

# MINNIE HALLOWELL BOWEN (1861–1942): THE PAPERS OF AN UPPER-CLASS ANGLOPHONE WOMAN FROM SHERBROOKE

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Minnie Hallowell Bowen descended from and married into prominent families of the Eastern Townships: the Hallowells who came to Canada as United Empire Loyalists, and the Bowens, who emigrated from Ireland. Members of these families took an active part in Canadian and regional politics and land development, and they were appointed to high-ranking positions in the civil service. Minnie Bowen was born in Sherbrooke on February 4th, 1861, the daughter of lawyer John Hallowell and Helen Maria Clark. She was educated in private schools and taught for twelve years. In 1890, she married Cecil H. Bowen, son of George Frederick Bowen, Prothonotary of the District of St. Francis and first mayor of the city of Sherbrooke (1852–1854). Minnie Bowen was active in such philanthropic, religious, patriotic and cultural associations as the Women's Missionary Society, the Sherbrooke Patriotic Association, the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, the Women's Conservative Association, the Canadian Authors' Association, and the Sherbrooke Choral Society. She published six books and booklets of poetry and wrote literary texts that were published in newspapers and periodicals.



*Minnie Hallowell Bowen.*  
(Source: Sally Bowen Collection)

Minnie Bowen had a deep sense of patriotism. She promoted the idea of a Canadian flag in newspaper articles and in talks; she had an important correspondence with federal politicians about this issue; and she even designed and made a flag proposal consisting of the White Cross of Sacrifice upon the Red Ensign and the Union

Jack in the left upper corner. She died in Quebec City in 1942 and was buried in the Elmwood Cemetery in Sherbrooke.

In 1998, Ms. Sally Bowen generously donated the first lot of her grandmother's personal papers to the Archives Department of the Eastern Townships Research Centre. The fonds contains source material mainly related to Minnie Hallowell Bowen's literary writings and on her involvement in the Canadian flag issue during the first decades of the 20th century. Many of her writings relate to local events, to the world wars, and to Canadian and British politics. The fonds also provides information on the activities of Minnie's family members: her husband, Cecil H. Bowen; her son, Lloyd H. Bowen; her daughter, Rose Meredyth Bowen; and Henry Bowen, Edward Bowen, Eleazar Clark, George Frederick Bowen, John Hallowell, William Bowen, Frank A. Bowen, Frederick Chamberlin Bowen, and Edward Hugh Bowen. The documents show the family's involvement in the development of railways, the mining industry, the Armed Forces and Militia, scouting, and social clubs and associations. Some documents refer to the Fenian Raids, the Knights of Columbus, and the history of Sherbrooke. The fonds includes manuscripts, correspondence, photocopies of press clippings, articles, publications, photographs, diaries, prospectuses, and drawings. It comprises the following series: Literary Works and Other Writings ([189-?]-[193-]), Involvement in the Canadian Flag Issue ([1897?]-[1935?]), Tributes to Minnie Hallowell Bowen (1911, 1942), Lloyd H. Bowen (1865-[1943?]), Cecil H. Bowen (1866-[193-?]), Other Family Members (1818-1933), and History of Sherbrooke ([193-?]). Researchers may consult more archival material relating to the Bowen family at the Centre de l'Estrie of the Archives nationales du Québec. Nine volumes of music sheets owned by Jessie Bowen and Eliza Wyatt Bowen are available at the Bishop's University Library.

Minnie Bowen was a prolific writer of poems, stories, plays, and legends. Her poems appeared in *The Sherbrooke Telegram*, *The Sherbrooke Daily Record*, *The Montreal Daily Star*, *The Gazette*, *The Algoma Missionary News*, *The Quebec Chronicle Telegram*, the Canadian Authors' Association *Yearbooks*, and in pamphlets or booklets that she herself published from Sherbrooke. Her many publications attest to the fact that the contents of her verses, and the form in which they were written, were welcomed by the editors and readers of Quebec's daily newspapers. However, her inability to interest the editors of any of the literary journals or publishing houses of the day points to an abiding weakness or problem in her work.



