

Mary Arnold (and Mabel Reed): Co-operative Women in Nova Scotia, 1937-1939

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Mary Arnold (and Mabel Reed): Co-operative Women in Nova Scotia, 1937-1939

MARY ELLICOTT ARNOLD AND HER COMPANION Mabel Reed arrived in Nova Scotia in 1937 as part of an American Co-operative League study tour.¹ Disillusioned with the Consumer Co-operative Services they had helped to found in New York City, Arnold and Reed embarked on the venture in the hope of restoring their faith in the co-operative movement. The tour took them to Antigonish to observe the adult education programme at St. Francis Xavier University. Their visit to Antigonish brought more than renewed commitment. The two women decided to stay in Cape Breton to offer their expertise and organizational skills to a newly established co-operative housing initiative in Reserve Mines. During the next two years Arnold supervised the completion of 11 houses. She was by no means the only woman involved in the Antigonish movement, but Arnold was the only woman of her time who directed a programme that largely concerned men.

Since the 1980s, and in particular since the Topshee Conference on Women in Co-operatives in 1985, the history of the Antigonish movement has been rewritten to take into account the contributions of women. New studies now acknowledge the significant contributions Maritime women, such as Sister Anselm (Irene Doyle),² Sister Marie Michael (Sarah MacKinnon),³ Kay Thompson Desjardin,⁴ Zita O'Hearn Cameron⁵ and Ida Gallant Delaney,⁶ made to the Antigonish movement. Recent

1 Registrants for the 1937 Co-operative Tour of Nova Scotia Co-operatives are listed in the Co-operative League of the U.S.A. and the Extension Department of St. Francis Xavier University, *Report of the Conference Tour* (New York, 1938).

2 Sister Anselm worked closely with Sister Marie Michael in the early years of the Antigonish movement and helped spearhead the drive for craft co-operatives. She holds degrees in arts and social work and is now the historian (informally) for the Sisters of Saint Martha.

3 Sister Michael was the director of the Women and Work programme from 1933 to 1944 and was the Extension Department's librarian.

4 Desjardin worked as an editor and writer for the Extension Department. She was also Dr. Coady's and Dr. MacDonald's secretary. She wrote *Techniques in Consumer Co-operation* (Antigonish, 1939). In 1975, The International Year of Women, Desjardin described women who were feminists as "avant-garde liberals" and "female chauvinists" who were unconcerned "with the voiceless and underprivileged women in our society". She deplored their "undertone of bitterness against men" and argued that feminists were "setting one half of the human race against the other". Kay Desjardin, "Submission to the Nova Scotia Task Force on the Status of Women", 1975, St. Francis Xavier University Archives [SFXUA].

5 Cameron worked as a writer and editor for *The Extension Bulletin* and as a secretary for Dr. Coady and Dr. A.B. MacDonald.

6 Delaney was a bilingual field worker hired by the Extension Department to work in both Francophone and Anglophone districts.

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accounts of the Antigonish movement identify them as the leading women, organizers who used their skills to establish auxiliary programmes for women and support the work of male leaders. By telling their own stories and discussing the historical work of women in co-operatives, some of these people have helped to awaken a new interest in the roles women played in the movement.⁷ The work of ordinary women who maintained local study clubs and facilitated the growth of the larger organizations has received less recognition to date. And the work of two outsiders, Arnold and Reed, who stepped beyond the conventional women's sphere, has generally been neglected.

That early historians should have overlooked the significance of women's roles in the movement is not entirely surprising. Anne Alexander, the historian who has gone furthest towards integrating the history of women into a general account of the movement, points out "the under-representation of women in the formal (versus the informal) leadership structures, the general patriarchal nature of the organization's hierarchy, and the emphasis upon support roles for women through the Women's guilds".⁸ Yet this is not to imply that contemporaries in the Antigonish movement were unaware of the significance of women's participation in the movement. Alexander, for example, cites Moses Coady's "recognition of the importance of women's involvement" and Delaney's belief that women were "heroines of incredibly hard times — doing what was necessary to survive". She further notes Coady's shrewd promotion of co-operatives, which required women's participation for their success.

Because contemporary leaders of the Antigonish movement thought of women in terms of supportive roles, historians seeking to recover their history have, naturally enough, looked to the women who played those "supporting roles". And the history of these local women is important. They expanded the range of women's activities while appearing to be, whether they were or not, in conformity with the larger ideological boundaries of the Antigonish movement's gender construction — Catholic wife, sister, mother and helpmate.

