

“Strength in Union”: Patterns of Continuity and Change Within the Sir Robert Borden Chapter of The Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire 1915-1965

Lorraine Coops

ABSTRACT

Lorraine Coops explores the ways in which fifty years of the Wolfville (Sir Robert Borden) Chapter of the I.O.D.E. reflect changes in women's role and view of themselves.

RÉSUMÉ

Lorraine Coops passe en revue cinquante années d'activités du Chapitre Sir Robert Borden d'I.O.D.E., à Wolfville, et elle montre comment ces activités reflètent les changements intervenus dans le rôle des femmes et dans la perception que celles-ci ont d'elles-mêmes.

“Her Impulse to Help Others”

The Canadian manifestation of the “woman's club movement” reached its peak during the First World War when thousands of women were active in various women's organizations.¹ In 1916, Marjory MacMurphy suggested how important an analysis of women's organizations could be to understanding women's roles and status within Canadian society:

Women's organizations offer a promising starting point for a study of Canadian women. Supposed to be

efficient and progressive, they are often spoken of as representative of the best work of women in Canada. An analysis of their characteristics and the actual work which they have accomplished cannot fail to produce interesting results.²

One women's organization which offers many unique opportunities to assess women's traditional and changing place within Canadian society on a national, regional, and local level is the Imperial Order of the

Daughters of the Empire (IODE). As one of Canada's largest national women's organizations in the first half of the twentieth century, it represented the world view of thousands of its members across Canada; while on the provincial and local levels, members adapted general IODE sentiments to meet specific community needs and circumstances.

The records of the Sir Robert Borden (Wolfville, Nova Scotia) Chapter of the IODE reveal a pattern of change and continuity which underlaid the aims, emphasis and direction of the organization and contributed to its longevity.³ These records also provide evidence of how the membership, activities, and concerns of the chapter reflected the socio-economic and cultural milieu of the Annapolis Valley during the period from the chapter's founding in 1915 through to 1965. Through their involvement in organizations such as the IODE, Maritime women, like their sisters in other parts of Canada, adapted traditional, roles, expectations and aspirations to the changing vision of the twentieth century, truly creating a place of their own.

"One Flag, One Throne, One Empire"

The IODE was an exclusively female organization founded by Margaret Polson Murray in 1900 to provide field comforts to Canadian troops serving in the Boer War and to promote, through women's patriotic service to their country, Canada's ties with Great Britain and the Empire. These beliefs in the value of British imperial traditions were, at the turn of the century, an opinion shared by many outside the organization: "Canadians, both women and men, advocated closer ties with Britain and the Empire, promoted British institutions and values, and assumed nationalism and imperialism to be one and the same."⁴ This focus on Britain and imperialism was reflected in the IODE's membership. Like the majority of club women in this period, women involved with the IODE came from Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, and middle-to-upper class

backgrounds.

In keeping with its founding philosophy, the IODE continued to place emphasis on certain attitudes and activities - "loyalty to Canada and the Crown; Empire solidarity; knowledge of Imperial history; proper observance of historic and patriotic days; erection of commemorative monuments and plaques; promotion of sound education; and assistance to people in need, especially exservicemen and their dependents."⁵ However, while not unique in its support of patriotic and imperialist causes, neither was the IODE typical of women's organizations of this period; for, unlike other women's organizations, the IODE did not seek to alter Canadian society. Instead, the membership sought to preserve those British ties and traditions with which they felt comfortable. Accordingly, as an organization, the IODE was rarely concerned with "the woman question."⁶ However, cross membership in women's organizations was quite prevalent, and it was not uncommon for women to belong to two or more organizations. Thus, while duty, service, and patriotism could be addressed through participation within the IODE, issues such as temperance and suffrage could be pursued through involvement in organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union.⁷

Many organizations, particularly the single issue ones such as those based on suffrage or temperance, often lost their vitality or attraction as the goals, needs and aspirations of women changed, or certain political or social aims were achieved. Nonetheless, although the IODE was founded around a specific cause, with a particular mindset, and espousing somewhat narrow and conservative outlooks and goals, it still managed to remain relatively vital and viable. This was achieved through a combination of continuity and change within the context of an evolving Anglo-Canadian nationalism. Between 1902 and 1914, the IODE established a pattern whereby it adapted to an altering society while maintaining its traditional focus and ideals. During this period, the IODE concentrated its energies

increasingly on education and public welfare, a strategy that in the long run enabled the organization to outlast the Empire it sought to preserve and protect.

