

Obituaries

KAY REX, REPORTER AND WRITER 1918-2006

As a single-minded young journalist she brought an early form of feminism to the newsrooms of Canadian Press and The Globe and Mail. Later, she wrote a history of the Canadian Women's Press Club

BY NOREEN SHANAHAN, TORONTO

In 1942, Kay Rex asked the managing editor of the London Free Press for a job. "I'd never let a daughter of mine become a reporter," he told her.

It turned out to be an introduction to 40 years in journalism.

It also became the title of her 1995 book, *No Daughter of Mine*, a tribute to the Canadian Women's Press Club, a place where Ms. Rex found sanctuary, support and inspiration.

Beginning in 1904, the club's earliest members included Nellie McClung, L.M. Montgomery, and Emily Murphy. Fifty years later, Ms. Rex joined the club and, shortly after its demise in the early 1970s, she decided to record its history. "What remains are the stories of the women who were its members," she wrote.

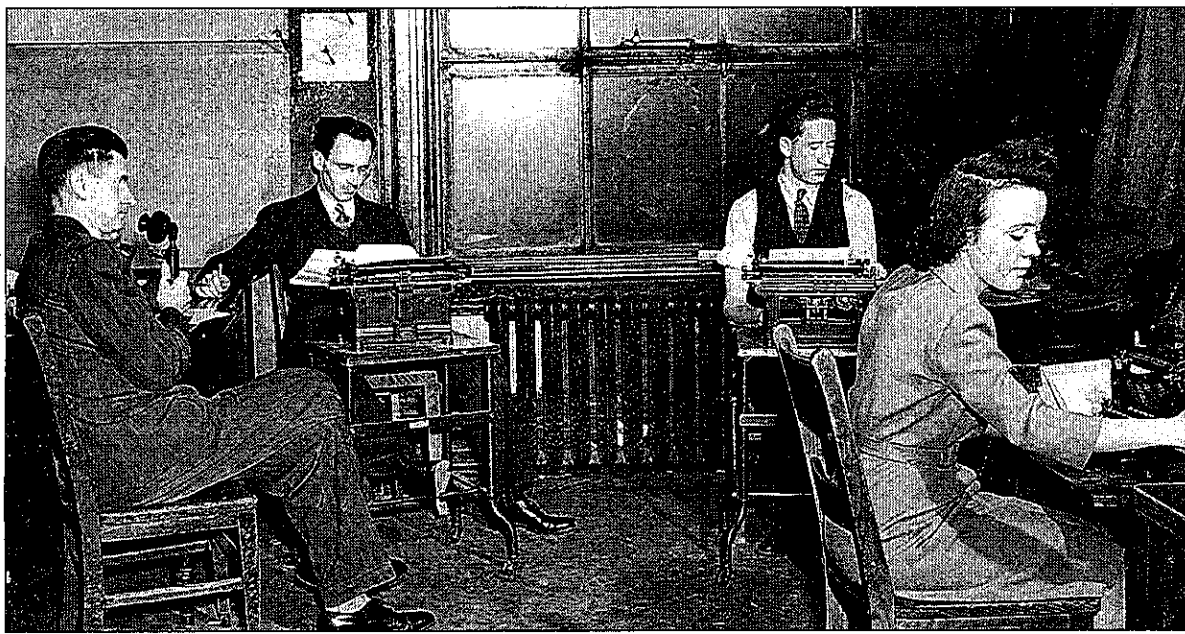
There's the story of Margaret (Miggys) Graham, a young Ottawa reporter who burst into her editor's office in 1904 to complain that all the men on the paper were getting free trips to the St. Louis World's Fair. Why couldn't she go, too? Okay, he said, if you can come up with the names of a dozen women journalists, I'll send the lot of you. Ms. Graham provided the names of 16 women journalists then working in Canada, and the idea for the Canadian Women's Press Club was hatched on the train on the way back from St. Louis.

