

Canadian Women's Archives

CANADIAN WOMEN'S ARCHIVES is a regular feature of *Atlantis* and is designed to give a voice to Canadian women who, in the past, have had something to say about the role and condition of women. Diaries, letters, oral history and government documents are just a few of the sources that might usefully be tapped to enhance our understanding of women's history. The Editors of *Atlantis* urge readers to search attics, archives and ash cans for such material and submit it for publication.



Woman's Influence: Evlyn Fenwick Kierstead, 1899

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In 1899, Evlyn Fenwick Kierstead, a young woman of twenty-one delivered a speech entitled, "Woman's Influence", to the steadfast Circle of the King's Daughters in Nova Scotia. The speech is buried among her personal documents which are held at the University of British Columbia's Special Collections. The original, hand-written, almost illegible speech lay in one of Evlyn's scrapbooks. There is no clue as to how or why this speech came to be given. Her surviving children had never heard of it, there is no reference to it in her personal documents, no clues or traces in newspapers, in fact, no reference whatsoever to it, anywhere. Interestingly, there are only two speeches in Evlyn's many volumes of personal documents which span her long life. The other speech was an earlier one delivered in 1894 upon her high school graduation.

Evlyn Fenwick Kierstead was born on August 21, 1878 in Windsor, Nova Scotia.¹ She remained in Nova Scotia until her early twenties where she first completed her Bachelor of Arts and then a Master's degree in Philosophy and German at Acadia University. By the time she had finished her Master's at age 21, Evlyn was an ardent supporter of women's equality. As early as sixteen years of age, Evlyn made the subject of women's rights a priority. At her high school graduation, Evlyn addressed her graduating class on the subject of women in a speech entitled "Dux Femina

Facto", meaning "A Woman Leads the Way." J.W. Longley, the Attorney General at the time, and a notorious advocate of patriarchal values is reported to have "subjected her address to seething criticism" (Victoria Times, April 6, 1917). The speech stressed post-secondary education for women, advocated women's suffrage and made reference to contemporary feminists. The speech set the tone for Evlyn's long-standing commitment to women, stressing as it did education as the most critical factor regarding the advancement of women.

Evlyn's ideas are more fully elaborated in the speech published here. She believed that the influence of women would produce a better civilization. Her ideas on women's purity is a clear statement of what we now label "maternal feminist" views. Feminist theory of today is in direct opposition to much of what Evlyn advocated in 1899. Yet, her nineteenth century Anglo-Saxon values are typical of other feminists of her time and place. She believed that although not all women could attend university, they must stimulate their minds through reading and discussion. Intellectual education for women, whether formal or informal, was still largely unconventional and unpopular. The fact that Evlyn had been asked not to mention higher education for women in her speech and proceeded to ignore this advice shows how strongly she believed in

her cause and its worth. Clearly, women reading this speech today, can see how trapped Evlyn was by the oppressive and restrictive attitudes of the era and she, too, advocated many of the socially dictated roles for women. "Woman's Influence" includes comments on the importance of dress, etiquette and appropriate behaviour by women in the presence of men. These include female passivity, taking an interest in the work of men nurturing their needs, and supporting their beliefs without question.

For six years after graduating from university, Evlyn Kierstead taught high school in Middletown, Connecticut. In 1905, she married fellow Acadia graduate Wallace de Beque Farris, a lawyer in Vancouver, where they made their home and where throughout much of her life Evlyn supported legislative reforms through the University Women's Club, an educational organization she helped found in 1907. She also was a founding member of the Women's Liberal Association of Vancouver in 1915. Her work in these and other women's organizations and her involvement in the Senate and Board of Governors at the University of British Columbia (1912-1942) influenced government legislation regarding social policies affecting women. Evlyn Farris used her influence for social change and for the advancement of university education for women in British Columbia from 1907 until near to her death in 1971 at the age of ninety-three.

