A Writing Life: Phebe Florence Miller, the Poet and Postmistress of Topsail

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My post-doctoral project, supported by the Institute for Social and Economic Research at Memorial University of Newfoundland and entitled “A Writing Life: Phebe Florence Miller (1889–1979), Poet and Postmistress of Topsail,” will be an exploration of archival and published life writings by a female Newfoundland poet from this past century. It will bring Miller’s autobiographical texts and the historical discourses informing them into critical focus through an interdisciplinary lens, using feminist, geographical, post-colonial, and postmodern theories. The purpose of the research is to examine a Newfoundland woman’s negotiation of identity within the porous boundaries of auto/biography, place, and history.

Phebe Florence Miller’s parents were Joseph Miller and Emma Allen, both of whom were descendants of founding families of Topsail, a town of only a few hundred people on the southern shores of Conception Bay. The fourth of five children, she was educated at the Methodist School in Topsail where she was a successful candidate in the Council of Higher Education exams. Choosing not to pursue a career in teaching, Miller worked as a government telegraph operator starting in 1907. In 1928 she was appointed postmistress, and in 1935 she moved to the newly created wireless station where she remained until her retirement in 1942. Unmarried and childless, Miller devoted most of her passion to her writing life. Her archival record, which includes hundreds of poems, 43 volumes of her personal diary, 2 journals written for a public audience, and over 60 years of correspondence, is a testament to this fact.¹

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1 P. Florence Miller Collection, Coll-016, Archives and Special Collections, Memorial University of Newfoundland. All further archival references are to this collection.

From 1916, Miller's poetry was widely published in Newfoundland, appearing regularly in the St John's *Evening Telegram* and the magazines *The Veteran* (1920–49) and *The Newfoundland Quarterly* (est. 1901), among other publications. In 1929 a volume of her poetry, entitled *In Caribou Land*, was published by The Ryerson Press of Toronto. In his introduction to this collection of Miller's work, E.J. Pratt wrote that "Newfoundland is in this poetry, with the accent on the last syllable."² Miller also brought her vision of Newfoundland to a Canadian audience in the early 1920s through her winning entries to Dr Chase's Great Almanac Contest in 1920, 1921, and 1924.³

My study will tell us more about the "lives and times"⁴ of Newfoundland women of this time period and will contribute to life-writing studies by expanding discussion of the genres of letters, diaries, and poetry. It will also showcase a rare, and perhaps unique, phenomenon in rural Newfoundland in the 1920s and '30s – the existence of a literary salon in a small, semi-rural community. Miller's correspondence and diaries make reference to her "Blue Castle," a library in her grandfather's small house in Topsail where visitors (such as fellow Newfoundland poets Mina Brown and Edwin Duder) played literary games, held musical recitals and poetry readings, and enjoyed general discussions of literature of all sorts. It is also the place where Miller, in a journal entry of 8 September 1938, says, "the story of my life is written."⁵ Examining such a phenomenon will certainly lend greater insight into the identity of the woman who created this extraordinary literary environment, the people who were part of it, and the place in which it occurred.

I am unsure of the source from which Miller took the name of The Blue Castle. Perhaps it was a tongue-in-cheek reference to that

The journals written for a public audience were those Miller submitted to Dr Chase's Great Diary Writing Contest. These, along with other documents in Miller's papers, were written in handmade books.

- 2 E.J. Pratt, Introduction, in *In Caribou Land* by Phebe Florence Miller (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1929), 1.
- 3 John K. Crellin notes that Dr Chase's almanacs, originating in Toronto, boasted a circulation of 1.7 million copies in 1926, and that copies were sent, free of charge, to every household in Newfoundland (*Home Medicine: The Newfoundland Experience* [Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994], 20–21).
- 4 See Carmelita McGrath, Barbara Neis, and Marilyn Porter, eds., *Their Lives and Times: Women in Newfoundland and Labrador, A Collage* (St John's: Killick Press, 1995).
- 5 Phebe Florence Miller, journal entry, 8 September 1938, file 1.01.005.

quintessential seventeenth-century Parisian salon, the famous *chambre bleue* of Madame de Rambouillet.⁶ Based on her diary and journal entries, plus letters to Edwin Duder and Mina Brown, it is obvious that Miller liked to play the part of the *salonnière*, inspiring her guests with witty conversation and luminous company, in the tradition of the great salons of pre-revolutionary France. Or, it may be that that she based its name on the 1926 L.M. Montgomery novel entitled *The Blue Castle*. In this book, a young unmarried woman dreams of a palace where she is free to be herself, outside the confines of proper society. Miller does refer to the Blue Castle as a “Place of Dreams”⁷ in much the same way that the character of Valancy Stirling talks about her Blue Castle in the Montgomery novel.

Phebe Florence Miller is a writer once regarded as one of the pre-eminent poets in the Dominion of Newfoundland. As Patrick O’Flaherty maintains, “A postmistress from Topsail where she was born, Miller was a poet of ability, as E.J. Pratt recognized. Her work is a rare attempt to use (or hint at use of) what she imagined was Newfoundland dialect in formal lyric poetry. In this respect, she resembles to some degree a poet like Robert Burns.”⁸ Yet, Miller is virtually unknown today. To bring her life and writing back into the public consciousness would be to reinvigorate a significant part of Newfoundland and Labrador’s socio-cultural heritage, and add yet another piece to the intricate mosaic of Canadian women’s life writing.

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Ce projet revoit la biographie et l’œuvre de la poétesse terre-neuvienne Phebe Florence Miller (1889–1979). Il met surtout l’accent sur le salon littéraire appelé « The Blue Castle » présidé par Miller elle-même dans sa maison familiale située dans la communauté semi-rurale de Topsail, Conception Bay, durant les années 1920 et 1930.

6 See Nicole Aronson, *Madame de Rambouillet, ou, la magicienne de la Chambre bleue* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).

7 She uses this phrase in a letter to Edwin F. Duder in 1945 (file 6.05.013).

8 Patrick O’Flaherty, “Literature in Newfoundland,” in *The Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, ed. Cyril Poole, Robert Cuff, and J.R. Smallwood (St John’s: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1981), 1: 327.