"The CWPC became the only press club of its kind in the world," Ms. Rex wrote. "It played a tremendous role, leading and encouraging the success that women journalists enjoy today."

Kathleen Rex was the daughter of Lionel and Grace Rex of Woodstock, Ont. The elder of two children (she was big sister to brother Kenneth), young Kay, as she later became known, grew up a young girl in love with words. She nurtured an ambition to write and found support in a Sorbonne-educated aunt who taught French at the University of Western Ontario during the early years of the 20th century. Frances Kay Montgomery ultimately encouraged her niece toward six decades as a writer.

Ms. Rex landed her first job in 1941, fresh from university, at the Woodstock Sentinel, the local daily newspaper. She stayed for a year and then joined Canadian Press working in CP bureaus in Vancouver, Ottawa and Toronto from 1942 to 1953.

Gill Purcell, the legendary editor



Kay Rex in the Vancouver office of Canadian Press, circa 1942. She spent 10 years at the news co-operative before joining the Globe and Mail in 1959, below right. In her retirement, she crisscrossed the country to research her history, *No Daughter of Mine*. Privately, she also wrote much fiction.

and general manager at CP, wrote her an excellent reference letter: "She has handled a great deal of women's copy for our feature service and has reported for us a number of national women's conventions. Her ability to get along well with large women's organizations, indeed with all sorts and conditions of people, has been of particular value."

After CP, Ms. Rex moved on to the CBC but little is known of her work at the broadcaster other than she was some sort of "program co-ordinator." Some time around this period, she began working for a fashion magazine in Montreal called *Style*. Although the magazine no longer exists, one can speculate that its content did not suit her developing feminist interests. In any event, it wasn't long before she decided to take off for Mexico City and try her luck as a freelancer.

In 1959, she took a crack at joining *The Globe and Mail*. Her application letter to *The Globe* — where she worked until 1983 — is an artifact from a dead age. Typed crookedly, and faint with faltering letters, it names her parents as "A.L. Rex and the late Mrs. Rex." Clearly some of Kay's feminism was waiting to be awakened. As it turned out, much of her education in women's issues came directly from the stories she wrote.

"She was in the women's department ghetto at first," said her friend Joan Hollobon, a former *Globe and Mail* colleague. "But in the wild and woolly world of the old newspaper types, if something particularly interested you on your beat you made it big or you made it little."

Some women's issues that Ms. Rex "made big" concerned poverty, daycare, immigration, health, employment and peace. She helped introduce into the Canadian lexicon the names of such organizations as the Voice of Women, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women — and even the word "feminist."

At the same time, however, there existed a kind of fluff around the edges of her words, presumably to appease anxious editors and a wary public. She straddled a fine line, writing in conservative times, when boys were boys and girls were girls.

For instance, in 1962 she de-



scribed a women's meeting as: "Es-kimo women in their best parkas and beaded footwear came to a tea given for Mrs. Peter Robinson [president of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire] during her visit to Tuktoyaktuk."

A few years later, she profiled a Toronto women's art exhibit called the "basement artists." The painters were mostly young mothers — none of them were named — who were forced to work under challenging conditions. "There are women who make anything do for a studio," she wrote. "The basement recreation room, a corner near the laundry tubs, and who, of necessity, must work by artificial light."

One artist carried her sketch board around the house so she could keep an eye on her three little girls. "She used to find the lighting beautiful directly underneath the window but this was too near the ironing board, so she moved."

Kay Rex recorded similar stories in *No Daughter of Mine*. Edna Jacques, whom Nellie McClung called "the Scrapbook Poet," was a Saskatchewan writer who published at least nine collections of poetry during the 1920s. "When poems are cut out of newspapers, pinned above the sink, and committed to memory by busy women in house dresses as they peel potatoes or wash dishes, has not such a poet achieved fame?"

