



PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women

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March 31, 2008

Island Heritage Study
c/o The IRIS Group
52 East River Drive
Stratford PE C1B 2E4

Dear members of the IRIS Group:

The PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women has an interest in Prince Edward Island heritage that continues to include women and under-represented groups. We challenge the province to continue to seek new ways to conserve, interpret, and present a vision of women as co-creators with men of our landscape, our culture, and our history. And we suggest that support for women's contributions to culture and to history-making in the here and now must be supported, to ensure women's equal contributions to what will be seen as "heritage" in the future.

Rather than provide a detailed assessment of strengths and assets or gaps and weaknesses in the Island's heritage resource institutions, the main goal of this submission is to suggest ways to build on heritage assets, keeping inclusion and diversity in mind as essential goals; to offer a vision for a healthy and dynamic future for heritage; and to affirm the central role of the Government of PEI in being a steward of heritage.

The PEIACSW Mandate

The Prince Edward Island Advisory Council on the Status of Women (PEIACSW) is a provincial government advisory body dedicated to supporting women's full and equal participation in social, legal, cultural, economic, and political spheres of life.

The Council regularly works in collaboration with government and community groups, undertakes research on issues of concern to women, offers analysis and recommendations to policy-makers, responds to media, and creates public education resources.

A character in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* says of history: "It tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all — it is very tiresome." Of course, the practice of history and preservation of heritage have come a good way since Austen's day. The study of women's role in history is much strengthened, along with the stories of other under-represented groups. To be frank, in contemporary histories and museums, interpretations of domestic and community life have almost supplanted the endless stories of "popes and kings . . . wars and pestilences." However, because men as a group continue to have more power in the public sphere than women as a group, it takes constant work and vigilance to fight the tendency of history and heritage efforts to focus on men and to restate the knowledge, values, and deeds of men. There is a lingering instinct to label men's activities as "more important" in the shaping of culture, whether the activities are in politics, business, or war. This kind of history is not only tiresome: it makes white male power seem normal and inevitable. It is a heritage of exclusion and disempowerment.

The most visible symbol of what's tiresome in Island heritage has been and continues to be the "Fathers of Confederation." There are many, many reasons that a focus on the "Fathers" is exclusionary. But few would argue that the story of the "birthplace of Confederation" — a birth that apparently required limited female involvement — is a compelling story for everyday Islanders, many of whom are descended from people who opposed confederation or who were indifferent to it.

Too many of the monuments to history that dominate PEI's heritage landscape are male-centred, celebrating the careers of industrious men, the homes of rich men, the meeting places of political men, and the loss of military men. In these contexts, women's achievements are treated as exceptional, but always as exceptions — A female farm innovator! A woman whose social network and social status cemented cultural life for the privileged of her town! A female premier! A woman war hero!

The most obvious "exception" is the monumental importance of Anne of Green Gables and her author, Lucy Maud Montgomery. They also dominate the heritage landscape, but their role in heritage is complicated, as always, by the problem of "fiction." The heritage of Anne is sometimes dismissed as "just fiction," though it seems the tide has turned on this trend, with closer historical analyses of Montgomery's life and times. (It is interesting to note that the Jane Austen quotation above continues on to say, "and yet I often think it odd that [history] should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.") Surprisingly, other than a dull national historic site plaque at Green Gable House, there is no public monument to Montgomery or her creations.

These dominant and dominating images in Island heritage are what make museums and similar projects so absolutely important. Museums offer a richness of interpretation that is absolutely essential to telling an in-depth story of culture and society, rather than simply maintaining a tired "brand." Museum sites across the Island generally do a pretty good job celebrating women's contributions to

society and placing importance and value on domestic and community life. Sometimes, but less frequently, museums offer an insight into the effects of poverty, abuse, and discrimination in women's lives and in the lives of under-represented groups. First Nations and Acadian communities have led the way in reclaiming these aspects of their history. The gender lens has been applied less frequently, since women's experiences are so diverse, including multiple variations of experience based on their culture, racialized identity, class, role within a particular family, sexual orientation, and other circumstances.