As imperialists, the members of the IODE felt that high-minded, healthy citizens, well-versed in their proper roles and duties, were essential to the continuation of a strong Empire. Thus, the IODE encouraged the teaching of Empire and Dominion history, discussion of patriotic and imperial subjects, essay contests, and awareness of the other "outposts" of the Empire. The IODE's interest in public health and welfare grew out of its concern over the number of soldiers returning from the Boer War with tuberculosis. In response to this need, the organization promoted sanatoriums and improvements in treatment. While the group's other charitable activities, such as Fresh Air camps and milk and snack programs, also focussed initially on the needs of veterans and their families, these projects were gradually expanded to include, in general, those deemed in "need."

Although the organization had successfully shifted from militaristic to domestic concerns following the Boer War, the imperialistic framework remained. Thus, the IODE continued to support cadet training units in schools and advocated for ongoing military preparedness programs. The conflict in Europe in 1914 seemed to justify their stance that women and the nation must be ready, at any moment, to support the Empire in its hour of need. As the organization's Golden Jubilee history suggests, "In the opinion of many, Canada was unprepared for war in August 1914, but not so the Daughters of the Empire: they were in the vanguard of women's organizations, having had the advantage of experience in the South African War."⁸ Between 1914 and 1918, the IODE doubled its membership and among the chapters formed as a direct result of the war was the Sir Robert Borden (Wolfville) Chapter.

"An Eager and Like-Minded Band of Women"

At the time of the Sir Robert Borden Chapter's founding in 1915, Wolfville was a thriving community with a population of just over 1,400. Acadia University, founded by Maritime Baptists in 1838, was the focal point of the social, spiritual, intellectual, and economic life of the community. The highly successful apple industry firmly linked Wolfville with Great Britain as the majority of the local crop was shipped to British markets. With telephones, electric lights, and a municipal water and sewer system in place, the town could boast of having speciality shops, a photography studio, several hotels and restaurants, and a skating rink. In addition to these general amenities, for those with time to spare, various service, social and recreational clubs and organizations provided the community with leisure time activities.⁹ With its prosperous background, ties to Great Britain, and a history of women's active participation in various organizations, Wolfville had all the right ingredients for the founding of a local chapter of the IODE.

Although there is no written account that details the formation of the Sir Robert Borden Chapter, it is likely that the founding members, eager to do take part in the war effort, were attracted by the IODE's success and growing prominence in Canada. During the first years of the First World War, the IODE received much attention, spearheading a campaign which raised over \$280,000 for the war effort in just three weeks. Its image was further enhanced in Nova Scotia when the annual meeting of the National chapter was held in Halifax in May, 1915. Such direct contact no doubt helped to prompt the women of Wolfville to organize a chapter.¹⁰ Due to the war, however, the members voted to "retire and work with the Red Cross Society,"¹¹ and thus the chapter's regular recorded meetings did not begin until January 1918.

From the outset, the local chapter reflected more the interests, concerns, demographics and socio-economic realities of the Annapolis Valley than those

of the parent organization, which was firmly rooted in the central Canadian experience. While the members of the local and national chapters shared similar ideological viewpoints, there were several significant differences that led the members of the Sir Robert Borden Chapter to create a place of their own within the larger national organization. For example, as with the parent organization, the Sir Robert Borden Chapter's membership consisted of prominent community members. However, the strong links between the local chapter, Acadia University, and the Baptist community had a direct impact upon the direction and function of the chapter causing it to craft a style of its own. Whereas the national and the provincial chapters did emphasize certain aspects of education, the local chapter's ties with the academic community¹² kept much of its attention focussed upon the local school system and this accounts, at least in part, for the chapter's strong support of educational projects in peacetime.

