

Lives Lived
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Muriel Olive (Scott) Pratt

Wife, mother, grandmother, great grandmother, storyteller and intuitive spirit. Born August 13, 1915 in Armagh, Northern Ireland. Died January 30, 2001 in the Seven Regions Health Centre, Gladstone, Manitoba of chronic lung disease.

Muriel, like many women who matured in the early 1940's, played a role as the emotional and spiritual centre of her household, and in her case this extended to her wider family circle of sisters, brothers, and sister-in-laws, brother-in-laws, nieces and nephews. Although she had six children of her own including my four sisters and one brother and myself, her extensive hospitality meant that this network of extended family members were always welcome in our large farm home at meal time or to stay for a few days. Perhaps it was her earlier dreams of becoming a teacher that led to her strong interest in children and their individual personalities that she felt should be nurtured. Perhaps it was her nature as an intuitive being leading to an ageless knowing about people and how to bring out the best in them. My mother was age 10, when the family immigrated to the dusty plains of Manitoba from the lush green hills of Northern Ireland and for the first few years, they kept asking neighbours where all the flowering trees had gone. One of my sisters, who is more logical by nature, often commented that mother would tell inaccurate stories, while I knew that she simply provided more vibrant colour and imagination to a world that could sometimes be bleak.

Following high school graduation, Muriel applied and was accepted to teachers college, however, as was typical of the time, my grandfather refused to pay the tuition and stated that girls should stay home to help their mothers with the household. As everyone who knew her realized, Muriel never gave up easily on anything she wanted, so she went to the City of Winnipeg anyway to train as a secretary. Romance intervened and in 1939 she married a neighbour, Frank, whose family had emigrated from England to Portage La Prairie and eventually bought the farm next to the Scott family outside Plumas, Manitoba.

With six children to raise, she had ample opportunities to use her skills as wife, mother and teacher, encouraging her children to enjoy learning and to explore life and the wider world outside of the Manitoba borders. Three of the children remained in Manitoba raising their children in small farming communities, while three moved to the urban areas of Ontario and British Columbia. While her nature was strongly nurturing, she also had a critical streak that would not allow her to accept anything but the very best from her children including disciplined behaviour in public. As was common in that era, my father was the emotionally absent parent, although always physically present, leaving the upbringing of the children to mother.

The last ten years of my mother's life were especially difficult. She lost her greatest supporter and friend when my father passed away in 1985, leaving her depressed for the next three years. She struggled with a series of illnesses from emphysema to diabetes and

heart disease and later two incidents of breast cancer. Her independent spirit resulted in her continuing to live alone from 1985 to 1995, even though forced to use a walker to get around during the last five years. When I would arrive for my annual visit, neighbours would comment that they would frequently find her sitting on her walker on the main road into town, obviously tired out. When they would ask her if she wanted a ride, her comment was always “no, I will make my own way. I am just going down the road to my daughter’s house.” Eventually, a neighbour was contracted to become the home care worker and she did an excellent job responding to such unorthodox requests as, “could you plant a few petunias in the front flower box. It looks so bare.” The three urban sisters living in other provinces learned to make separate annual visits to give her some company and to give the two local sisters and one brother a well-deserved break. The next stage was a small nursing home in the next village, Gladstone, Manitoba. Although very resistant at first, several falls at home finally convinced my mother that need for 24-hour care had arrived. What followed were five years of annual visits to Third Crossing Manor where we got to know the kind and caring nurses and health care aides who looked after a group of fragile older people, many of whom had various stages of dementia. Throughout her time in the home, Muriel continued to have a stream of visitors. The nurses often commented about the table in her room full of photographs of family and the numerous post cards and letters she received from places around the world that family had visited. She loved the extra attention she received when her son-in-law would give an annual slide presentation to all of the residents on different trips from around the world.

Throughout her life, Muriel maintained a strong interest in people, their families and their lives and always had a story to tell, although in later life, it became more and more difficult for her to remember and keep the facts straight. This only made the stories more colourful and amusing. During her final years she enjoyed the visits from her large family, the occasional trips to local restaurants and the exchanging of stories about families with the staff of the nursing home.

At her funeral in early February, the values that had shaped her life were evident in her obituary. She had met at least two important goals as teacher, although not in the formal sense, and as a leader and emotional centre of her family circle, the major role of many women from the early 1940’s until the early 1960’s when feminism took root. Would she have lived her life differently, if born in a later generation—probably? Would her six children have gained or lost from that transition—we will never know. She will be sadly missed by her natural family and by her extended family at the Third Crossing Manor.

Karen Gansel

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