#### The Poet Anne Wilkinson and Her Connections to London

(as of May, 2024 this is version is slightly revised)



photograph 1 Anne in Egypt 1929 (Coldwell, 1992) p.161

The article on Beechwood by Ailie Cleghorn in the 2023 Spring issue of the LMHS newsletter prompted me to re-acquaint myself with the poet Anne Cochran (Gibbons) Wilkinson (1910-1961).

The last owner of Beechwood was Edna Theresa (Gartshore) Cleghorn (1877-1967). Edna had a son, Robert Allen Cleghorn (1904-1995). One of Robert Cleghorn's friends happened to be Frederick Robert Wilkinson (1905-1959). who married our poet, Anne Gibbons, in 1932<sup>1</sup>.

Anne Cochran (Gibbons)

Wilkinson's (ACW) life was one of privilege, tragedy, and genius. Her privilege came from her Osler and Gibbons heritage; her tragedy from various unfortunate life events; and her genius from her gifts with the English language.

Anne Wilkinson (ACW) only lived in London a short time, at 536 Ridout St N., until about the age of 9 when her father George Sutton Gibbons (1881-1919), a London lawyer, died. Her mother and the three children then moved to Craigleigh<sup>2</sup> the 13 acre estate in Toronto's Rosedale owned by ACW's maternal grandfather, Sir Edmund Boyd Osler (1845-1924).

Her connections to London were many, as by marriage and by blood she was related to several prominent families, notably Harris<sup>3</sup>, Askin, Little, Ryerse, Gunn, with her paternal grandfather being London's Sir George Christie Gibbons.

All these inter-relations also tie her back to Beechwood, as the marriage loops McClary/Gartshore/Gunn/Cleghorn and Gibbons/Harris/Gunn intersect.

It is hard to imagine a Londoner with a more affluent and influential pedigree than ACW's, with two knighted grandfathers, an internationally famous knighted uncle - Sir William Osler -, along with the Gibbons' position in London's business affairs and high society.

# Beechwood's Chain of Ownership & McClary/Gartshore/Cleghorn

Beechwood was built for John Birrell (1814-1875) in 1854. After his death his widow, Maria Louisa (Sunley) Birrell (1822-1891), stayed there until her death, at which time it was purchased<sup>4</sup> by William Gartshore (1853-1931), who then passed it to his widow, Catherine Florence (McClary) Gartshore (1857-1951), who then passed it to her daughter Edna Theresa (Gartshore) Cleghorn (1877-1967).

The following sketches of Beechwood by Anne Marsh are from Terrence Honey's book, London heritage (Honey, 1991):







After family ownership, Beechwood was bequeathed to Victoria Hospital in 1967. Some references say it was used as a nurses' residence,<sup>5</sup> and others say it was used for interns<sup>6</sup>. However, Edna Catherine in a 1998 interview with the author says that it was never used as a residence by Victoria Hospital.

Actually, in the early 1960's, Edna Theresa had offered Beechwood to her cousin Jake Moore<sup>7</sup> for use as the new home for the Art Gallery. Jake thought this was a good idea, as the acreage allowed room for expansion and parking, but Clare Bice was against it.<sup>8</sup>

Beechwood was demolished in 1972.

# The McClary/Gartshore/Cleghorn families - Civic Mindedness.

As well as being philanthropic and patriotic, these families were supporters and patrons of various London artists. The ladies, in particular, were civic-minded socialites with lots of family money.

Art Gallery London, portraits of the McClary Girls by Robert R. Whale. (Smart, 1990)

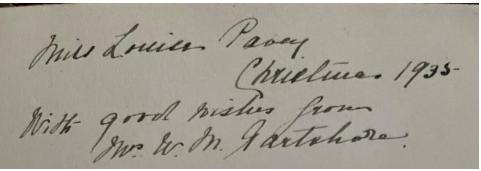


Photo 3 Theresa Maria (McClary ) Gunn 1870



Photo 4 Catherine Florence (McClary) Gartshore 1870

As a sidebar, William Moir Gartshore had a secretary/assistant at McClary's by the name of Margaret Samantha Wade (1882-1980<sup>9</sup>). She too was a poet and published a collection of her poems titled "Leaves" in 1935. The author has an original copy of Leaves<sup>10</sup> (doeskin cover) that is inscribed by Mrs. W.M. Gartshore to Louise Pavey. Louise was the niece of John McClary, and Mrs. Gartshore was his daughter.



photograph 5 Inscription in GRA copy (Wade, 1935)

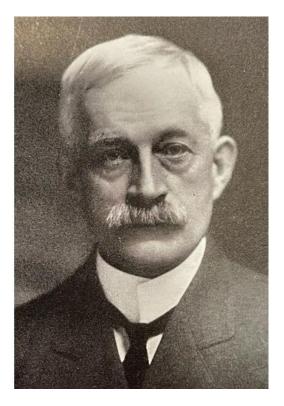


photo 6 Catherine McClary Gartshore (Mrs. W.M.G.)<sup>11</sup>



Photograph 7 Edna Theresa (Gartshore) Cleghorn 1890 by Paul Peel, 97 High Street (with Riding Crop)

## The Gibbons of London







Photograph 9 George Sutton Gibbons (Advertiser, 1915)

ACW's paternal grandfather Sir George Christie Gibbons (1848-1918) was prominently involved in many endeavours at the city, provincial and federal level.