As the majority of the population within the Annapolis Valley area were adherents of the Baptist faith, certain fundraising activities undertaken by national and provincial chapters such as card parties, dances, and socials were unacceptable. This reflection of local realities was also evident in the celebration of the "Founders Day Church Service," held in February of each year to commemorate the "anniversary" of the IODE. Unlike the tradition in Ontario where the service was most often held in Anglican churches, in Wolfville the service was rotated between the Anglican, Baptist, and United churches. By recognizing and respecting the religious diversity of the local community, the chapter retained the interest of its members and thus helped ensure its longevity.

"To Instill Patriotism Into the Young"

Consideration of its member's personal preferences guided the chapter in most of its non-wartime activities. After each of the World Wars, there was a successful

readjustment from undertakings, such as providing hospital supplies, field comforts, and reading materials for soldiers to the chapter's peacetime mainstays of education and family and child welfare. In all cases, the chapter balanced the ideals of the IODE with local needs and realities. Thus, while many of the IODE's national programs focused on what was seen as the more inspirational and imperial aspects of a good education - such as patriotic pictures and literature, and pictures of the Monarch and the Royal Family - the Sir Robert Borden Chapter maintained a much more practical and local focus. For example, in 1923 the chapter began to supplement the salary and school supply needs of the Morine Mountain School, which due to a lack of funds had closed several times prior to the chapter's involvement.¹³ Even before the implementation of the national "adopt a school" program in 1944, many other small rural schools in Kings County were recipients of books, maps, flags, blackboards, and instructional materials, such as the IODE's *A Primer on Democracy*. The chapter continued to provide such materials until the consolidation movement of the mid-1960s closed most of these rural schools. Although the chapter did donate the prerequisite imperialistic pictures and calendars and sponsored patriotic essay contests in accordance with national IODE education policy, close links to the education system in Kings County ensured that IODE-supported topics would be included in the curriculum, thus allowing the members to focus more on the practical aspects of education. The chapter's largest contributions to education at Wolfville, and later on to Horton High School, were in the form of bursaries for post secondary education. By 1965, the chapter was awarding a \$200 bursary to a student graduating from the Wolfville School and \$100 to a student from Horton.

"A Prompt and Sympathetic Response to Every Need"

The chapter's emphasis on education also fit in

nicely with its interest in family and child welfare. Although most welfare work fell in line with the goals of the national chapter, supporting mainly "approved" charities and organizations, such as the Girl Guides, the Children Aid Society, the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON), and ex-servicemen and their families, the Wolfville Chapter did continue to help local families on an individual need basis (the chapter's minutes record requests for clothing and "milk money" for school children).¹⁴ The chapter was particularly proud of its role in obtaining a VON nurse for the Wolfville area, raising \$1300 to set up the program in 1920 and pledging \$500 over each of the following ten years to maintain it. Constraints brought on by the Depression in the 1930s forced the chapter to cut back, but the VON program was a valuable contribution to the local community in the years prior to Medicare, when hospital and doctor's fees placed medical care out of the reach of many.

