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### Résumé de l'article

Ella L. Smith était une des rares femmes professeures à Mount Allison University lors de son engagement pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale et elle a été la première femme à devenir chef de département dans cette institution. Elle est restée active après sa retraite gérant une petite librairie sur le campus. Les récits oraux qui subsistent représentent Ella Smith comme un personnage haut en couleurs, exubérant, voire excentrique. L'étude de ces récits permet de mieux comprendre les attitudes sociales envers les femmes qui entraient dans le milieu universitaire alors dominé par les hommes.

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# NARRATIVE, GENDER AND MARGINALITY: THE CASE STUDY OF ELLA LAUCHNER SMITH<sup>1</sup>

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Thus far, most studies in the growing folkloristic literature on local characters examine the role as it is adopted and played out by males.<sup>2</sup> An opportunity to consider the local character phenomenon as it relates to a woman presented itself in 1989 when I took up a teaching contract in the Centre for Canadian Studies at Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick. Soon after my arrival at Mount Allison I began to hear narratives recounted about Ella Smith, a former professor and book store operator, who had become a landmark on the campus prior to her death in 1972. Faculty members and former students continue to keep Smith's name and memory alive through the stories they exchange of her unconventional behaviour. This paper introduces the life story of a remarkable woman who was and still is known as a local character. It explores thematic patterns in the circulating corpus of oral narrative that maintains Smith's special status.

## **Ella Smith (1884-1972)**

Ella Lauchner Smith was born in Saint John, New Brunswick on May 18, 1884, the eldest child of Frances (Fannie) Hanson and James Willard Smith. Her mother, a native of the New Brunswick farming community of Durham Bridge, taught school in Saint John prior to her marriage in 1883.<sup>3</sup> In her

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1. Thanks to Cheryl Ennals of the Mount Allison University Archive, Margaret and Alex Fancy, Harold Greer, Peter MacCrae, Ron Smith, Oscar Tracy, J. Henry Tye, Nancy Vogan, and the staff of the Smith College Archive. The tape of the Tracy interview is located in the Mount Allison University Archive, Acc# 9002; all other tapes are in my possession.
  2. A notable exception is Janet Langlois's "Belle Guinness: The Lady Bluebeard: Community Legend as Metaphor," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 15 (1978), p. 147-160.
  3. Census returns indicate that by 1881 Fannie had left Durham Bridge, York County for Saint John where she was teaching school and boarding with Stephen and Sarah Lauchner who operated a bakery. By 1883 Fannie had left the Lauchners, married J. Willard Smith, and was expecting her first child. The death of the Lauchners' adopted daughter, Ella Victoria, in November of 1883 prompted Fannie to call her daughter Ella Lauchner Smith when she was born later that spring.

obituary, Fanny Hanson Smith is described as “a zealous worker of the Children’s Aid Society...convener of the standing committee on Child Welfare of the local council of women and was a willing worker of the congregation of the Queen Square Methodist Church”.<sup>4</sup> James Willard Smith, the son of a prominent shipbuilder<sup>5</sup> from Advocate Harbour, Nova Scotia, began his career as a commission merchant in Saint John at the age of twenty. Eventually he acquired forty vessels, most of which were engaged in the coastwise trade.<sup>6</sup> Willard Smith was an active member of the local Methodist church and a strong prohibitionist.<sup>7</sup>

From a young age, Ella Smith was a gifted student. Reportedly by the age of twelve she was “devouring Greek”<sup>8</sup> and in 1901 she graduated from Saint John High School as valedictorian. She earned BA Honours in Classics (1905) and an MA in Classics (1908) from McGill<sup>9</sup> where the university’s first female full-time faculty of arts member, Hilda Oakley, reflected on Smith’s interests and abilities:

Miss Smith entered college [*Royal Victoria College*] when only sixteen, but I soon noticed that her interest in the things of the mind was rather unusual and that she was

4. *Saint John Globe*, 5 Jan 1923, p. 2.

5. The 1871 census p. 20 Advocate Harbour 59 #64 lists the family of Sidney and Maria Morris Smith as consisting of seven children: James W. 12, George W. 10, Anezolletta 9, Martha J. 7, Lawson E. 5, Robert D. 3, and Frederick L. 6 months. Two other children: Percy and Ethel Mildred later completed the family.

