

A Great Rural Sisterhood: Madge Robertson Watt & the ACWW by Linda M. Ambrose

Rebecca Beusaert

Volume 108, Number 1, Spring 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050616ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050616ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Beusaert, R. (2016). Review of [*A Great Rural Sisterhood: Madge Robertson Watt & the ACWW* by Linda M. Ambrose]. *Ontario History*, 108(1), 128-130.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1050616ar>

relationship deteriorated in the years that followed. He believed that the “pot-bellied little bastard” (210) was a mere journalist who had never produced a substantive historical work; it was especially galling to Creighton that Underhill, between the two, was the more popular professor.

Creighton, however, did elicit the respect and loyalty of his doctoral students, because he encouraged them to follow their intellectual interests even if they differed from his own, and he worked tirelessly on their behalf. Notably, he supported Ken McLaughlin’s innovative use of quantitative, computer-generated data to write his thesis on the 1896 federal election. Lamentably, Creighton was as anti-Semitic as his colleagues and friends—an attitude that pervaded the University of Toronto—but

never toward his one Jewish doctoral student, Angus Gilbert.

Wright clearly struggled with his complex, fascinating subject. His ambivalence shows in his assessment of Creighton’s 1970 lament for the nation, *Canada’s First Century*, a “great book,” but really, as Wright demonstrates, little more than a raging polemic. In sum, Wright’s volume is a nuanced story of the historian and his humanity. Creighton, undoubtedly, would hate the book because it has the temerity to question some of his judgments. He is quiet now, but thanks to his impressive oeuvre and now, to Wright’s outstanding biography, his legacy will endure.

Paul Axelrod
York University

A Great Rural Sisterhood

Madge Robertson Watt & the ACWW

by Linda M. Ambrose

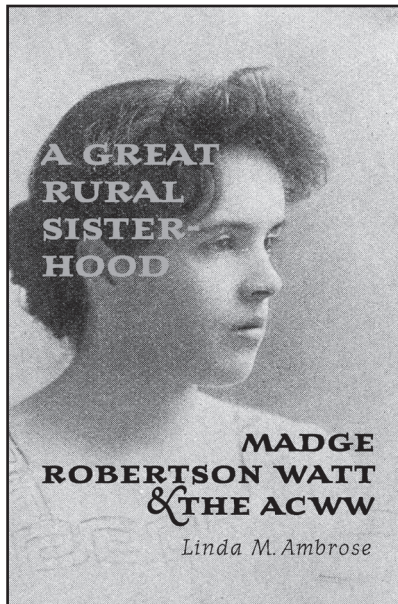
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 326 pages. \$32.95 Paperback. ISBN 9781442615793. \$75.00 Cloth ISBN 9781442647725. \$32.95 ebook (EPUB format) ISBN 9781442669024. (www.utppublishing.com)

In this carefully-researched and engaging biography, Linda M. Ambrose explores the life of Madge Robertson Watt, a woman who devoted much of her adult life to raising awareness of rural women’s issues, first at home in Canada, and then on a continental and global scale. Madge Watt is best known for her role in establishing the first Women’s Institute (WI) in Britain in 1915, and was central to the creation of the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) in 1933. In spite of the many achievements Watt accomplished, particularly her efforts to nurture a transnational network of clubwomen, she has largely been ignored by Canadian historians. With

the exception of those well-versed in the histories of the WI or the ACWW, Watt is an obscure historical figure. Ambrose’s book goes a long way to help fill a large gap in the historiography of rural women’s club work, offering a detailed and colourful account of the enigmatic Watt.

One of the (many) strengths of Ambrose’s book is her gift for story-telling, especially the pace at which Watt’s life unfolds. As Ambrose describes, Watt was a woman with “multiple selves” (217), a woman who was provided with particular advantages in her youth that shaped her into an indomitable force within clubwomen’s circles. Structured chronologically, the book’s six chap-

ters are each devoted to a significant phase in Watt's life—her early years and upbringing; education and initial forays into writing; marriage and motherhood, war work in England after her husband's death; Watt's eventual return to Canada and involvement with the ACWW's founding, and finally her retreat from public life in the postwar years. Though Watt was a passionate and committed supporter of a "great rural sisterhood" (19) that stretched across the globe, as Ambrose points



out on numerous occasions, her life was also interesting for how much it was rife with contradictions and controversy.