The impact of these women's efforts was similar to that of the Quebec women who belonged to the *cercles des fermières*, whose leaders, like those of the Antigonish movement, sought to strengthen rural values as a bulwark against urbanization. In Quebec, the *cercles des fermières* provided a forum of sociability for women while consolidating their role in agronomy "to counter the rural exodus".⁹ In Nova Scotia, the apparent conformity in the roles women assumed permitted them to gain the applause of men, as what they were doing looked like women's work, even as they pushed the traditional boundaries of acceptable behaviour for women in organizations. Because this challenge to the limitations on women's equality was

7 Ida Delaney, *A Fieldworker's Account of the Antigonish Movement* (Hantsport, 1985); Irene Doyle, "Women of the Antigonish Movement", (Atlantic Institute, 21 July 1982); Irene Doyle, *My Experience as an Extension Worker Over Fifty Years Ago* (Antigonish, 1993); Irene Doyle, "Women in Community Development: The Antigonish Movement", (Women's History Month Symposium, St. Francis Xavier University, 26 October 1995).

8 Anne Alexander, *The Antigonish Movement: Moses Coady and Adult Education Today* (Toronto, 1997), p. 153.

9 Yolande Cohen, "L'Association des Cercles des fermières in Quebec: Sociability and Social Influence", in Yolande Cohen, *Women and Counter Power* (Montreal, 1989), p. 129.

indirect, it left uncontested some of the constraints on women's roles.

The history of women in the Antigonish movement is not, however, only a history of innovation constrained. Certainly it includes the struggles of women who appeared to accept the social norms of the day, and who made important contributions within these limitations, but it also includes the contributions of women who did not conform to the stereotypes of wife and mother that the movement used to support the growth of co-operatives. In the 1930s and 1940s the expanding field of social work provided opportunities for independent and interdependent women who were far more autonomous in their personal and professional lives than the normative Catholic dictates of the time. These women, who were not married and who might be viewed as "marriage resisters",¹⁰ often had women as their life-long companions. They tended to be adventurers. Many were migrants, such as the young Maritime women who went to the Boston States in search of work. They developed their own expertise in working outside the home, finding jobs within larger social movement institutions. Like their more institutionally bound sisters, women such as Arnold broadened the narrow category of social welfare, focused on the care, protection and maintenance of mothers and children within the family, to include economic self-sufficiency. How did these women survive in organizations that were not women centered, not feminist and not built on the experiences of women like themselves? And how did they shape these organizations and change perceptions of female roles?¹¹

Arnold, an expert co-operator in her own right, was an outsider, an interloper. She was as far outside the conventional and idealized norms of womanhood in the Catholic-dominated rural society of Nova Scotia in the 1930s as she could be.¹² Her actions were not consistent with the gender expectations of the larger co-operative organizations or the more egalitarian gender expectations of the hard-working rural farm wives and daughters of the 1930s, nor could they be explained as being so. The Antigonish movement never held her up as a model for other women to emulate. Although her contributions to the organization contradicted the movement's basic Catholic philosophical orientation, her activities were, nonetheless, welcomed and encouraged by Coady and Jimmy Tompkins, another of the movement's leading figures. As Coady wrote in his introduction to *The Story of Tompkinsville*, "The men

10 Agnes Smedley used this term to characterize Chinese women who resisted marriage in the 1930s. Agnes Smedley, *Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution* (Old Westbury, 1976). See too Agnes Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung", in Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke, eds., *Women in Chinese Society* (Stanford, 1975). For an analysis of the pathologization of female partnerships in Britain in the 1920s, see Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York, 1981). For developments in the United States, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985), and for Canada, see Carolyn Strange's consideration of "single" females in *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930* (Toronto, 1995).

11 The general conventions of womanhood in Canada in the 1930s and 1940s are described well in Beth Light and Ruth Roach Pierson, eds., *No Easy Road: Women in Canada 1920s to 1960s* (Toronto, 1990).

