

**Frances G. Halpenny, A world of words : Frances Halpenny's  
autobiography**  
(Toronto: Published Privately, 2017) 66 pp. Unpriced  
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[See table of contents](#)

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Fransess G. Halpenny, *A World of Words: Fransess Halpenny's Autobiography* (Toronto: Published Privately, 2017) 66 pp. Unpriced (paperback) no ISBN.

Fransess Halpenny was Canada's first scholarly editor and a major force in scholarly publishing. Halpenny's editorial career spanned five decades. She joined the University of Toronto Press as a junior editor in 1941, was named editor in 1957, rose to the position of managing editor in 1965, and was appointed associate director (academic) in 1978. As a hands-on editor of scholarly works who was incisive in her editorial practice, she was vital to the press's development as a leading scholarly publisher.

Halpenny, who spent her last four years in the veteran's wing of Toronto's Sunnybrook Hospital, died on Christmas Day 2017, aged 98. *A World of Words* is her final publication. Though it was published privately as a series of episodic recollections originally dictated to art therapist Sharona Bookbinder between May 2015 and March 2017, the slim volume contains an introduction and an index—a clear indication that Halpenny remained a scholarly editor to the very end of her life.

*A World of Words* is significant for what it reveals of Halpenny's resilience and drive, qualities that led her to remarkable achievement. In this autobiography, Halpenny touches on key periods that endured in her memory. She remembers her early years in the small town of Maxville, Ontario, where her father was a druggist and where social life revolved around the United Church. In 1929, her family moved to Toronto. There she attended Brown Public School and then Oakwood Collegiate Institute. A scholarship made it possible for Halpenny to attend the University of Toronto—"my family could only provide room and board but not manage my school fees" (11)—where she discovered a love of books and theatre and went on to win several more prizes. She earned a BA (1940) followed by an MA (1941), but was dissuaded from pursuing a doctorate in English. In the early 1940s, young women like her were not made to feel "particularly encouraged" (12) in their educational ambition. Fortunately for Halpenny, an opportunity at the University of Toronto Press prevented early disappointment from turning to rancour.

In the fall of 1941, Halpenny was hired to edit manuscripts and handle reader's reports. After one year, however, she took a leave of absence from the press and joined the women's division of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). She trained as a meteorologist and from

19 October 1942 to 2 November 1945 was stationed first in Torbay, Newfoundland, where she supported an anti-submarine patrol by tracking weather patterns in the North Atlantic Ocean, and later in Summerside, Prince Edward Island. As she makes clear, these wartime experiences had a lasting influence on her life.

When she returned to the press in late 1945, Halpenny's editorial responsibilities increased. She prepared the bibliography for "Letters in Canada," the *University of Toronto Quarterly's* annual bicultural survey of Canadian literature. She edited the manuscripts of influential scholars, such as political scientist Robert MacGregor Dawson and art historian J. Russell Harper. She advanced the in-house editorial practice and mentored aspiring editors.

Halpenny knew little of Canada when she enlisted in the RCAF. The knowledge of Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island she gained through military service fed her growing nationalism and proved especially advantageous when she became general editor of the monumental *Dictionary of Canadian Biography/Dictionnaire biographique du Canada* (DCB/DBC), a position she held from 1969 to 1988.

The DCB/DBC enjoyed great stability under Halpenny's direction. She prioritized primary sources and sought a wide representation of individuals, including women whenever possible. As a cultural historian who was trained in literary analysis, she hoped that the *Dictionary's* biographical entries would tell the story of this country from the broadest stroke to the smallest detail.

Halpenny was the longest serving general editor of the DCB/DBC. In total, she oversaw the publication of ten volumes of the *Dictionary*—together, they covered the years 1741 to 1900—as well as an index for volumes one to twelve (which spanned the years 1000 to 1900). The volumes and index were published between 1972 and 1991—a great feat of general editorship. That three of the ten volumes were issued during the period 1972 to 1978, when Halpenny also served as dean of the University of Toronto's Faculty of Library Science (now the Faculty of Information or iSchool), signalled her capacity for leadership and ability to manage varied functions.

Although Halpenny mentions her contributions to the DCB/DBC and the Faculty of Library Science, she devotes several pages to her lifetime involvement as both actor and director with the Alumnae Theatre, a company founded by female graduates of the University of Toronto. In addition, she recalls several Toronto residences—her family homes in Rathnelly and Leaside, her own flat on Walmer

Road, and her private room in Sunnybrook Hospital—as well as her beloved Northlea United Church, which grew out “of a conversation between my mother and a church official” (53).

More than anything else, *A World of Words* reveals the positive frame of mind that shaped Halpenny’s long and fulfilling life. She finds her final accommodations in the veteran’s wing of Sunnybrook both “suitable” and “comfortable” and admits to being pleased with “the staff” and the “arrangements” (58). Halpenny’s professional pride and personal satisfaction grew out of such good cheer.

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