Museums and other initiatives that create and sustain a rich and varied story of Island heritage are the most important projects for us, as a province, to support with public investment. It is for these reasons, among others, that we believe a provincial museum is so important for PEI, to supplement the community-focused stories in the current, distributed museum sites. Along with the need for a provincial museum, we have heard important calls from the community for specific focuses of historical attention — particularly, the need to interpret natural history and the need for a children's museum. These specialized interests are very much worth exploring as part of a consideration of any wider museum project.

We would like to see museums interpret and present existing heritage projects and bring knowledge to life in new ways. Many community histories, academic histories, and public histories have been created in Island communities. (In 2001, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women created "First Hand," a public history celebrating women's art throughout the 21st century, a resource mainly available on-line.) The accumulated wisdom of our communities is well-collected in archives and libraries, but well-paid and dynamic museum staff people are needed to bring these project to life and to light. Also, increased human resources in archives and extraordinary collections such as the PEI Collection at Robertson Library would make the body of local knowledge more accessible to the public.

It would add even more value to sites that become centres for doing and debating women's history if there were (financial and other) support for individual scholars or groups (fellowships) or for regional historical conferences, symposia, and (always popular on PEI) lecture series.

Our archival resources seem to be most frequently used for genealogy projects, a focus of research that is disappointingly limited. Further, the way genealogy is done in Western culture serves to reinforce patriarchy at every generation, with fathers' names celebrated and carried down through the years and women's names lost, their identities subsumed in their role as begetters, begetting and begetting and begetting. We need people working with heritage resources who are able to help to open out the study of personal history beyond this narrow genealogical focus to root it in context.

We know that many ideas and priorities have come out of the province-wide public consultations already. The following are the kinds of initiatives and investments that the Advisory Council on the Status of Women would strongly endorse.

Shorter-term projects:

- Investment in public art in public spaces by women and men. This should include creation of public monuments and memorials that focus on women's history.
- Increased investment in contemporary arts and culture. This should include increased support for existing institutions, such as the PEI Council of the Arts, and initiatives, such as the craft Buyers' Markets, that provide grants to artists and artisans and that assist them in making a livable income from their work.
- Multi-year, stable provincial government support for local publishing projects that illuminate our small Island's past and our contemporary circumstances in non-fiction, fiction, and poetry for adults and for children.
- Specific support for arts programs and arts presence in the schools — including supports for arts educators (many of whom are women), for supplies and space, and for artists-in-the schools — to give Island young people maximum inspiration to apply their creativity.
- Support for doing and debating inclusive historicals research in academia and in the wider community.
- Investment in sustainable and beautiful affordable housing — creating heritage buildings for tomorrow that make people's lives better today.

Longer-term projects:

- A provincial museum, supported by a well-maintained and well-staffed artifactory, in a location designed to benefit local people first and to tourists second. This is needed notwithstanding the value and quality of the seven provincial museum sites and should be an addition to, not a replacement of, these sites.
- Consideration of the role and value of a maintaining a specialized focus in part of or all of a provincial museum. Groups advocating for a children's museum have insight into what benefits this could bring, as do proponents of a museum of natural history. (Either or both of these focuses could merit — or even require — an independent museum site, and this is well worth exploring.)
- A provincial art gallery to collect and exhibit arts and crafts from the Island's past and present.

All of these projects would create opportunities for highlighting women's role in Prince Edward Island's past and would support women's present role in shaping the heritage of tomorrow.

Within each of the priorities that come out of public consultation and written submissions to the Island Heritage Study, we ask for acknowledgment of the importance of *inclusion* — of women's history and of the history of under-

represented groups. We also ask for a balance in priority between conserving the heritage we have today and supporting the creation of heritage for the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a brief to the province-wide consultation on Island heritage. We look forward to the results of the consultations.

Sincerely,

Isabelle Christian
Chairperson

CC: Hon. Valerie Docherty, Minister Responsible for the Status of Women
Michelle Harris-Genge, Interministerial Women's Secretariat
Members of the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women