12 Gregory Baum, "Social Catholicism in Nova Scotia", in Peter Slater ed., *Religion and Culture in Canada* (Toronto, 1977); Sister Marie Michael and Ida Delaney, *What Can Women Do?* (Antigonish, [c.1940]).

and women of Tompkinsville have real proof that dreams come true Our great obligation to Miss Arnold, then, is quite evident".¹³

However one considered Arnold and her companion Reed as individuals, the work that they did could scarcely be dismissed as insignificant. Certainly Coady recognized this. Yet Arnold's and Reed's contributions to the Antigonish movement have been overlooked, even in the recent literature that has been attentive to the role of women in the movement's history. The choices that have informed the preservation of documentary evidence add to the problem. This study cannot adequately consider Reed's experiences and contributions because there is little evidence dealing specifically with her work, detailing her point of view or describing her life.¹⁴ Arnold's writings provide some documentation of Reed's experience and there are tantalizing glimpses in other documents lodged in the St. Francis Xavier University Archives, but it would require other approaches, such as oral history, to get a better sense of the life these two women might have lived in Cape Breton.

Arnold was a writer as well as an adventurer and leader. Born in New York State in 1876, she became, early on, an energetic organizer. Reed was a childhood friend. In the late 1890s the two assumed management of the Reed family's farm in Rariton, New York. In the early 1900s, when they were in their twenties, they left their farming venture to work together as Indian agents in the Klamath region of California. They wrote a book about the two years they spent there which includes reflection on the practical difficulties of undertaking traditionally male-defined activities. Arnold described how her activities, and those of her partner, were socially devalued by men and women. As she put it: "No one thinks much of women in this country. And no one likes them. And missionaries are worse. We simply can't be missionaries. And government agents are worst of all. No wonder people won't look at us or speak to us".¹⁵ Arnold noted how people there chose to think of them as "Schoolmarms": "A nice familiar occupation that everyone understands".¹⁶ She also described an incident where an old man shook a bony finger at the two women and admonished them "'You want your own way', he screamed, 'You want your own way and you won't get it. But I glory in your spunk'".¹⁷

By the time Arnold and Reed arrived in Nova Scotia in the summer of 1937, they could draw on a diverse array of adventures and career experiences, as farmers, newspaper reporters, government agents, dietitians, cafeteria operators, co-operative organizers, board members and, for Arnold, as an executive in the United States Employment Service.¹⁸ Arnold and Reed were discouraged and disturbed by events in

13 Mary Ellicott Arnold, *The Story of Tompkinsville* (New York, 1940), p. 5.

14 It is difficult to gather information on Reed, her work and her relationship to Arnold while in Cape Breton. The only relevant correspondence in the St. Francis Xavier University Archives is either addressed to, or signed by, Arnold. It is clear from the correspondence, though, that Reed resided with and cared for Arnold. Both had a long history of personal and professional collaboration and both made extensive contributions to co-operatives.

15 Mary Ellicott Arnold and Mabel Reed, *In the Land of the Grasshopper Song: Two Women in the Klamath River Indian Country in 1908-1909* ([1957] Lincoln, 1980), p. 41.

16 Arnold and Reed, *Grasshopper Song*, p. 41.

17 Arnold and Reed, *Grasshopper Song*, p. 126.

18 *Great American Cooperators: Biographical Sketches of 101 Major Pioneers in Cooperative Development* (Washington, D.C., 1967), pp. 39-41.

a co-operative housing scheme in New York City that Arnold had first organized with a group of social workers in 1919. It began with a small co-operative cafeteria and grew to include ten cafeterias, a credit union, a library, a 67-unit co-operative apartment and a membership of 6,000. Arnold served as general manager. By 1936 she was complaining of having to deal with “an unpopular communist union demanding recognition from an unwilling membership and equally unwilling workers”.¹⁹ It would seem that the politics of the groups that Arnold and Reed were working with were becoming too radical for them in the 1930s. Moving north opened the possibility of working with an organization that was more compatible with their views on co-operation and might permit them greater freedom of action. It also provided a break from the upheaval that was occurring in New York.