In a local history of Advocate published in the *Amherst Daily News* 1 March 1921, p. 5 Bessie Moore describes Sydney Smith as one of the chief shipbuilders and owners of the community. Stanley Spicer’s *Sails of Fundy: The Schooners and Square-riggers of the Parrsboro Shore*, Hantsport, NS; Lancelot, 1984 lists six schooners built by Smith.

Upon his death, Sydney Smith is described as “one of the eldest residents of that community [Advocate]. Several of the men of his generation had carried on vessel building there and he was the last of his contemporaries to engage in that occupation” (*Amherst Daily News* 9 October 1908, p. 4). Smith may have in fact stayed in the business too long for at the time of his death he was not a wealthy man. His real property consisted of a dwelling house and barns valued at under \$800 while his personal property was assessed at under \$100 (Cumberland County Probate 1924 filed 9 October 1908).

6. *Saint John Globe*, 21 May 1925, p. 3.

7. His obituary in the *Saint John Globe*, 21 May 1925, p. 3 notes that as far back as 1878 he was a prominent figure in the cause of temperance and was well known throughout the province in this regard. The newspaper describes him as “one of the strongest prohibitionists in the province for many years”. It is clear that Ella inherited her parents’ social conscience, adopting her father’s belief in abstinence and her mother’s commitment to social welfare and feminist ideals. In an interview published in Mount Allison’s *Argosy Weekly* 96:7 (20 October 1967), p. 2 Ella links her own disregard for liquor to her father’s belief in total abstinence.

8. Doug Prince, “Ella-You Know She Runs the Bookstore”, *The Argosy Weekly* 96:7 (20 October 1967), p. 2.

9. McGill is recognized for its openness in educating women, having admitted women to the BA programme in 1884 and graduated its first women MAs in 1894. See; Margaret Gillett, *We Walked Very Warily: A History of Women at McGill*, Montreal, Eden, 1981, p. 17, 419.

capable of seeing the wider bearings of the subjects of her study. She always showed a keen appreciation of poetry, and of music as well as of the studies to which she was chiefly devoting herself and it is possible that the variety of her interests prevented her from distinguishing herself so much as might have been expected in her examinations.<sup>10</sup>

Following her studies at McGill, Smith taught briefly in the Montreal school system where she drafted a history course for the province of Quebec.<sup>11</sup> Her 1914 graduation with high honours from Somerville College, Oxford (the only woman in her class to do so) not only gave her an M.A. in Modern History but won her the distinction of being the first Canadian woman to receive a degree from Oxford University.<sup>12</sup>

During and immediately following World War I, Smith taught at Bedales School which she described as “a very progressive school in southern England”,<sup>13</sup> and afterward briefly taught history at Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, Virginia. Eventually she was hired by Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, as an instructor in economics and sociology with the promise of a likelihood to teach history. Before any opening in history materialized, however, she contracted tuberculosis and was forced to retire to Saranac Lake, New York in the Adirondack Mountains for a lengthy recovery period. Within two years during this recovery, her parents died.

Recovered from her bout with tuberculosis and free from any family responsibilities, Smith began what was a fascinating period of her life. For approximately the next ten years she spent the majority of her time in Europe, devoting herself to what she described as “political research and travelling”. From 1930 until the outbreak of World War Two, Smith toured Yugoslavia, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Russia, and Spain. She spent two years in Russia, the second of which she devoted to the study of farm collectives. Despite her claim that the lectures she delivered upon her return from these two trips to Russia in order to support her travels were “the most dispassionate, carefully prepared lectures of things that were important only”,<sup>14</sup> the Russian Consul-General refused her a visa for a third visit. Smith quoted him as declaring, “That lecture of yours at the Royal Institute of International Affairs caused us more loss of prestige in circles we value than all the newspaper writing of the year”.<sup>15</sup>

Refused entry to Russia, Smith’s next major piece of investigation centred on Spain where she studied the Spanish Revolutionary War...from both sides,

10. Letter of reference from Hilda D. Oakley, Mount Allison Archives.

11. “Introducing Ella Smith, MA,” *The Argosy Weekly* 77:13 (11 February 1950), p. 2.