*Minnie Hallowell Bowen, c. 1894. (Source: Sally Bowen Collection)*

Minnie Bowen grew up and lived practically all her life in the small, affluent, sheltered society of upper-class anglophone Sherbrooke. She was educated there and married a man very much like herself. It is understandable that from an early age she would imbibe the values of that society and conclude that what had worked very well for her would be equally appealing to her audience. She was no doubt encouraged to believe this by the evident praise and approval she received from members of her own class and community. However, the patriarchal, elitist, colonial mindset with its devotion to duty, king and country, British imperialism, respectability, and the Christian truths as formulated by the Canadian Anglican Church, which guided Minnie Bowen through the first forty-five years of her life, was called into question by the generation that survived World War I. In Canada, the immigrants of eastern Europe who had been arriving in large numbers since the late 1890s were beginning to make their presence felt. There was an increasing demand for made-in-Canada policies as the Canadian nation became more self-aware and more critical of its ties with Britain. In Sherbrooke, the population had become majority francophone in the 1880s, and the old anglophone ruling class was on its way out. In the world of literature, the rising force of modernism set out to challenge and overthrow the literary heritage, which Canada had taken from Victorian and Edwardian England. However much Minnie Bowen might have been aware of these developments in her daily life, she does not appear to have thought them worthy of expression in her literary works. The impres-

sion we receive from her poetry is that she was firmly locked into the Victorian and Edwardian mindset she had grown up with. Consequently, her work has historical interest as an expression of the values of Quebec's anglophone upper-class, but unfortunately it has much less literary interest.

The following poems will serve as illustrations of her fervent, stern, and unquestioning view of war, patriotism, and the British connection. The first poem, titled "Canada's Lament," was written at the time of the Boer War when Sir Wilfrid Laurier was Canada's Prime Minister. It sets out her basic political allegiances. Note the references to the flag, a theme to which she would return later in life.

Oh! for just one little hour! with our old-time chief in power!  
 To be ruled—as we were ruled by good Sir John!  
 Now we drift and vacillate. When he steered the Ship of State,  
 The world could know the course that we were on.  
 Are we heading down the wind, leaving Britain far behind?  
 Or for just a small Republic (as they say!)  
 Or the great United States, where the hungry Eagle waits?  
 Will you tell us? angry shade of good John A.  
 It was "Britain and her Duty," and "the Empire and the Flag,"  
 And he never once forgot them for a day;  
 It was "Leave your selfish ends, cease your sulking and be friends."  
 In the days when we were ruled by Sir John A.

Now, with Wilfrid on the throne, so meek-spirited we've grown—  
 As he tells us what our duty is to be—  
 That we do not care at all though Old England on us call,  
 And the transports bear the regiments to sea.  
 Yes! New Zealanders may go with their faces to the foe,  
 And Australians die a-fighting far away;  
 We may "resolute" and "brag," but we mustn't help the Flag,  
 For he who rules the country says us "nay."  
 It is "any flag will do," with a certain subtle crew  
 (You can buy it by the yard, in colours gay),  
 And they do not care at all if a well-loved ensign fall—  
 And it mattered such a lot—to Sir John A.  
 Could he see us here below—could our brave old chieftain know,  
 We have failed to take our place at England's side;  
 How his loyal heart would bleed, that in war's stern hour of need—  
 The country that he led should turn and hide.

. . . . .

He was always strong for "Britain," and for "Duty," and the "Flag,"  
 And he never once forgot them for a day;  
 It was "keep your rifles clean" and "God save our gracious Queen!"  
 In the days when we were ruled by Sir John A.

These views were enunciated much more forcefully when World War I broke out in August 1914. The following poem, "The Call to Arms," was written on August 4 of that year:

What is this call that holds the land  
In breathless hope and dread?  
What trumpet nerves the living arm  
And moves the mighty dead?  
The voice has filled the Nation's heart  
Like sudden burning flame,  
The Call to Arms! that Britain's sons  
May guard her deathless fame!  
No soul can hear that solemn call  
Without an answering thrill—  
No heart behold the face of war  
And bid its pulses still!  
This is the hour our lives pay back  
The love Great Britain gave,  
Nor shall our march be stayed by death  
Nor daunted by the grave!

Deep is the debt we owe for strength  
For Freedom and for Laws,  
To Her who in the hour of need  
Upheld with might our cause.  
Then by the ties of gratitude  
And loyalty held fast,  
Those links that bind a nation's soul  
Divinely to its past—  
Rise for the Empire! One in heart!  
Clear on the stormy way  
Is Duty's star—go forth to meet  
The issue of the day!  
The God of Battles rules on high—  
The nations are as dust  
Arm! for our country calls her sons!  
Strike! for the cause is just!