Arnold and Reed attended the Rural and Industrial Conference, an annual event sponsored by the St. Francis Xavier Extension Department, and Arnold in particular was impressed with Coady’s charisma. As well, she was intellectually and emotionally attracted to his ideas concerning the “collective purchase of land by men in the fishing villages”.²⁰ After the conference Arnold began writing letters to Coady, then the director of the Extension Department. Her affection for Coady was evident from the beginning of their correspondence, which continued until 1953. Arnold’s letters always extended some kind of “warm personal greetings” from the two women, or in her words, “miss and myself”. In letters of 1939, for instance, while expressing her concerns about Coady’s health and travelling schedule she wrote: “The road to the stars always seems smoother after I have talked to you”.²¹ Writing from Philadelphia in 1949 she admonished him: “Above everything else, take care of yourself. This is a pretty troublous old world and we only have one Dr. Coady”.²²

As part of the study tour visit to Reserve Mines, Arnold and Reed met and conversed at length with Tompkins.²³ Tompkins was the former vice-rector of St. Francis Xavier University, author of “Knowledge for the People”,²⁴ a stirring call for programmes of adult education, and former parish priest in Canso. Tompkins, who was a thorn in the side of the more conservative Catholic hierarchy in Antigonish, had been in Reserve Mines since 1935. There he advocated methods of organizing which emphasized the educational and intellectual development of the working class. As a recent biography describes him, Tompkins was “the abrasive, compassionate, nagging, cranky, inquisitive, generous and altogether marvellous priest who remains the inspiration and conscience of a worldwide social movement”.²⁵ When Arnold and

19 Arnold to George Boyle, 26 September 1951, republished in part in George Boyle, *Father Tompkins of Nova Scotia* (New York, 1953), pp. 194-5.

20 Arnold to Coady, [c. 1937], RG 30/2/1/81, SFXUA.

21 Arnold to Coady, 1 August 1939, RG 30-2/1/123 SFXUA.

22 Arnold to Coady, 17 August 1944, RG 30-2/1/145 SFXUA.

23 Arnold’s own account of her stay in Tompkinsville describes the work of organizing the housing group. The book contains instructions for organizing housing co-operatives as well as an appendix of relevant documents including the Nova Scotia Housing Act, budgets, material lists, related legal documents and actual housing designs. See Arnold, *The Story of Tompkinsville* (New York, 1940).

24 “Knowledge for the People” was Tompkins’ most succinct and best-known statement advocating adult education. His selected writings, including “Knowledge for the People”, are reprinted in the appendix of George Boyle, *Father Tompkins of Nova Scotia* (New York, 1953).

25 Jim Lotz and Michael R. Welton, *Father Jimmy: Life and Times of Jimmy Tompkins* (Wreck Cove, 1997).

Reed met him, Tompkins was still in his prime and his health had not yet begun to fail as it did later in the 1940s.

Arnold and Reed's arrival in Reserve Mines was well-timed for Tompkins and a group of miners who had started a housing study group. Letters had already flown back and forth between the nearby Glace Bay office of the Extension Department and Antigonish on the issue of the housing study club. The Extension Department in Antigonish, under Coady's direction, had reservations concerning the group's desire to begin building houses, as it felt the miners did not have sufficient technical expertise. Happily for Tompkins, Arnold possessed the skills the Extension Department thought the miners needed.

At Tompkins' request, the two women stayed on beyond their initial consultation with the miners so that they might assist the housing study group. As Coady later reflected, "We introduced Miss Arnold to our troublesome group of miners at Reserve and sat back with a feeling of intense relief".²⁶ This characterization probably arose from the miners' insistence that the Extension Department make housing an area of co-operative study. In 1937 Arnold officially resigned from her positions in New York, which she had held since 1919, as the general manager of Consumers' Cooperative Services and as a board member and treasurer of the Cooperative League of America. She became a voluntary staff member and the housing advisor for the St. Francis Xavier Extension Department in Reserve Mines, Cape Breton.

Her first action on behalf of the housing group was to initiate a petition to the Nova Scotia government asking for regulatory changes so that co-operatives might benefit from provincial housing incentives. The Nova Scotia Housing Act of 1932 provided low-interest loans to help make housing more affordable in the difficult years of the Depression but it did not provide assistance for co-operative housing projects. Arnold quickly established connections with Angus L. Macdonald, the premier, and began a successful lobbying campaign for changes in the act.

Work with the miners' study club in Reserve Mines, the Toad Lane Study Club, proceeded slowly. Arnold worried about the miners' understanding of their project and promoted further co-operative education during the fall and winter of 1937. She need not have worried. Housing construction, once begun, went quickly and well. The first house went up in the fall of 1937. It permitted the group to assess construction costs. As well, it provided a residence for Arnold and Reed. Arnold acted as the contractor for the group throughout the project, and as a tribute to her efforts they renamed themselves the Arnold Cooperative Housing Corporation. The men continued their paid work as miners even as they learned to build houses. Commitment to the project was strong, and the group moved to complete framing on all their houses before the winter of 1937. Arnold was active in virtually every aspect of the project and taught members how to develop blueprints and build scale models of their homes. She helped the men maintain connections with other males who were experts in legal, co-operative and housing matters and consistently encouraged them in their work.