"So Long As the Empire Lives"

Over time, there were subtle changes in the chapter's educational and welfare activities. Many of these related directly to changes happening within Canada, and the country's relationship to the world. As the Empire gave way to the Commonwealth, for example, a new and different emphasis can be found in IODE-sponsored education programs and events. Thus, where once Empire Day had been the prime focus, gradually Dominion (Canada) Day and national heritage came to the foreground. As circumstances beyond the IODE's control directly impacted on its goals or philosophy, such as Britain's relinquishment of its Empire or the Canadian government's rejection of the Union Jack in favour of a new Canadian flag, the IODE was forced to acknowledge and eventually accept these changes.¹⁵ The local chapter also conceded, agreeing that "the traditions of the old must give way to the new."¹⁶ In keeping with its customs, the IODE accepted the reality of the Commonwealth,

but chose to see it as an extension of those cherished British values and institutions which it had always promoted and protected; and when the organization lost its fight over the Union Jack, rather than wave an obsolete flag, the IODE adapted by retaining the Union Jack as the organization's flag while instructing the local chapters to devote at least one meeting to discussion and appreciation of the new Maple Leaf.

"Let Strength In Union Prevail"

As a review of the first fifty years of the organization indicates, the chapter slowly evolved new strategies, interests, and policies, all the time maintaining a conservative perspective both of itself as an organization and of the world around it. For example, although it was a women's organization, it had not addressed women's issues; and as Canadian society rapidly changed in the post-Second World War period, the IODE often struggled to keep up. Thus, the appeal the IODE had for women of all ages in, for example, the early 1900s or during the two world wars began to fade in the 1950s, and the focus became more centred upon women of an older age group. In 1968, for example, out of the 48 members, 2 had 50 years of service, 3 had 30 years, 4 had 20 years and 8 had 10.¹⁷ Although the presence of an "old guard" may well have made the recruitment of new members more difficult, the aging membership provided a strong sense of continuity for these women as the chapter and its members grew old together.

Loyalty, either to a group, philosophy, or a cause, produces a continuity which guarantees an organization's existence from year to year. Although this kind of devotion can have a negative impact, such as resistance to change, for the Sir Robert Borden chapter, the loyalty of its members created the firm base from which the organization functioned. The chapter had adopted "Strength in Union" as its motto during the First World War and, in many respects, this motto accurately describes the consciousness of the

group. United by their common beliefs and backgrounds to the national IODE and the world beyond, the local chapter provided its members with a forum for their views and values. Membership meant being a part of something larger than one's self and provided a means for women to make a contribution on a local, national and international level. The strength gained from participation contributed to the perseverance, resiliency and durability of the organization and, ultimately, to the satisfaction and enjoyment of its members. (See Figure #1)

Although the Wolfville Chapter, like the national IODE, approached its activities from a narrow, conservative and traditionalist view point, and though it often romanticized and idealized its aims and aspirations, some of its projects did achieve concrete and lasting results. As part of the national organization, for example, it contributed to the War Memorial and Overseas scholarships, by which many Canadian men and women were able to pursue graduate degrees, and to relief projects through which thousands of people dislocated by war and natural disasters received food,

clothing, and encouragement. Through the chapter's efforts on the local level, bursaries of up to \$300 for post secondary education were awarded to local graduates; the services of a VON nurse were secured; small rural schools received the supplies necessary to provide even the most rudimentary education; and undernourished children benefited from the milk and snack programs in the schools.

By broadening its scope to include educational and charitable activities, the Sir Robert Borden Chapter adapted to the post-war periods, and the results of its efforts benefited both the community and its members. Such mutual benefits were achieved through the combination of continuity and change and strength in union, concepts which nourished the organization and provided goals for its members. In the process, the members developed an emotional, spiritual, and physical place of their own. Given their dedication, tenacity and adaptability, it is little wonder that the Sir Robert Borden Chapter outlasted the Empire which it admired and idealized.



Sir Robert Borden Chapter, I.O.D.E., Wolfville, N.S. 30th. Anniversary Celebration, 1945, Permission of Pat Stewart. Courtesy of Esther Clark Wright Archives, Acadia University.

NOTES

The author would like to thank Donna Smyth, Conference Coordinator, Thomas Raddall Symposium September 1992, Acadia University and Queen's University School of Graduate Studies and Research for financial assistance.

