready to take matters into their own hands.

The violence of urban society is also underscored in Shannon McSheffrey's examination of homicide among men of the elite ranks. In 1532, Sir William Pennington was killed in a spectacular swordfight, in front of many witnesses from both sides of the conflict. Consequently, there were multiple versions of what happened circulating throughout London. McSheffrey carefully teases out the various threads of assertion and obfuscation and places them against the competing political priorities of all those touched by the incident, including the highest reaches of the royal court. Her analysis of the many narrative threads demonstrates how story-telling affected the versions that were developed to conform to the political and legal imperatives of various interest groups. In the end, this case demonstrates how legal sources construct narrative, shaping the reality that is being recorded in conformity with the law. McSheffrey's provides an excellent example of how painstaking historical research and analysis can bring to light new and complex understandings of the past.

Together these essays touch upon many of the historical questions that were of interest to Margaret Wade Labarge. If they seem wide-ranging or disparate, that is because their breadth reflects her breadth of interests, from politics to medicine, from religion to daily life: all were subjects of her historical curiosity. It is, then, no surprise that she herself described her essays as a miscellany,[8] and this perhaps justifies and explains the title of our volume: *A Miscellaneous Medievalist*. Who better than Margaret Wade Labarge — our dear Polly — could meet the definition of 'miscellaneous': said "of a person (esp. a writer): having various qualities or aspects; treating of various subjects."[9]

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8 Labarge, *A Medieval Miscellany* (1997).

9 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *miscellaneous,* adj. (2); available at <www.oed.com>.

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