12. A Mount Allison student journalist notes, “Her Oxford degree, however, was not conferred until 1921 when the status of women had sufficiently improved to allow it” (Prince 2).

13. “Dr. Ella Smith Dies in Hospital”, *Tribune-Post* (1 November 1972), p. 1.

14. Prince, p. 2.

15. *Ibid.*

and popular wisdom has it she was once again asked to leave...by both sides. By her own account, she was once locked in the washroom of the General Staff House in Spain only to climb out the window and come back through the front door.<sup>16</sup> During her travels in Spain, dinner companions ranged from Ernest Hemingway to Bernard Shaw and Lady Astor.

The outbreak of World War Two and personal financial difficulty brought an end to this lifestyle.<sup>17</sup> In 1940 she joined the history department of Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, where she had lectured earlier on her tours, and where several family members had attended.<sup>18</sup> Smith replaced Capt. G.F.G. Stanley who had left for military service<sup>19</sup> and in what she described as "a stop gap measure" from 1940-1946 she acted as head of the history department until an appropriate male could be located and hired.<sup>20</sup> She remained at lecturer status for her eleven years at Mount Allison.<sup>21</sup>

Beginning in 1940 Ella Smith organized an annual Christmas book sale for the students of Mount Allison and the residents of Sackville. She once stated, "I wasn't interested in selling books. When I came to Mount A, I simply found my students hadn't read enough to be interesting to teach".<sup>22</sup> Upon retirement

16. Ibid.

17. An undated letter from Smith to William A. Neilson, President of Smith College, states "...it is a very grim necessity to find myself in the position of earning a decent living and even more important of feeling I am making a contribution worthy of my past opportunities". A letter from Neilson to Smith dated 14 July 1930 refers to her "financial misfortunes" and expresses the wish that "when the market improves more may be salvaged than you fear" (Smith Archives).

18. A sister had married into the Reids, an established member of the university town's elite, and was residing there. Ella could well have been living with her for the 1940 Mount Allison *Argosy Weekly* notes that she was already residing in Sackville. John G. Reid, *Mount Allison University: A History II 1914-1963*, Toronto; Published for Mount Allison by University of Toronto Press, 1984, p. 155.

19. "Faculty Replacement", *The Argosy Weekly* (5 October 1940), p. 2.

20. Prince, 2 quotes Smith who commented in retrospect, "My period as Acting Head of the History Department represents the only major appointment of a woman that there has been at Mount Allison in the non-professional field...it seem to me regrettable that there should not be appointments made now and then to the Liberal Arts Faculty of women of a degree of scholarship that would mean their being appointed once to an Associate Professorship".

21. During this tenure, all did not run entirely smoothly and there were student rumblings from time to time when Smith acted unconventionally. In "Dr. Ella Smith...", 8, the author reports that once when Smith found the results of an exam she had given unsatisfactory, she invited the students of her history class to a meeting where she promised that they would hear something of benefit and then offered those present the opportunity to rewrite the exam then and there. As a result, some Mount Allison alumni remember her classes as something to be avoided at all cost (Conversation with my father, J. Henry Tye, 25 May 1990). Others recall her lectures as splendid and claim her classes were considered very popular (Interview with Ron Smith, 28 May 1990). Whatever the general consensus of the student body from 1940-1951, the class of 1950 dedicated the school yearbook to her.

22. Prince, p. 2.

from the history department she devoted herself full time to bookselling, operating a small but well stocked bookstore on the campus, which she appropriately called the Campus Book Store. Reportedly Smith kept her shop open long hours and there are accounts of her ability to con some unsuspecting visitor to the bookstore into doing duty for her when she felt that she needed a break.<sup>23</sup>

In 1963 the university recognized Ella Smith's contribution both as a teacher and bookstore operator by awarding her an honorary degree. The citation includes Smith's most lasting legacy to the university and the town, her reputation and the narrative corpus she generated in her role as local character:

For more than twenty years Mount Allison and Sackville have been privileged to fall under the spell of Ella Lauchner Smith, and only the most stubborn and unresponsive can have failed to profit from contact with such an unusual and remarkable person...whose distinctive service to and influence on the university have created a special tradition...<sup>24</sup>

Upon her death in 1972, the university newspaper makes a similar oblique reference to "a dear friend who has contributed much, both in the way of involvement and legend".<sup>25</sup> Finally, in his history of Mount Allison, published to mark the university's sesquicentennial, John G. Reid remarks that Ella Smith's "eccentricities were the stuff of legend".<sup>26</sup> Today when Ella Smith's name is mentioned around the university or town, or among alumni, some will comment vaguely on her trip to Russia or mention her graduation from Oxford, but the majority respond with an anecdote that attests to the special "character" status that Ella Lauchner Smith maintained throughout her time in Sackville.

## The Narratives

Local character status is developed and maintained through the exchange of narratives that attests to this special status and that spans the classificatory gamut from brief personal experience anecdotes or fragmentary accounts mutually built by two or more people in the course of conversation, to elaborately

23. Conversation with Nancy Vogan, 29 January 1990. While Smith's stock was varied and provided an important service for faculty, students, and residents of Sackville, Smith acted as a censor of what she considered to be vulgar ("we all have to go to the bathroom but it's not necessary to make frequent reference to it") or crude ("Why should I make it more difficult for you by providing all the physical sex stimulants pornographic books have to offer?") (Prince 2). These views were perhaps in keeping with her belief that she once expressed to a student interviewer in response to a question concerning lowering the drinking age. Smith responded negatively and said, "I'd like to keep a few vices for old age" (Ibid). Never content to allow things to run too smoothly, however, she was brought to task by the university president for selling cribs to the students, John G. Reid, p. 247.

24. Citation LLD-Ella Smith, MtA, *Mount Allison Record* 46:3 (Summer 1963), p. 27.

25. "Ella L. Smith", *The Argosy* 101:5 (November 6, 1972), p. 3.

26. Reid, p. 247.

detailed and skilfully crafted legends “performed” by a single narrator. Narratives that strengthened Smith’s designation as a local character were told by students and colleagues who encountered her in the classroom, bookstore, faculty lounge, or elsewhere in the course of campus life. A graduate of the class of 1954 comments that with only approximately four hundred students in the 1950s, Mount Allison was a place where “people were interested in everyone”. He describes how members of the faculty and student body often became larger than life and the stories about them considered common property. Furthermore, he interprets the narratives about Ella Smith as evidence of the “solidarity of students against staff...I heard these stories even though I never took history”.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, as important as the narratives told about Ella Smith might have been to students, the stories extend beyond the university campus into the town. As one former resident of Sackville comments, there may have been many members of the university faculty and student body considered characters but if they spent all their time on campus, townspeople would not identify them as such.<sup>28</sup> He comments, “Oh, that was really the talk in town about, you know, there were people in town who knew Ella Smith and they might be living out of town and they’d come to Sackville and if they were talking to somebody, they’d say, ‘Well, have you got any new stories about the activities of Ella Smith?’”<sup>29</sup> In the creation and circulation of stories about Smith both groups—town and gown—came together. My search for stories about Ella Smith drew informants from the university and Sackville communities. During the course of my fieldwork I talked with eight informants, five of whom knew Smith through university connections, usually as their teacher, and three who were former neighbours. A cursory examination of the Ella Smith narratives I have collected demonstrates the mutual fascination Smith held for faculty and students of Mount Allison as well as for the residents of Sackville.

Local character narratives are diverse and often center on more than one personality flaw. Individuals may be attracted to different aspects of the character and rely on narratives that illustrate this interest. As Bruce Jackson suggests, the goal of character narratives is often more directly related to the informant’s status and interests than to the actual character. Jackson notes in his work on narratives about Professor Norbert Weiner, “Out of an available repertory one selects the subject matter and focus that concern oneself most. One characteristic of a real folk hero is there is enough to him, real or constructed, to permit such selection to take place”.<sup>30</sup> Six informants I talked with and the authors of all

27. Conversation with J. Henry Tye, 25 May 1990.

28. Interview with Ron Smith, 28 May 1990.

29. Ibid.

30. Bruce Jackson, “The Greatest Mathematician in the World: Norbert Weiner Stories”, *Western Folklore* 31 (1972), p. 2.

but one written recollection of Smith are male and not surprisingly their stories reflect a definite male perspective.