Another poem, "The Soldier," evidently written about the same time, expresses her view of what was expected of Canadian young men:

A man must love his country well,  
Do all his manhood can,  
To keep her honour shining clear—  
Or cease to be a man,  
And if to save her from a foe

War be the only way  
 His body must be yielded up,  
 The price that he must pay.  
 If knowledge of the Truth of God  
 Be crushed on sea or land,  
 His soul must thrust aside all ease  
 To hear a stern command.  
 Though safety plead the tyrant's cause  
 And comfort lend advice,  
 His soul alone may counsel him—  
 His body pay the price.  
 Thus will the soldier enter war—  
 Not filled with greed or hate,  
 But facing death that Freedom's cause  
 May stand inviolate;  
 With Duty as his daily bread.  
 Devotion for the cup  
 In which the wine of sacrifice  
 Is surely lifted up.

As we see in "There Is No Peace," Mrs. Bowen was not daunted by the mounting casualty rates as the war dragged on:

Our sons have died in glory that righteousness be done!  
 They passed in countless numbers before the fight was won!  
 The line for which they struggled—the cause for which they died  
 They gave to our remembrance before The Crucified.  
 We shall not break that promise, we shall not lose that gain,  
 Our souls shall go to meet them without betrayal's stain,  
 There is no peace but battle—there is no truce but pain  
 Until the Right they fought for returns to earth to reign.  
 O Heroes in God's presence! Beloved in His light!  
 We follow in thy footsteps to conquer in the fight.

For Mrs. Bowen, God, righteousness, and the British Empire were as one, and she appears never to have faltered in her conviction.

In the late 1920s Minnie Bowen took an active part in the flag debate. In her poem, titled "The Flag," she expressed her almost mystical view that the Union Jack should remain Canada's flag:

The Flag has given us all we hold most dear:  
 Honour and truth and purity and love—  
 Courage and that strong purpose that shall dare  
 The torturer's knife—or that long lassitude  
 Of unmarked, dreary days, so Right be done;  
 Because it is the Cross that in the Flag

Brings all the beauty and the use of life  
 And binds them into one. So men shall see  
 It is the Cross that shines throughout the Flag  
 And makes it and the Empire glorious;  
 Hallows the hero-deeds beneath its sway—  
 Sheds inspiration on the common lives  
 That toil for it—on the unnumbered graves  
 That mark the path of Empire, leaves its light,  
 The royal splendour of the triple Cross—  
 And wraps the victors of its peace or war  
 In the immortal glory of its folds!

This is our Flag! so great that we must keep  
 Our lives in nobler seeming for its sake—  
 So holy that it consecrates and holds  
 All strong endurance to its high ideal!

Her tendency to equate changing values with moral decline is expressed in a poem she wrote for the students of Bishop's University in June of 1938:

March on, young lives! And raise this sickened world  
 To greater heights. Chase Demons!—Break the hold,  
 Unseen—but pitiless, of false ideals  
 That keep in deepest slavery those souls  
 They have subdued! Remember in distress,—  
 Deceiving, dark and intercepting mists  
 Disperse and vanish in the upward climb;  
 The ominous valley, threatening dire dismay  
 Will fill with sunshine, as the heights attained  
 Give larger vision,—for eternal Truth  
 Waits ever on the mountains of the soul.

There were, however, other sides to Minnie Bowen that achieved expression in her poetry. Apparently she had a sense of humour as we see in the following undated poem, titled "The Flu":

When Mrs. Tomkins has the Flu,  
 She does as women ought to do,  
 She heeds her husband's accents dread,—  
 "Now Emily! go straight to bed!"  
 With handkerchief to reddened nose  
 And most unwilling step,—she goes.  
 She leaves the baking and the stew  
 (She does as women ought to do)  
 Tells Mary Ann to "Do her best."  
 And seeks abhorred and gruesome rest.

The next poem, fortunately without the hubby-knows-best philosophy of the previous example, was apparently written for children. Titled "The Cow," it is undated.

"I have four stomachs" said the Cow,  
 "They came to me I know not how!  
 In days when I had only one  
 I used to frisk when meals were done;

Now, when I sit me down to tea  
 I have to fill the other three!  
 I lunch and dine and sup all day,  
 And have no time at all to play.

Of old, when I went out to tea  
 One modest cup sufficed for me;  
 But now,—with shame my hide turns pale—  
 I drink it by the twelve-quart pail!

One stomach sometimes causes strife,—  
 But four take every joy from life!  
 It's very hard, as all allow,  
 I am a most unhappy cow!