Woman's Influence

Madam President, Members of the Steadfast Circle of the King's Daughters, and other friends:

I have been asked to speak to you this evening on the subject of Woman's Influence. Influence has been defined as a controlling power, quietly or efficaciously exerted, woman's influence is coincident with the history of the race. From the earliest days she has been affecting society in its varied forms and interests. Up to the days of

chivalry her power was very limited. However her effect on society increased in chivalric days and her influence was good though necessarily circumscribed by the barren views of that age. When we inquire into the facts of history we find many notable examples of woman's influence, wielded sometimes by those in prominent, sometimes by those in obscure positions. This influence has been—on one side, or the other—either for good or bad. As illustrating this power, we may mention a few of the most notable examples found in history.

In sacred literature we find Adam led out of Paradise by Eve's influence. This was hardly in the right direction. A second is found in the case of Deborah, who going to war influenced Berek to stoop to conquer.

Patriotism finds its most volatile exponent in Joan of Arc, when she incited the men of France to deeds of valor.

"First in the ranks see Joan of Arc advance—
The scourge of England, and the boast of
France."

In works of mercy the labors of Florence Nightingale have been instrumental in providing good nursing for the soldiers who guard our homes and native land.

And in literature, who can deny that the power of Uncle Tom's Cabin in freeing the slave, was of immeasurable value.

These names have all become history. And to these we must add yet another, of Mrs. Frances E. Willard, who but one short year ago [1898] passed from us. Who can fail to admit that her works still follow her and her influence lives in many names in many lands.

This brief and necessarily imperfect mention of the lives and works of a few wonderful women, whose number might be multiplied

indefinitely, will serve to show that in all times, ancient, mediaeval and modern, the influence of women on society had been tremendous.

Now admitting that she has wielded this power, we may very properly ask what gave it to her?

What is it gives power to the mill that grinds the corn: it is the force of the water or steam behind the machinery. What is it that gave strength to the bullets last summer in the War with Spain: the gunpowder behind them, was it not?

So we find that for every effect in physical life there must be an adequate cause and such also is the case in the mental, moral and spiritual world. So if woman is to have influence, there must be some hidden strength, some inherent power. You cannot influence by merely trying to do so. You must be before you can hope to wield any power. Then you will very properly ask, how shall we get this power?

Our nature is threefold, the physical, the mental, the spiritual and it is by bringing these to the highest perfection that we will gain the most influence.

You all know, I suppose, from the preceding addresses to which you have listened with interest, how important it is that your body and its functions should be cared for. You have learned that its health has a great effect on the healthy working of your mind and soul. Cleanliness is next to godliness. Be sure and remember that, and also that bodily purity leads to pure thoughts and aspirations. Regular habits, work, exercise. All these are part of the duties you owe yourself.

Not all of us can be students in the ordinary acceptance of the term, but we can all do our work, whatever it may be in such a way as to give the best possible training to our minds. We can have a certain system in our sweeping, dusting,

working and the like, that will teach our minds to think systematically, and logically. And we all have at least a short time each day when we can read. Though our regular work must not be neglected for it: since in that case our mental nature would gain at the expense of our moral. When you can read, read good literature. Don't let your mind dwell on the murders and other horrors described with such disgusting vividness in the daily paper. Ask some person of good judgement and liberal education to suggest books for you and your gain in a year will be remarkable. This does not at all mean that you must read stupid books. But the abundance of good and cheap magazines and the inexpensive copies of standard stories in nearly all homes put good reading within the reach of many of you.

In regard to your spiritual life, it is helped by the other two since we cannot absolutely divide one side of our nature from the others. But most of all it depends on a knowledge of a personal God to whom you can confide all your petty trials and worries. The nearer you live to the source of all strength, righteousness and purity, the more influence you will have.

Yet I must warn you against the error of thinking that your education is ever completed. Some one has said that "our ideals must have been low ones if we ever attain to them." The striving and struggling against sin must go on, and we must endeavor to develop not only negative virtues but positive ones. It is not the amount we accomplish: it is the spirit in which we try that counts.

