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A Woman's Almanac revived after two decade hiatus

By: [Hans Rollmann](#) | November 5, 2016
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Marian Frances White, original editor of the N.L. Woman's Almanac, with a copy of the 2017 edition. Photo by Hans Rollmann.

Thirty years after the first edition was published, and 20 years after the last, 'A Woman's Almanac' is back to document the diversity of struggles and achievements by women in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Thirty years after she began work on the first provincial woman's almanac, writer, poet and activist Marian Frances White looked on Thursday night as a new generation of feminists resurrected it, launching the first Newfoundland and Labrador *A Woman's Almanac* since the annual series ceased publication in 1997.

After a hiatus of almost 20 years, the almanac is back. At the launch of the 2017 edition, St. John's Status of Women Council Executive Director Jenny Wright explained that while going through old boxes in their offices, she and her staff found the old almanacs and were inspired by what they represented.

After reaching out to White for permission, the group partnered with local publisher Breakwater Books to bring the series back to life.

White was visibly moved at Thursday's launch, passing around her copy to those in attendance and asking them to sign it. It was three decades ago, in 1986, when she began working on the first N.L. Woman's Almanac, a project that would run for 10 years.

In addition to serving as an agenda and day planner, the books contained women's art and poetry, as well as biographies of women from across the province. The calendar entries also included some historical information and research on women in this province, as well as astrological information (in "an attempt at relating a woman's twenty-eight day cycle with that of the moon," the book explains).

"Like most of women's work, this almanac was conceived and grew out of a need for its existence. It is hoped that these sketches of women's lives will add to a feeling of pride in ourselves," White wrote in the introduction to the inaugural almanac in 1987.

The information collected within the almanacs continues to serve as a rich source of historical data on women in the province.

The 1987 edition contains a diverse array of information, for instance:

- On Feb. 21, 1986 St. John's resident Mary Williams was part of a women's expedition to the North Pole;

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- In the winter of 1983 the first Women's Studies course was offered at Memorial University;
- In 1986, 13,000 single parents were registered in the province;
- On Feb. 14, 1986 Mary Ann Turnbull of Charlottetown, Labrador became the province's first certified electrical journeywoman;
- In 1986 the Gateway Status of Women Council lobbied against granting licenses to process fish at sea in factory freezer trawlers because it would take jobs away from the women who worked in large numbers in onshore fish plants.

A diversity of struggles

The first edition also reflects a strongly developed awareness of the importance of intersectional feminism. It profiles several Indigenous women. There's Martha Johnson, "Inuit Spanish flu survivor," who as a seven-year-old girl survived alone on an island off the coast of Labrador, protected only by a wild dog after her family died of the flu.

There's also Marilyn John, "Newfoundland Micmac Indian" who fought for recognition for the province's Indigenous Peoples.

In a passage of the 1987 almanac that echoes with particular power today in light of the struggle at Muskrat Falls, John writes: "As aboriginal people we see the right to land as one of our basic rights."

Her passage also corroborates an argument many in the Newfoundland Mi'kmaq community still find themselves making today:

The attitude that the Micmacs are not aboriginal to this island is ridiculous. The Micmac Indians have been in Newfoundland since time immemorial... It seems apparent that many of the people here today are a mixture of Beothuck and Micmac... Today the government is saying that the Beothucks are the aboriginal people. I venture to say that if there were Beothuck people around today to claim aboriginal rights the attitude would be the opposite. I have come to recognize that peoples' attitudes are born out of ignorance. You have to teach people your history and make credible arguments for them to realize that what they have always believed is not necessarily true.

The almanac also celebrated Indigenous dates of note such as the recognition of the Conne River Band being granted official Indian status in 1984, while honouring Indigenous struggles in poetry — "the six foot skeleton / in the museum / tells nothing of genocide," Lillian Bouzanne wrote more than three decades ago.

The '87 Almanac also profiled women with disabilities, such as "Wheelchair Athlete" Joanne McDonald from St. Mary's Bay.

McDonald grew up with Spina Bifida and went on to compete in slalom and basketball competitions around the world. When she first became involved in 1973, she explained in her entry, "there was no such thing as a wheelchair sports association here. No one here had ever heard of people with disabilities taking part in sports.

"This changed after a few people travelled to a national event in Calgary to observe disabled people competing. They returned to Newfoundland demonstrating the hundred metre run, how people threw a shot put and played table tennis. The following year I was invited to compete."

Yet then McDonald discovered most of the sports were male-dominated.

"I find that frustrating because I know there are many, many women in this province and this country who are capable of competing in wheelchair sports. I get annoyed because I see the high percentage of men competing," she wrote.