Local characters are often identified with one or more central images — which borrowing Edward Ives's term to describe a central defining image of legend — might be labelled “tableaux”.<sup>31</sup> For those who know and/or circulate the narratives these tableaux embody the essence of a character's personality or outlook, and sometimes vividly depict his or her place in the community. In narratives concerning Ella Smith, three tableaux predominate. The first draws from university life and depicts Ella Smith with the then university president, George J. Trueman. An informant recounts:

Dr. George J. used to have a lot of visitors to Sackville during the summer and this was when they had a chapel in the old Centennial, I think it's called the old Centennial Hall, and it was on the third floor and it was a lovely little chapel. It really was....And he had a visitor this particular day and of course they used to go on a visitation of the campus and Dr. George J. told this man, he said, 'Now' he said 'this is our Centennial building here, our administration offices but' he said 'there's something on the third floor that we're really quite proud of, Mount Allison never had it before' and he took him up to show the chapel and when he went through the door and into the chapel, here was these ladies' clothes and undies and everything all hung on a line drying. And Dr. George J. Trueman knew who they belonged to because there was no one else on the campus that would do a thing like this, you know....Just like army banners, you know, they were all drying and of course he spoke to her about it and he said how embarrassing it was because he had this friend from Toronto or Montreal who was being conducted on this visitation of the Mount A. campus and she said, 'Well,' she said, 'I don't think God would mind me trying to be clean and having my clothes in the chapel drying'.<sup>32</sup>

Another informant contributed this variant:

They used to tell the story in the old days of Centennial Hall, she put up this little line in the chapel to dry her undergarments and Dr. Trueman was taking some people through and something was said and she said, 'Well, she couldn't see that it made much difference, the students certainly didn't use the chapel so she might as well put it to some use'.<sup>33</sup>

Other tableaux relate to Smith's position within the wider community. Smith had a habit of flagging down any vehicle that passed or jumping into any idling one she encountered, demanding that the driver take her to the university or mail her letter. A former neighbour recalls:

She was a real character. I mean she'd come out and she'd be late for class, she might have a class at Mount A and she'd come out of Randworth's apartments there and go, march right out in to the middle of the road holding a cane like that and if there was a truck coming down, she never got out of the way and she just waved that and they

31. See Edward D. Ives, “The Man Who Plucked The Gorbey”, *Journal of American Folklore* 74 (1961), p. 1-8.

32. Interview with Ron Smith, 28 May 1990.

33. Interview with Harold Greer, 9 January 1990.



had to stop or either kill her. And she'd go over to the window where the driver was and she'd say, 'I'm ten minutes late for my class at Mount Allison. Would you be good enough to drive me up?' And they used to do it. I mean even truckmen and different things like that. They'd do it because she wouldn't move.<sup>34</sup>

The tableau crystallizes an occasion when she imposed upon a town physician for a drive. An unsigned written recollection describes the incident:

A common sight on York Street was the vision of a somewhat frail elderly lady waving a letter to stop a motorist. This was her means of getting a letter to the Post Office in a hurry, and it mattered not whether the driver was an acquaintance or a complete stranger. Not infrequently she would be dressed in her bathrobe, having worked all night. On one occasion she was on her way to the Post Office with a package of books and attempted to hitch a ride with a local doctor. When he explained that he was rushing to a patient she simply joined him and that particular trip to the Post Office was via Dorchester.<sup>35</sup>

The image of Ella Smith going forty miles out of her way to mail a letter has become a popular one in community memory.