The results were impressive. Along with the original model house, the group completed ten new houses by the spring of 1939. Tompkinsville proved to other

26 Moses Coady, introduction to Arnold, *The Story of Tompkinsville*, p. 3.

recently established housing study groups in Nova Scotia — which were loosely affiliated — that co-operative housing could work.²⁷ The group acknowledged Arnold's contributions with a written tribute, noting that: "space will not permit a review of the many worries her expert mind saved us from. As a small token of appreciation, her name and that of Dr. Tompkins will be perpetuated by our company and village. Our members are coal miners".²⁸ By the fall of 1937, Coady had come to recognize the quality of Arnold's work with the housing group at Reserve Mines. He invited Arnold and Reed to take part in an Extension-sponsored short course. Arnold was to be the movement's housing expert and lobbyist, designing the curriculum for housing courses and study groups, while at the same time continuing political lobbying in Halifax.

In February 1938, the Extension Department and Coady decided to offer Arnold a monthly salary as a staff person.²⁹ Coady did not tell her that the Consumers' Co-operative Service (CCS) in the United States was providing the money for this — 100 dollars a month for a year. The CCS did not provide a rationale for the conditions they attached to the grant, but they insisted that the money be channelled through the president of St. Francis Xavier University without Arnold's knowledge.³⁰ Arnold accepted Coady's offer with some reluctance. Although she was pleased with the salary, she was concerned that the Extension Department's resources not be strained.³¹ When, in November 1938, she learned of the arrangements that provided her salary, she objected to them, characterizing what had occurred as deliberate financial deception. She returned most of the money and accounted for what she did not return with receipts for the costs of modifying the demonstration house so that she and Reed might live comfortably in it.³²

Arnold's position within the Antigonish movement was, at times, difficult. Tensions with A.B. MacDonald, the central administrator at the Extension Department, appear to have left Arnold wondering, in December 1938, whether she could continue to work within the confines of the Extension Department. MacDonald became increasingly engaged in the development of credit unions at this time and was not, in Arnold's view, sufficiently supportive of her housing initiatives. It is not clear whether he simply did not have time for the minutiae of housing co-operatives or whether he deliberately wanted to discourage them because of the amount of organizing they entailed. As well Arnold was usurping his role as a housing expert. When MacDonald decided to eliminate co-operative housing groups from the Department's programme, Arnold began to question her continuing involvement in

27 The Extension Department published a bulletin in 1949 which summarized the process of forming a housing co-operative in Nova Scotia. St. Francis Xavier Extension Department, *The Story of Co-operative Housing in Nova Scotia* (Antigonish, 1949). For a film which reviews the importance of the Tompkinsville as a housing project but fails to mention Arnold even once, see *Moses Coady* (National Film Board, 1976).

28 MG 14/184, [c. 1939], Public Archives of Nova Scotia.

29 Coady to Arnold, 2 February 1938, RG 30/2/1/98, SFXUA.

30 Consumer Co-operative Services to Coady, February 1938, RG 10/763-764, SFXUA.

31 Arnold to Coady, February 1938, RG 5/10/763-64, SFXUA. Archival documents do not reveal how Arnold and Reed financed their stay in Cape Breton.

32 Arnold to Coady, November 1938, RG 30/2/1/101, SFXUA.

the organization.

In a letter to Coady she indicated her unhappiness with the situation and complained that MacDonald was dismissive of her contributions. Arnold noted that her political effectiveness would suffer unless her knowledge and authority were recognized and her position in the organization clarified: "If I have no connection with the Extension Department I think the [Housing] Commission ought to know it and before I go any farther in interesting other groups I must know what the program is in regard to a more general housing development". However the question of her authority was to be resolved, she told Coady that she had found her experience in the Extension Department useful and that "Miss Reed and I have learned"³³

Arnold continued to raise concerns about her relationship with the Extension Department in March 1939. Clarifying her status within the Department was, she believed, necessary in order to create a more favourable working environment for all concerned:

Since I came to the staff of the Extension Department I have felt that things have not worked out quite as they should. It has bothered me personally a great deal and more important it has seemed to me that the work has suffered and that has troubled me very much. In thinking it over I believe that situation might be met by a more informal relationship. It is desirable, of course, that Cooperative housing should be one of the activities of the Extension Department but I think if, instead of my serving on the staff in a paid capacity, you were to give me some mere honorary title such as advisor and consider me a loan from the Cooperative League the situation from our standpoint would be covered. I genuinely believe on this new basis things would go more smoothly. At any rate I know I should prefer it and would like to try.³⁴

This attempt to reposition herself within the organization seemed to work for a time. Arnold continued her work as the housing advisor to the study groups and the Extension Department with Coady's blessing, if not with MacDonald's. In 1939 she even acted as the Extension Department's officially sanctioned representative at a Toronto conference concerning the federal Housing Act. The friction between MacDonald and Arnold was left unresolved for the remainder of Arnold's stay in Nova Scotia. Later, after she had left the province, she made conciliatory overtures to MacDonald through letters to Tompkins and Coady. Arnold's lobbying efforts in Toronto concerning federal legislation were less successful than her efforts on the provincial level. She advocated an amendment to the federal Housing Act that would give co-operative housing tax-exempt status, but as she noted in a letter to Coady at the time, the chances of success were slim.³⁵

33 Arnold to Coady, December 1938, RG 5/10/764/103-104, SFXUA.

34 Arnold to Coady, March 1939, RG 30/2/1/112, SFXUA.

35 Arnold to Coady, February 1939, RG 30/2/1/106, SFXUA.

In April 1939, the Extension Department's newspaper, *The Bulletin*, announced Arnold's appointment as "chairman" of the Committee on Industrial Housing in the Co-operative League of the U.S.A. *The Bulletin* indicated she would remain in Nova Scotia, but Arnold told Coady that same month that she and Reed intended to leave Nova Scotia and return to the United States. Arnold had slowly been renewing her ties with American co-operative organizations even as she continued to work with the Extension Department. Increasingly she moved away from direct involvement with study groups in Nova Scotia and focused her attention on lobbying government and undertaking new investigative research and organizational work. Arnold and Reed had readied themselves for a return to the United States by working on a project that involved relocating outport residents in St. Mary's Bay, Newfoundland. From this they gained more experience with government-sponsored social programmes. In early 1940 they moved from Newfoundland to Maine and began a co-operative project with lobster fishers there.

Arnold's work in the United States built on her experiences in Nova Scotia. She went on to direct and manage co-operatives in Maine, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico and Bolivia. She also continued to write, producing co-operative pamphlets, study guides and at least two books which were based on her Nova Scotia experiences.³⁶ Arnold did not leave her relationship to the Antigonish movement behind. Instead she helped the Antigonish movement forge new links with other organizations, such as the American Friends Service Committee, and she retained personal connections with the movement through regular correspondence with Coady and occasional visits north.

Although Arnold attempted to forge alliances with other women and to use the respect she gained from men within the housing co-operative and within the Antigonish movement to enhance women's power more generally, she did not succeed in transcending entrenched gender roles and traditional gender-based inequalities. Arnold encouraged women's involvement in the planning phase of the co-operative housing project, challenging male assumptions that the women were "only miners' wives" and were not interested in building houses. While the men worked on the technical details of construction, the women reviewed the housing plans, assessing them for their utility and making suggestions for change. The women undertook traditional "women's work" by cooking and cleaning for the men and children.³⁷ They also sewed curtains, made quilts and prepared their households for a major move. Arnold challenged the men to revise housing plans to include some of their wives' suggestions concerning design. The men did make some of the changes women suggested, but not one included his wife's name on the deed of their house.³⁸

Unlike most of the other female field workers, Arnold did not participate in traditional female support work in the co-operative organization. Nor was she involved with the Women and Work programme, which the Extension Department

36 Arnold, *The Story of Tompkinsville*; Arnold, *Father Jimmy of Nova Scotia* (New York, 1940).

37 This was a much different kind of work than it is today. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York, 1983).

38 Deed Books, 1926-1945, Registry Office, County of Cape Breton.

founded in 1933 and which sought to encourage female co-operation in activities that were traditionally defined as women's work, including the development of a home-based craft industry. Like other women in the movement Arnold did, however, turn her home into a centre that supported co-operative activity. Moreover, she expressed interest and support for aspects of women's programmes she found relevant to her goals. Nevertheless, the traditional work of women was not Arnold's immediate concern; she left this to Reed. And, as is so often the case, little is said about this type of work in public documents concerning the Antigonish movement. Thus Reed's major contribution, like that of so many other women in the movement, remains obscure.