1. On the woman's club movement and women's involvement in voluntary associations, clubs and societies, see, for example: Gail Cuthbert Brandt, "Organizations in Canada: The English Protestant Tradition," Woman's Paid and Unpaid Work: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives, ed., Paula Bourne (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1985); Sharon Cook, In Sunshine and Shadow (forthcoming, McGill-Queen's University Press); Naomi Griffiths, The Splendid Vision: Centennial History of the National Council of Women of Canada 1893-1993 (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993); Anne Firor Scott, Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); and Veronica Strong-Boag, The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada, 1893-1929 (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1986).
2. Marjory MacMurchy, The Woman - Bless Her quoted in The Proper Sphere: Woman's Place in Canadian Society, eds., Ramsay Cook and Wendy Mitchinson (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976)
3. The Sir Robert Borden Chapter records analyzed for this paper include: Minute Books (1915-1965); Membership Lists (1915-1965); Financial Statements (1939-1965); Treasurer's Books (1935-1945); Special Funds and Disbursement Books (1940-1965); Scrap Books (1963, 1965); and Fiftieth Anniversary Material (1965). These sources are held by the Esther Clark Wright Archives (ECWA), Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia.
4. Nancy Sheehan, "Philosophy, Pedagogy, and Practice: The IODE and the Schools in Canada, 1900-1945," Historical Studies in Education (Fall 1990), 307. For more on the IODE, see for example, Sheehan, "Tea Sippers or Crusaders?: The IODE as a Woman's Organization, 1900-1925," paper read at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, May 1984, and Lorraine Coops, "So Long As the Empire Lives": Patterns of Change and Continuity Within the Sir Robert Borden Chapter, Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, 1915-1965," Honours thesis, Acadia University, 1991.
5. Vera Eaton Longley, A History of the Sir Robert Borden Chapter I.O.D.E. (Wolfville: np, 1962), 2.
6. For more on "the woman question" and women's issues such as temperance and suffrage, see for example, Carol Bacchi, Liberation Deferred?: The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983); Linda Kealy, Not An Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s to 1920s (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1979); Alison Prentice et al., Canadian Women: A History (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988) and Joan Sangster, Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989).
7. As Mary Ellen Tingley points out in "The Impact of War: Wolfville Women 1914-1918," (Masters thesis, Acadia University, 1983), it was not uncommon to find women listed as members of three or more organizations.
8. The Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire: Golden Jubilee, 1900-1950 (Toronto: T. H. Best Printing Co., 1950), 2.
9. For a description of Wolfville during the First World War, see Margaret Conrad, George Nowlan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986) and Tingley, "The Impact of War." Among the women's organizations active in Wolfville by 1915 were the YWCA, the WCTU, the Red Cross, and various church-based associations such as the Woman's Baptist Missionary Union and the Saint John's Women's Auxiliary.
10. Holding the annual meeting in Halifax seems to have made quite an impact. In 1914, there were 10 chapters in Nova Scotia, but by the end of 1915, this had increased to 26.
11. Minutes, 28 September 1915, (ECWA).
12. The wife of the president of Acadia University was always a member of the chapter, whether active or honorary, and for many years the local chapter's president was the wife of a high school principal and school board member.
13. Tingley, 98.
14. For example, the local chapter had an Education Committee from 1920 to 1965, a Family and Child Welfare Committee from 1935 to 1951, and a Services Home and

Abroad Committee from 1952 to 1965.

15. It is interesting to note that only twice within the local chapter's minutes are specific political actions recorded. The National Chapter sent a communique which urged all IODE members to vote for John Diefenbaker. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, members of the local Chapter wrote to George Nowlan, Conservative MP for the Annapolis Valley, urging him to ensure that the Union Jack remained the official

Canadian Flag. Margaret Conrad, author of Nowlan's biography, found that he received more correspondence over the flag issue than any other during his long political career.

16. From a poem by Mrs. Porter in The Acadian, 14 January 1965, 1-4.

17. Source: IODE Membership Lists and Financial Records, (ECWA).