A final identifiable tableau pictures her scooping cream off the top of her neighbours' milk bottles before they woke in the morning:

They tell this story...people used to, living in Randworth Apartments, their milk used to be distributed outside the door of the various apartments, you see. And she was supplied with milk too at that time. And this was before the pasteurization of milk, you know, and the cream used to be at the top of the bottles—. She used to get up early, just after the milk was delivered and she'd case the whole joint afterwards with a pitcher in one hand of water and an empty pitcher in the other and she'd go to each door and she'd pour off the milk and fill up the bottle with water. And that is really a beautiful story. And that really explains Ella Smith very, very much. She was very much that way.<sup>36</sup>

Characteristic of many character narratives, the above stories describe an inelasticity, that is an unwillingness or inability to successfully switch from one context to another.<sup>37</sup> Here strategies — like hanging out a wash wherever convenient or hitching a drive with whoever passed by — that may have served Ella well during her years as a political researcher and traveller do not translate well into the Canadian context. While in one situation at least some of these behaviours may be interpreted as street smarts, in university and town they were seen as an imposition and a breach of the social contract. In particular, the hitchhiking narrative illustrates how a trait like practicality may become a violation of the social code when it is taken to extremes. Some Sackville residents associated this kind of behaviour with Smith and in response to my question, "What kind

34. Interview with Ron Smith, 28 May 1990.

35. "Ella Smith-1972", *The Mount Allison Record* (Winter 1973), p. 9.

36. Interview with Ron Smith, 28 May 1990. Also recounted in interview with Oscar Tracy, 22 June 1990.

37. See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Trans. Annette Lavers, New York, Hill and Wang, 1972. Barthes identifies these characteristics as important components of humour.

of a neighbour was she?" one informant responded, "She was a nuisance".<sup>38</sup>

As evidenced in the anecdote of Smith skimming off her neighbour's cream, a subtheme in the narratives describes Smith's challenge of social networks and reciprocity. For example, one informant describes her "view of landscape engineering". Annually she would take a notion to cut a four foot square piece of grass behind her apartment building even though it did not belong to her. As a boy the informant would be asked to mow it. He comments, "It would take me longer to mow than my own lawn. It would be up to my knees and I had to take twenty-nine runs at every blade...And she would pay me: twenty cents". He adds that she was not known for "parting with money easily" and his mother would tell him to be nice to her because she was really just a little old lady.<sup>39</sup> Another written account has to do with the local theatre:

Passing by, as the second evening show was starting, she went in and started to brush by the ticket collector, saying, 'I have no money with me but all these seats are vacant and nobody else will be coming; I'll just sit here.' When he objected she continued 'Alright, I'll bring the money later, and I'll leave my hat with you as security.' And at one time the manager had three of her hats in his office!<sup>40</sup>

Thriftiness is a common theme of character anecdotes elsewhere and of course epitomizes the Scottish character type. What is interesting here is that there is some evidence to suggest Smith needed to manage her money judiciously. The belief that her father was "a very wealthy man"<sup>41</sup> and her connection through marriage with one of the more prominent Sackville families is juxtaposed against these demonstrations of extreme thrift to heighten the narratives' humour. The extremes of wealth and thrift are set up not only to add amusement value but to offer a comfortable explanation for what community members undoubtedly recognized as a discrepancy between the status of the individual — in this case a faculty member linked with a prominent family — and the standard of living she maintained. With an emphasis on extreme thriftiness the community points to a flaw in one of its individual members rather than take responsibility for low salaries and pension plans that penalized a single woman like Ella Smith, especially in her later years.

Inelasticity, extremity, and violation of social contract characterize much of the humour and narrative associated with local characters.<sup>42</sup> Other characteristics are more specific to Ella Smith narratives and the particular conduit

38. Interview with Ron Smith, 28 May 1990.

39. Conversation with Peter MacCrae, 24 May 1990.

40. "Dr. Ella Smith-1972", p. 8.

41. Interview with Harold Greer, 9 January 1990.

42. For an examination of the local character phenomenon, see my PhD thesis: "Local Characters and the Community: A Case Study of Tradition and Individual Nonconformity in the Maritimes", Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1989.

along which they are passed. While status reversal remains an element of the stories — the university president is embarrassed in front of the visitor “from away” and Smith demands the doctor chauffeur her to the post office — several of the stories about Ella end with her being chastised or inconvenienced. The general pattern of character narratives where the character turns the tables on an individual in a position of higher authority is not repeated in every instance. While this contrasts with most anecdotes told about local characters, the pattern may be common among narratives focusing on professors and teachers. As Barre Toelken states, “Their own folk traditions reveal that students express themselves by a system that imposes on its prisoners too many unwanted oddball instructors and too much unneeded homework...”.<sup>43</sup> Narratives centring on teachers may be more satisfying for students if they end in the instructor being rebuked or controlled. In stories of Ella Smith’s unreasonable demands meeting with opposition, students found humour, release, and perhaps were able to rehearse strategies for dealing with future demands.