"Not on the vulgar mass
Called work must sentence pass,
Things done not took the eye and had the
/price:

O'er which from level stand
The low world laid its hand,
Found straightway to its mind, could value
/in a trice!

But all the world's coarse thumb

no pains to be so? Well because one person is wrong, it does not follow that everyone should be. But are you sure she is as you say? Remember that your hard feeling may make her seem different from what she actually is.

All of us feel at times as if we could not speak pleasantly if our lives depended on it, yet it is astonishing how much we can do by trying. And a sunny even manner is a blessing in any house. Whether it be in the kitchen, study or drawing-room.

In this connection, let me say a few words to you about your speech. We may not all of us be able to speak correctly at all times finest English undefiled, but even if our grammar is faulty there are certain things we can all avoid. The first is the use of slang. Now slang is very oppressive, and it is in this degenerative age very difficult to keep one's speech entirely free from its contaminating influence. But the more you use it, the more you have to use it, because it gradually destroys all your more gentle forms of expression, and some slang is very near to profanity. This using slang is a temptation we all have to struggle against, particularly if we have brothers or cousins, who are walking unabridged dictionaries of slang, and the habit is only overcome by continual watchfulness and correction.

The second point is this. You sometimes hear it said that speech is silver, silence is golden. This is sometimes true but not always. For instance when you hear someone spreading a slanderous or hateful report about some girl, which you know is distinctly false, your words in defense of her are pure gold. You ought to speak them. It is moral cowardice if you don't. And if a girl is poor or friendless or a stranger in a strange land, your kindly words of her to other girls may entirely change the tone of her life. On the other hand, the influence of silence is sometimes the most potent for good. When you are cross or annoyed, if you can keep quiet till you are cool

again, you will never have been lost through hastiness of speech.

What is your manner on the street? Is it such to impress on people's minds that you are a quiet, modest, lady-like girl who shuns remark, or are you loud, noisy—and boisterous? You must answer these questions for yourself, you know. I do not. For we who are students are working hard at home in the evenings, when I suppose the most of you take you exercise.

But to speak to strange men, or in a loud way to those with whom you are acquainted marks you at once as an immodest unladylike girl. You can never hope to influence those men friends as it is your privilege and right to do while you display such familiarity. Be gentle, don't shriek in laughter, don't shout, and don't stay out later than nine o'clock if you can avoid so doing.

Then in regard to your work. Most of us, as I said before, are helpers in somebody's home. There is a verse in the Bible which says, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might," and another, "Whatsoever thou doest, do all to the glory of God."

Now when you sweep a room and don't sweep under the sofa or in the corners, when you neglect to wash all the dishes, do you think you are obeying this command.

The power of work well done is enormous. All great men and women accomplished what they did by faithfully performing small duties. It is absolutely wrong to shirk or half do work. While we are on this matter, of housework and home-making, I want to say a few words in defense of the college girl in that relation. I am afraid some of you think she is a cross between a man and the creature known only by the comic papers, called the New Woman. You were never more mistaken in your lives. I was asked not to advocate the higher education of woman, here this evening. I most certainly would not advise you to go



EVLYN FENWICK KIERSTEAD FARRIS
(courtesy of the City Archives of Vancouver).

to college, but let me defend those who have gone. Some of you think we know nothing about housekeeping. This recalls to my mind a cutting remark made by a lady of this town to a young girl graduate. "Laden with flowers and honors," she said, "Now I hope you'll begin to learn something useful like cooking and sweeping." It was unkind and unnecessary, and whenever that girl sees that woman coming, she goes around the corner to avoid her. You are terribly mistaken if you think we do not appreciate home and housework. The girl who won the medal in my own class was an accomplished cook, and the best French and German scholar in the class can make her own gowns and cook, too. Even the most depraved of us darn our stockings and mend our clothes. And we all know enough to sweep a room before dusting it and to break eggs before trying to beat them.