Although Arnold's work was in some ways related to that of the women architects and social planners who designed the "Grand Domestic Revolution",³⁹ she did not appear concerned with the sexual division of labour in Tompkinsville. Arnold took women's wishes into account in the planning phase of the project and she seems to have questioned differential male/female access to property structures, but she did not argue explicitly for women's participation in the project as equal partners with men. The language of the qualifications for membership in the co-operative was male, and membership was predicated on earning a salary and being able to save or borrow money to pay for housing. The property of the co-operative, in the case of Tompkinsville, belonged to the men on the Board of Directors, and the individual houses the co-operative constructed became the property of male heads of households. In short, Arnold did not overtly challenge the dominant version of Catholic womanhood.⁴⁰ She did not question the gender-based inequalities that prevailed in the housing co-operative she helped to plan, nor did she object to the criteria for property ownership in the co-operative or resist a separate spheres approach to the division of labour. Arnold and Reed were exceptions to the rule, and the only ones, within the housing co-operative.

Although many of those who commented on Arnold saw her as austere and serious, she maintained a lively correspondence with her friends. As well she worked with members of her adopted community to write a humorous play in 1938 called "The Miner's Wife".⁴¹ Reed remained very much in Arnold's shadow, working primarily in the domestic sphere. In Nova Scotia, Reed was best known as Arnold's companion. This was not always the case and did not remain so in Maine, where both women worked with lobster fishers. Nonetheless, it is Arnold's personality that emerges most clearly in the records and what we know is that she maintained an independent demeanour and worked easily and effectively with men such as Coady. Arnold was sharp with those with whom she did not agree, including some of the female office staff in the Extension Department. When Zita Cameron, Coady's secretary, sent her a

39 Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983).

40 This Catholic version of normative womanhood was not restricted to political democracies in either Europe or North America. Catholic leaders in places such as Argentina also supported "female subordination to hierarchical relations in the home, workplace and society". Sandra McGee Deutsch, "The Catholic Church, Work and Womanhood in Argentina, 1890-1930", *Gender and History* 3, 3 (Autumn 1991), p. 304.

41 "The Miner's Wife: A Cooperative Play Or Musical Comedy, If You Prefer", RG 30/3/2/1096, SFXUA.

poor photograph of Coady for a book Arnold was writing on housing co-operatives, her response was caustic: “Heaven help you if the enclosed is what you call a good photograph of Coady. I am not sending you back the cut for fear you may actually use it”.⁴²

In her day, Arnold received public recognition as an expert co-operator. Ida Delaney, the other female lay staff member in the immediate region where Arnold worked, remembered the opening day of Tompkinsville in the spring of 1939. According to Delaney, the provincial housing registrar paid public tribute to Arnold’s skill and expertise in directing the housing co-operative, despite differences he had previously had with her, and he emphasized her ability to work with others for the common good.⁴³

Arnold’s connections with the male director of the Extension Department, as well as other well-known co-operative leaders in the United States, and her own independent behaviour, may have facilitated her work with men and women, but at the same time they may have limited her potential for solidarity with other female staff. Delaney and Arnold, for instance, were not close collaborators even though they were in close geographical proximity. Coady and Arnold, by contrast, though at a distance, were fast friends. It is difficult to say whether Arnold and Reed ever gained the kind of acceptance or offers of friendship from the female staff that they received from the male director. By casting herself as exceptional Arnold seems to have avoided some of the negative consequences of breaking out of approved subservient roles for women. This contrasted with the strategies of most of the female staff members she worked with. Because of her outsider status within the Antigonish movement and her co-operative education and expertise, she could more easily resist the forces casting women in the traditional roles of wives, mothers, helpmates and daughters. Arnold’s partnership with Reed was not hidden and was recognized by the men in the organization. Like many of them, her work was supported by the labour of a woman who lived with her as her companion. In her two-year stint as housing advisor for the Extension Department, Arnold was able to skirt the movement’s prescriptions for women’s behaviour.