Early in the book Ambrose does an exemplary job of showing how young Madge Robertson's affluent upbringing in the small town of Collingwood, Ontario shaped her into the indefatigable networker and clubwoman that she became. Watt learned first-hand from her parents how to effectively manage civic organizations and applied these skills to her studies, earning Bachelor's and Master's degrees in the Arts at the University of Toronto. Watt was the first woman to achieve such a feat at the school where she was also heavily involved in extra-curricular activities, honing her talents for writing and public speaking. After graduation, Watt served as editor of a well-known women's magazine in Toronto before moving on to New York City where she joined the staff of the prestigious *Frank Leslie's Weekly*. Ambrose notes that Watt's writings at this time, likely a reflection of her own internal dialogue, both supported

and undermined traditional Victorian ideologies about gender, marriage, and education.

At the University of Toronto, Madge first met medical student Alfred Tennyson Watt and upon her return to Canada, the couple married in 1893. The Watts moved to Victoria where the booming city allowed Alfred to establish a prosperous medical practice. Though Watt had given up her career as a journalist, she did not stray far from the publishing world, and

volunteered with Victoria's many clubs and civic groups. When Alfred accepted a position as an inspector at the quarantine station at William Head on Vancouver Island, the move marked a transition to so-called "rural" living for the Watts. Madge took up the life of a well-to-do rural woman, raising two sons amongst her new-found love of gardening and volunteer work with the local fair. In 1910, Watt gave her first public speech about the conditions of rural women living on Vancouver Island, calling attention to the important work of support networks like the WI (recently established in British Columbia in 1909).

Following her husband's devastating suicide in 1913, Watt moved to Britain, hoping to distance herself from the tragedy while spreading the message of the Canadian-born WI. In the process of establishing the first British WI in 1915, a "reverse colonialism" (99) occurred whereby Canadian ideas about rural life, imperialism, and patriotism were transplanted to the metropole. In the interwar years Watt, now

a recognized figure in British and Canadian clubwomen's circles, crusaded for an international alliance of rural women that would offer even greater mechanisms of support across borders. This organization, the ACWW, would go on to become the largest association of its kind in the world.

In spite of the fact that details about Watt's life are scattered and piecemeal at best, Ambrose utilizes sources such as Watt's own writings, correspondence, and Women's Institute fonds to craft a beautifully-written biography about an educated career woman, widowed mother, and polarizing public figure. Ambrose's careful consideration of Watt's contradictory qualities and prickly disposition are a breath of fresh air when so many biographies, especially of women, tend to glorify success in adverse conditions. Watt was not without her faults, but much like her contemporary

Adelaide Hoodless (founder of the WI in Canada), she used her affluence as a platform to draw attention to conditions in rural Canada, especially issues pertaining to women. Even after her death in 1948, Watt continued to be a provocative figure. Though deemed a person of "national historic significance" by Parks Canada (216), efforts to commemorate her endeavours were marred by factual inconsistencies and re-imaginings of Watt's long list of accomplishments. Regardless, as Ambrose concludes, Madge Watt needs to be remembered for her attempts to unify diverse groups of rural women, for her tireless efforts to bring attention to rural women's issues, and for her ability to connect with audiences of women from all walks of life.

Rebecca Beusaert
University of Guelph

Grain Dust Dreams

by David W. Tarbet

Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015. 122 pages.
\$16.95 Paperback ISBN13: 978-1-4384-5816-8. \$16.95 Electronic, ISBN13: 978-1-4384-5818-2. (www.sunypress.edu)

In his "Afterword" to *Grain Dust Dreams*, a new book about North American grain elevators published by Excelsior Editions, an imprint of the State University of New York Press, David W. Tarbet makes his case. "There are other books on grain elevators—many others. Most concentrate on how they look. [...] But I have taken a different approach. If I had to analogize elevators to humans and imagine elevators as having bodies and roles, I wouldn't see them as photographic models—attractive as they are. I would see them as workers.