It is manifestly unfair to take such a view of us. After a man had taken his B.A. degree, he is sent to a medical college if he is to be a doctor. He is not expected at the same time to take lectures in law and to study theology in his vacation. Yet you call marriage the noblest of all professions, quite correctly, too, and yet you think it a disgraceful thing for a girl at nineteen or twenty to leave college not wholly prepared for this profession, when a man has to spend three or four years after his arts course preparing for his career. It is very illogical. Any girl needs a two years course in household matters before she ought to marry and you here tonight are exceptionally fortunate in being able to get a good professional training, for which you not only pay nothing, but are suitably paid for your time. The more thoroughly you do your work the more you will influence those around you, and when that happy day comes when you go to take care of your own house, you will have such knowledge and skill that the words of the Bible will apply to you. "The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her."

So much for our influence in dress, manner and work. Now these relations have been purely personal, confined to our immediate selves, subjective. Let us for the remaining few moments consider our influence in our relations to others (1) in the home as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers, and (2) outside the home, in our relations as servants or teachers, and in our friendships with men. Some of us have the privilege and honor of being daughters in our father's house. Many of us here have the privilege of being King's daughters. The children of a heavenly Father, and the more faithfully we love and obey our heavenly parent, so much more we will love and honor our father and mother. We owe their love and service, and the cheerful performance of these duties can have unbounded influence, since all work well performed carries its weight.

George Eliot has said,
 "But were another childhood world my
 /share
 I would be born a little sister there."

Some of us can never be sisters again. But you, who can, what a glorious opportunity you have. You can be sympathetic with your brother or sister. You can listen to their tale of joy or sorrow. You can teach and help them from your own experience and they will believe you more readily than they will your father and mother because you are nearer their own age. You can help them to have a healthy happy time, and your sweet restraining love will help them to avoid or overcome temptations.

In regard to the relationships of wives and mothers, I fear any remarks of mine will remind you of the proverb that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread." It is especially the influence of a mother to which I wish to refer now, leaving that of a wife to my closing remarks.

I might talk from now till midnight and the half would not then be said of the influence of a

mother. You do not have to be great or wise or slim or highly-educated to be a good mother, though the more you have of these qualities the *better* mother you will be. The first great requisite is love—love your children and again I say unto you love them. Do not be afraid to tell them so. Be interested in their toys, their plays, their friends. Be sympathetic in their little joys and sorrows. Remember how small our joys and sorrows seem to God, and be patient, as He is patient. Don't deceive a child. If you once lie to a child you can never hope to have the same influence. A baby will tell you something and make you promise not to tell. A few moments later you repeat the funny question or ridiculous request to someone and the child overhears you. Now how can he have any confidence in you? His moral nature has suffered a distinct loss. Someone has said, "Every child has an individual character that may be modified by training or by circumstances but can never be wholly changed. Different temperaments require varied treatment, some yielding more and some less to the influences brought to bear on them. Do you realize that you are molding your child's mind by daily touches, each one too slight in itself to effect any result, yet altogether giving it a bias that alters the whole."

Come let us live with our children. Don't neglect them, for social or intellectual or religious Service. Yet don't be a slave to their whims or fancies. Be their mother so that when you are resting under the flowers they may be able to say:

"And now if I could keep her here,
 No sacrifice would be too dear
 No tempered winds for her too mild,
 There would I smooth or kiss her face
 And by her side take my old place
 And sob my years and cares away,
 The tears I have so long repressed
 Would lose their ache upon her breast:
 I think if I could feel her touch
 Once more, it would not matter much
 How sunny or how dark the day.

I love each mother that I see
 That brings my own so near to me;
 For though I never more may frame
 To any who will draw me near
 And answer me with warm caress
 As long as there are mothers here
 No child can be quite motherless."

In those relations outside of the home circle we have that of service. Our class motto was a Latin one, *Studemus Servire*. We study to serve. That is, we were striving to get the best in us developed and trained and to acquire knowledge that we might most faithfully serve the world. We are all in the relation of servant to master. And it depends on ourselves as to what master we shall serve. The only disgraceful thing about any kind of honest labor is: neglecting or half doing it. I think we sometimes make a mistake in being willing to do just what we are paid and nothing more. The servant clerk or teacher who holds too closely to this view is very apt not to do well that for which she is paid. A courteous obliging readiness to occasionally do more than one's share always brings a reward of some kind.