Back at *The Globe*, Ms. Rex continued to make progress. More hard-hitting pieces, with her byline attached, moved a little bit closer to the front pages. "300 Irate Canadian Women" read a 1962 headline. Ms. Rex wrote how most of these women, peace activists from Quebec led by Thérèse Casgrain, president of Voice of Women, arrived in



MAYER'S STUDIOS

Ottawa by train. "Some brought toddlers and babes in arms."

"Native activist honoured" tells how Mary Two-Axe Earley, feminist and activist on behalf of native women, received an honorary degree at York University.

She also wrote about an early training program in Toronto where immigrant women from Portugal and Italy were given courses in English, mathematics and industrial sewing-machine operations. "Some of the women have been in Canada only a few months. Some have had jobs in laundries, on assembly lines in factories. Others haven't worked at all. All have been handicapped because of their inability to speak English."

Ms. Rex's developing interest in women's issues, particularly concerning independence and financial security, was also reflected in personal choices she made. Joan Hollobon describes how one day Ms. Rex looked around the newsroom, thinking, "Who could I buy a house with? Who could I trust?" and spotted her. The two women lived together for 25 years.

"I became very, very fond of Kay. When you look after people, and they're not at their best, you get attached. Buying the house was a brilliant thing! It means that now, at 86, I'm able to take care of myself."

Ms. Rex was a tough nut with a kind heart. She was persevering and determined, Ms. Hollobon said. When driven by a cause, she just plowed on; nothing stopped her. She was a good reporter, took it

seriously, and was dead accurate. "Her book was that. It was a chore, took a lot of work, and she stuck to it because she felt the press club deserved to be put on record."

As it turned out, *No Daughter of Mine* became a retirement project. Researching it took her across Canada to interview subjects, many of them elderly women whose struggles for acceptance 50 and 60 years earlier had helped pave the way for the young Canadian women journalists and writers of today.

Terry Murray, *Medical Post* journalist and author of the recently published *Faces on Places*, remembers first meeting Ms. Rex in the 1970s and being immediately impressed — mostly with her grey-to-white hair. "From my vantage point in my early 20s she seemed like a little old lady," she said. "Until I got to know her and found that she didn't fit the stereotype at all. She was a sharp reporter who'd had a long history as a journalist."

"I didn't fully realize just how pioneering she was until her book came out but I knew she was gutsy. I mean, she decided to learn to drive when she was 60! She was a role model for me, journalistically and personally."

But, Joan Hollobon said, her great love lay much less in reporting than in fiction. "I've got boxes and boxes of her short stories. She would've loved to be an Alice Munro."

Actor John Drainie read several of her stories on his CBC show, though none were published. Friends recall them often being about young women. One featured a prostitute's interaction with an old man who told her she looked like his daughter. Another story focused on the dynamics of a family reunion that perhaps harked back to her days in Woodstock.

After she had retired from *The Globe and Mail*, Ms. Rex became president of the Toronto branch of the Canadian Authors Association. "She was particularly helpful to young writers," said Eleanor McEachern, who served as her vice-president but had no idea she had written short stories.

And yet there is more. While rooting among boxes, Ms. Hollobon also stumbled upon a novel-in-progress. The discovery came as a great surprise and provided her with proof that the quiet, reticent friend had been a force to be reckoned with. The novel, typewritten and etched with Ms. Rex's editing marks, is set just after the Second World War and tells the story of a Southwestern Ontario town whose populace struggles to adjust to a changing world, both politically and personally.

"I never even knew she had started a novel!" Ms. Hollobon said. "She was a mixture of being very firm and determined and outspoken about things felt strongly about and very modest and reticent about other things. I look at this writing and I think: I didn't even really know this woman. There's so much more I'd like to know."

Kathleen Amelia Rex was born Sept. 21, 1918, in Woodstock, Ont. She died of heart failure in Toronto on July 10, 2006. She was 87. She leaves her brother Kenneth Rex and her friend Joan Hollobon, both of Toronto.

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