Such material offers rich documentation to challenge perceptions that struggles around Indigenous rights and recognition of genocide, or equity for people with disabilities, are only recent attitudes and campaigns; three decades ago they were shown to be already well-entrenched struggles.

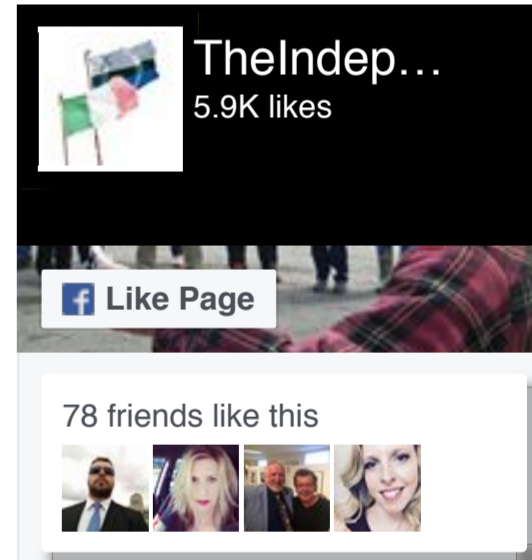
White acknowledges this in the introduction to the 1992 Almanac when she writes, "You are holding more than an agenda book to record and organize your demanding and exciting life, you also have a tool from which to measure your own achievements. With each edition, we are keenly aware that we no longer have to depend on history to acknowledge us; we are creating a permanent record that will clearly state how it has been and how it is for us in the 1990s."

Two decades later...

At the Nov. 3 launch at The Space in downtown St. John's, White and Wright were joined by some of the contributors to the new edition — Gerry Rogers, Amelia Curran, Laura Winters, and Florence Button, who each read from their contributions. The event also featured an aerial acrobatics performance from the troupe run by Anahareo Doelle, who is featured in the almanac.

White is delighted that a new generation has taken on the task she started 30 years ago.

"It is really a dream come true," she said. "I always wondered how this was going to happen again in my lifetime, and I'm thrilled that it has. Because there's so many wonderful stories of amazing, inspiring women that it certainly didn't end when I stopped doing the almanac and it's going to keep



going with a vengeance now.”

The new iteration of the almanac no longer contains astrological symbols, but it does follow the pattern of combining women’s biographies with key dates in provincial women’s history.

Contributors include the likes of Ruth Lawrence, Elizabeth Penashue, Lisa Moore, Zita Cobb, Kaberi Sarma-Debnath and more, while their biographical subjects include such varied characters as Joan Morrissey, Yamuna Kutty, Nanny Francis, and ‘Women of the Labrador Fishery’.

The historical dates reflect shifting agendas and events of the intervening 30 years, as well — from Kathy Dunderdale becoming the first female premier of Newfoundland and Labrador on Dec. 3, 2010, to Kyra Rees’ July 22, 2015 legal victory in winning the right for people to change government identification to match their gender identity.

Amelia Curran, one of the contributors to the 2017 Woman’s Almanac. Photo by Hans Rollmann.

Noted filmmaker, activist and New Democrat MHA Gerry Rogers is one of the new almanac’s contributors, and calls it “a wonderful thing.” She reiterated White’s comment that “if we celebrate ourselves we empower ourselves, and we continue to be able to tell our stories.”

Rogers said she hopes the almanac series will continue to be produced and will showcase a new generation of women’s activism in the province.

“I’m excited about the possibility of younger women and a more diversified collection of women getting represented,” she said. “We need to hear now from a lot more younger women, and from their experience and what we have to learn from them. There’s a young woman here tonight who said ‘Gee, I’d like you to take me under your wing.’ And I thought ‘No, no, no—how about if we walk side by side, and let’s hook wings and we’ll learn from each other.’”

Rogers said that publications like *A Woman’s Almanac* have had an important impact on shaping and inspiring women’s activism in the province.

“Many of the stories and many of the women featured are women who have done things in the past, and also the present, so it gives us a timeline of the activism and of the work. And it shows how change doesn’t just happen, that it’s a lot of really, really hard work. For instance in the piece that I did I looked way back in the early 80s, and talked about how at the women’s centre at that time we were talking about childcare. And hey, we’re still not there! We’re still having to work and push for that.

“So I think that it’s great in that we see how far we’ve come but also how hard we’ve worked, and that our rights are not given to us. Nobody is given rights. We have to work so damn hard for them.”

White concurred, as she looked up from signing books with a smile that reflected both pride and determination.

“I think women are at the front of all movements in this province, and the almanac will just give you a taste of that and what is to come.”

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