Gender issues surface in many of the oral narratives I collected about Ella Smith from male members of the Mount Allison and Sackville communities. There is a frequent reminder of Smith’s female sex and a focus on sexuality. One story is told about her escapades with an officer in the Russian army<sup>44</sup> while another narrative describes how her landlord once responded to one of her frequent complaints that there was no heat in her apartment with a threat, “Best thing I know now is when I go out of here, the first man I see I’ll ask him to come in and get in bed with you to keep you warm”.<sup>45</sup> Such narratives may be an exploration of the ambiguous sexuality of unmarried community members in the tradition of stories told about bachelors and spinsters. Alternatively, or additionally, the emphasis may reflect that informants recognized the unusualness of Smith’s female presence in a largely male context. It is probably no accident that the image of underwear drying on a line in the chapel has become an identifying one for Ella, for in the male dominated world of university teaching in the 1940s Ella Smith was as out of place as her underwear strung up like “army banners”.

As was mentioned earlier, many of those I talked with had been young male students of Smith’s. As a result, they may represent a group of individuals once interested in negotiating power or trying to better understand the nature of power Ella Smith held. As young men, most informants would have been students who were both unaccustomed to female professors and dependent on Smith for grades. Others, like the man who remembers the difficult boyhood

43. Barre Toelken, “The Folklore of Academe”, in *The Study of American Folklore*, Jan Harold Brunvand, ed. New York, W. W. Norton, 1986, p. 507.

44. Interview with Ron Smith, 28 May 1990.

45. Interview with Harold Greer, 9 January 1990.

chore of cutting Smith's grass, were neighbours. All occasionally found themselves at her mercy. In light of the conduit I tapped during fieldwork, the focus on sexuality found in their stories is perhaps not surprising. Further the narratives may represent an effort — albeit probably an unselfconscious one — to disempower Smith. The stories often demonstrate that despite her strong academic background, proven ability, and her position at the university that allowed her to hold power over her students, Smith was female and vulnerable to male charm, if not domination and aggression. The narratives communicate that men have the ultimate power and women like Ella Smith accomplish what they do because men allow them freedom to do so.<sup>46</sup> Smith, for her part, remained fiercely independent and urged others to do so as well. For example, in her address to the graduating class of 1950 she quotes John Drinkwater, "Grant us the will to fashion as we feel".

For over fifty years, Sackville residents and Mount Allison University students and faculty have fashioned and repeated stories about Ella Smith that hold meaning for them and help them mediate troublesome contradictions of everyday life. Individuals and groups have used and continue to use Ella Smith, in many ways an individual on the fringe, to their own advantage and to express both their feelings of discord and harmony. In the body of narratives that remain concerning Ella Lauchner Smith, members of the Mount Allison and Sackville communities explore the puzzling polarities they saw in this woman: her brilliant mind and impressive academic record versus her otherworldliness; her status versus her lifestyle; her independence versus her heavy demands on others; and her overt concern for and interest in the students and young people of Sackville versus her frequent inconsideration of other people's plans and property. Other narratives mediate gender issues such as Smith's femaleness versus her place in a male dominated university world; her power versus her lack of it; her membership as part of the establishment versus her marginalization from it; and her adventurous past versus the frail elderly woman people in Sackville knew. Smith's designation as local character helped integrate separate parts of the community and allowed community members to explore the meaning and boundaries of membership. While the designation of local character may have represented one of the restrictions others attempted to impose on Smith, it also facilitated her accommodation into campus and town life.

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46. This is further substantiated in narratives told regarding a former female professor in Mount Allison's music department that also focus on gender role differences and explore the power and position of the music teacher.