Arnold’s work demonstrated that subservience was not a “natural” part of the female character, but she was clearly regarded as an exception. It is difficult to tell how others might have phrased this and whether they ever discussed the issue of her female companion. Given her approach to living without men in her domestic world, Arnold would always have had difficulty organizing heterosexual Catholic women to fight the constraints that limited women’s place in the movement. Arnold’s identity was based on an alternative version of womanhood. She left the domestic work of women and the work of identifying with women as women to her female partner and other local women. Although her work was incorporated into the efforts of the overall movement, she did not serve as a role model whose behaviour might be emulated by local women.

Arnold’s correspondence explains her own understanding of her position and her appreciation of the political usefulness of idiosyncrasy. As she noted in a letter

42 Arnold to O’Hearn, 18 June 1939, RG 30-2/2/30, SFXUA.

43 Delaney, *By Their Own Hands*, p. 142.

concerning the housing co-operatives, it could provide an excellent defence until one was strong enough, or well positioned enough, to take the offensive:

I wonder whether it would be possible to see that no publicity gets out, so long as we are in the field of education the several interests will look upon what we are doing as an amiable idiosyncrasy but were we to go into the field of business the more wide awake of those interested could crush us before we get a start. We have already had that problem in the Eastern part of the United States in regards to gas and I hope we are going to be able to avoid it here until we are strong enough to fight.⁴⁴

Arnold was, for the most part, like other exceptional women, considered odd, not a real woman, a manly woman, and only one. She was a rarity, the kind of individual that “not every group could be blest with”.⁴⁵ Arnold was generally careful and circumspect in her public behaviour, even while employing her own strategy of eccentricity. Although the late 1930s was a time when traditional gender norms were being reinforced by organizations such as the Antigonish movement, Arnold and Reed’s lifestyle does not appear to have been construed as a threat.⁴⁶

Arnold’s years in Tompkinsville fit with a broader pattern of change in co-operative development and social reform in the interwar years. She benefited from growing opportunities for women’s work in urban contexts, but at the same time must have experienced the deliberate stigmatization and sexualization of same-sex partnerships that was beginning.⁴⁷ Arnold and Reed moved from the urban reform milieu of New York to the much more rural environment of “industrial” Nova Scotia and it is likely they considered their partnership as they planned these moves.⁴⁸ The almost completely rural trajectory of their life after their time in Cape Breton suggests that they found rural North America a more congenial and tolerant setting for them than urban America. Women in rural areas in North America may have found it easier at this time to lead divergent lives as public figures as long as they were circumspect in their public behaviour. It is possible as well that the 19th-century acceptance of exceptional women may have lasted longer in Canadian reform circles than in the United States.⁴⁹

How Arnold and Reed responded to the personal contempt that was often accorded to “single women” (that is women who did not marry, or in the Catholic vernacular of

44 Arnold to Coady, 7 December 1937, RG 30-2/1/94, SFXUA.

45 Leo R. Ward, *Nova Scotia: The Land of Cooperation* (New York, 1942), p. 193.

46 For a discussion of the linkage between the construction of gender roles and broad economic forces see: Ruth Roach Pierson, “Gender and the Unemployment Insurance Debates in Canada, 1934-1940”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 25 (Spring 1990), pp. 77-103; Margaret Hobbs, “Rethinking Antifeminism in the 1930s: Gender Crisis or Workplace Justice? A Response to Alice Kessler-Harris”, *Gender and History*, 5, 1 (Spring 1993), pp. 4-15.

47 Christina Simmons, *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History* (Philadelphia, 1989); Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem*.

48 For a review of that environment, see Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*.

49 The biography of Canada’s Charlotte Whitton (and by extension her life partner Margaret Greir) provides an interesting contrast. Her intelligent social welfare and political work was built on a domestic life that was feminine. P.T. Rooke and R.L. Schnell, *No Bleeding Heart: Charlotte Whitton: A Feminist on the Right* (Vancouver, 1987).

the 1940s, who were “the secular unmarried”) is hard to determine from the documentary sources. That Arnold moved freely in the upper echelons of the North American co-operative movement is a tribute to her technical and personal skills. Her successes and her own personal freedom, though, did little to further women’s equality. The Antigonish movement was built on the ideology of female domesticity, and Arnold and Reed never explicitly challenged this. Although the alternative model of female behaviour that they adopted posed an implicit challenge to the norms that prevailed within the Antigonish movement, its significance was blunted by their characterization as eccentrics and exceptions. To a significant extent, it was a characterization that they helped to construct.