Among the most appealing of Minnie Bowen's verses were the personal expressions she allowed herself from time to time. The following undated poem, titled "Grey Hair," expresses a thought that crosses the minds of those confronting the onset of old age:

Turn white and let her go the way of man—  
 Hair that was gold!  
 Give up the fight with Time—these phantom shades  
 So manifold.  
 Each pause brings back the glamour of lost years:—  
 You turn the page,—  
 Hope dies before the coming of quick fears;—  
 She sees Old Age.

Give now the recompense—a silver crown  
 Inlaid with peace,—  
 With gems from strong desires her soul laid down,—  
 From wars that cease;  
 The royal dignity, serene and mild  
 A life may keep  
 When, in the snows of age—God's little child,  
 She falls asleep.

The collection includes several poems that deal directly with nature, but more interesting are her poems and legends of the East-



ern Townships. Two of her longer chapbooks, *Winnowaia* and *The Story of the Lone Pine*, are retellings of Indian legends of the Townships in prose and poetry. Her intention, according to Frank Oliver Call in his 1935 Foreword to *Winnowaia*, was to assist in the creation of a body of local myth or legend, so that Canadian writers would have interesting source material to draw upon. In these chapbooks, as in several of her poems, Mrs. Bowen praised the beauty of the Townships landscape. Not all of these poems are successful, but the undated poem “Loneliness” is interesting—perhaps because we find her experimenting in free verse and in a more contemporary diction:

In the early evening  
The canoe slipped far from shore,  
Under the urge of their paddles  
It floated on the lake  
Its green length mirrored on the surface,  
The water, like a grey inverted bowl,  
Curved to the lighter sky,  
The liquid metal of the rippled waves,  
Pattined with silver,  
Moved in geometric changes  
Ceaselessly,  
Lifting the canoe with soothing motion,  
There, between lake and sky  
In a grey world,  
They two drifted together.  
No one else  
Was in that dim immensity  
To hold them apart;  
Yet, each one,—  
Like a thought imprisoned  
In an iridescent bubble,  
Gay or sombre,  
lived in a little world,  
Alone.

The following poem, titled “To My Critic” (for Anne Merrill) is endearing in its humility and self recognition:

You pared my phraseology  
Until at last it stood  
As seemly as the theme allowed  
And as of course it should.  
  
You didn’t like the chilly hand,  
You’re not to blame too much—

I find myself, it's creepy  
When it gets you in its clutch!

For laughter and for longing  
You hadn't any use—  
Such sentimental rhetoric  
Has seen too great abuse.

My metaphors and fancies,  
All vague and never clear,  
You took command of, instantly,  
And threw out on their ear.

In fact, you were quite justified  
When from the hopeless mess,  
You drew this pretty poem  
In its lovely fancy dress.

It's travelled so, between us,  
It has vexed you night and day,  
I hesitate to send it  
Once again upon its way.

Yet we've polished it so fully,  
We've eliminated spice  
We've cut the airy rambling  
And now it's rather nice.

But if again it journeys  
Back to me, its verses read,  
I shall never see it printed,  
For I know that I'll be dead.

It has just occurred to conscience  
That it isn't mine at all—  
You have been its true creator—  
It's your work, to stand or fall.

So take your little poem,  
And I wish you joy, my dear—  
I hope you know who wrote it—  
For I've tried to make it clear!

Towards the end of her life, Minnie Bowen decided to give up her childhood home in Sherbrooke and spend her remaining years with her daughter in Lévis, Quebec. In September 1939, soon after her arrival in her new home, she wrote "Goodbye to Sherbrooke":

Dear Loveliness, forever stay with me!  
When I shall go to other distant scenes  
And leave the well-loved home with all it means,  
Do not forsake my soul but live again  
In Memory, with every joy and pain  
That moulded life as God would have it be;  
Dear Loveliness, forever stay with me!

Dear Love and Friendship, ever with me stay!  
Abiding treasure from departed years,  
Whose solace neither fails nor disappears:  
In shadowed valleys, only your kind light  
Could guide uncertain steps and conquer night;  
Not Death itself your life can take away!—  
Dear Love and Friendship, ever with me stay!

Unfortunately for Mrs. Bowen and her colleagues in the Canadian Authors' Association, the modernists eventually triumphed and swept away most of the poetry of their predecessors. There may come a time when the balance will be somewhat righted, but given the enormous changes that swept over Canada during the twentieth century, it is difficult to foresee a return of the mindset that would make a revival of the poetry of Minnie Bowen possible.