All work is honorable.

All service ranks the same with God.

With God whose puppets best or worst we are, there is no last nor first.

As teachers in whatever department it may be we have a sphere of influence with magnificent opportunities. To help to mold a human being's character is a task angels might essay. That principle which should govern a mother's conduct holds in the case of a teacher. Love, patience, self-control, unselfishness, kindness, added of course to a grasp of one's subject, all these united tend to inspire the pupil to high ideals, noble resolves and earnest work.

And lastly, in our friendships with men, that friendship which has its most perfect type is the

happy marriage. Perfect frankness and honesty make a good basis for any relation. Some girls think it permissible and smart to lie to a man in word or action. No self-respecting girl would treat a woman friend so, why should you a man? Be even tempered and as nearly as possible always the same. To cut a man one day and to be decidedly cordial the next is distinctly bad form.

You can have no influence if you have no stability. Be kind and tactful and charitable. If he speaks to another girl, don't be jealous; if you are, don't show it.

Be interested in his work, no matter what it may be; if he drives a coal cart, or has an office or preaches the gospel. Get him to tell you his views on it, and to explain to you how it is done. You will learn a great deal yourself in this way. Keep his respect by keeping your own. Don't permit him to be familiar. Don't think you can influence him by a silly giggle, gossip or empty chattering or by continually teasing him about the girls. Men friends do a girl good, if they are the right sort of men. They broaden your view of life; even when a man hates anyone, he does not slip up behind and scratch, like a woman. He fights directly and squarely.

If your influence has been for good when a friend, it will be the same as sweetheart and wife. Don't, let me beg of you, don't have anything to do with a man who drinks, never marry him to reform him. If he does not love you enough before marriage to stop what he knows is wrong, he will not after marriage. If he will not sign and keep a pledge to abstain from all liquor, let it break your heart and spoil your life, but don't marry him. Don't marry him unless he is as pure morally as you are. Don't worry for fear you are not worthy of him. Every true pure girl is too good for the man she marries. You you can improve and let your love for him incite you to real honest self-improvement.

Perhaps among so many girls there are some who are going to be happy brides in this next summertime. Your happiness depends largely on your selves. Be sure you love the man enough to go to the end of the world with him. Yet love is not enough. You must honor and respect him with your whole soul, and then you will have a good foundation on which to build. Avoid quarrelling. If a little chord of anger or misunderstanding arises between you, dispel it with a burst of loving sunshine. When he is silent or depressed, don't worry him with foolish questions but wait, and try to cheer him without knowing what the cause of the gloom is; by and by he will tell you of his own free will and you will be glad you didn't bother him. If you decide to marry a man who smokes, who won't give it up before marriage, you need not think he will afterwards, and the best thing to do is to stand it without complaining or scolding. If you dislike it, tell him so before you marry him, but expect to endure it afterwards. It will probably make you ill at first but it is wonderful what horrible things we can become accustomed to. Be as cheerful and bright as you can. Make yourselves look as pretty as you can. It's your right and your duty to do so. Remember that when you were his sweetheart it took you an hour to dress, and nothing was too much trouble. Wear the colors he likes and strive to please him. Don't expect too much of a man as friend or husband. You are not an angel, though he may say so, but a very human girl, with many faults. Don't expect to marry an angel, if you did think how cranky he might be if his wings got ruffled.

I have said to you this evening what I most strongly believe: that your sweetness, your modesty, your purity, your faithfulness all have the greatest power in the home as in society. Character is what gives influence. Cultivate a firm and lovely character and the influence will come.

Girls, knowledge is now no more a fountain sealed.

NOTES

1. For more biographical details see Tami Adilman, "Evlyn Farris and the University Women's Club," in Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess, *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in B.C.* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1980), pp. 147-166.