Quoting in part from Peter Neary's entry in the <u>Dictionary of Canadian Biography:</u> "His business interests were extensive. In 1896 he established the London and Western Trusts Company Limited and became its president. He also served as president of the City Gas Company of London and as a director of the London Life Insurance Company. He helped found the London Club and the London Hunt Club, and he served the latter as both master of the hunt and honorary president. At various times he was president of the London Philharmonic Society and honorary president of the Canadian Club of London, and he sat on the original 1908 board of governors of the Western University of London, Ontario." 12

He was knighted in 1911 for his work as chairman of the International Waterways Commission and the International Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, the same year that John Carling was knighted. (The other famous Londoner to receive this honour was Adam Beck, in 1914.<sup>13</sup>)

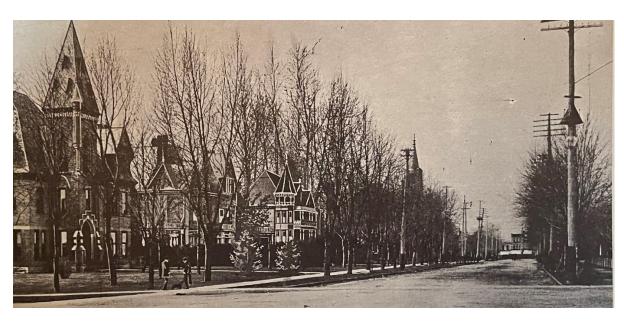
### Lornehurst

Sir George built his mansion, *Lornehurst*<sup>14</sup> overlooking Victoria Park. ACW was also related to the Harrises<sup>15</sup> *of Eldon House*<sup>16</sup>. In comparison, she thought Eldon House to be rather beautiful, but *Lornehurst* not so much. Her negative feelings about *Lornehurst* were also likely affected by the family whispers that Sir George's son, Alan (1884-1901) had taken his life there, in the tower, whose door was from then forever locked.<sup>17</sup>



Photograph 10 Lornehurst, 257 Dufferin Avenue<sup>18</sup>

*Lornehurst* sat on the grounds where London Life is now, and overlooked Victoria Park. London Life was outgrowing its Wellington Street quarters, and so in 1922 purchased the land across from Victoria Park on Dufferin Street.<sup>19</sup>



photograph 11 Dufferin Avenue, 1897 looking west from Wellington, Lornehurst on left<sup>20</sup>

It was demolished in 1926 along with the mansions of William McDonough and Col J. W. Little to make way for the new London Life head office.<sup>21</sup>

## Gibbons Memorial Park



photograph 12 Katharine Moore Campbell Becher<sup>22</sup>

The Bechers originally owned the land below Thornwood that became Gibbons Park.

#### This plaque is mounted at the St George St entrance to Gibbons Park



photograph 13 Gibbons Memorial Park Plaque

In 1925 the daughters of Sir George and Lady Gibbons wished to memorialize their parents along with their departed brothers Alan and George, by way of a city park and playground. The land was pretty much flood plain and belonged to the Bechers of Thornwood. The sisters wanted to not only donate the property to the City, but also wished to help out a financially struggling Mrs Becher<sup>23</sup> without it appearing as charity. They

enlisted E. V. Buchanan, general manager of the PUC, to offer Mrs. Becher \$25,000 on behalf of the city, even though the land was only worth a tenth of that. E. V. was "successful" in getting the negotiated price up to that amount, and once the deal was completed, after a bit of legal shuffling, the sisters transferred it to the city for \$1.00. They continued to support the park's development for many years<sup>24</sup>.



SIR GEORGE GIBBONS, 1912

London lawyer and businessman George Christie Gibbons became president of The London and Western Trusts Company in 1896 and was knighted in 1911 for his services as chairman of the Canadian section of the International Waterways Commission. Here, he poses in the driver's seat of an early automobile with four young passengers, likely his grandchildren. He died in Montreal in 1918.

Photograph 14 Sit George Christie Gibbons in auto, 1912, perhaps with Anne in back<sup>25</sup>, <sup>26</sup>



Photograph 15 Anne (R) with her brother Alan and sister Betty, 1917<sup>27</sup>

# Arts Patroness Twice President Of Music Club

Private funeral services will be held at Christ Church, Roches Point, today for Mary Osler Royd, 69, patroness of the arts and for many years president of the Women's Musical Club of Toronto, She died Monday at her home on Roxborough Dr. after a long illness.

Daughter of Sir Edmund and Lady Osler, Mrs. Boyd was educated abroad and was a skilled pianist. She had been active in the Women's Musical Club for more than 35 years and had twice been elected president. When she retired as president in 1948 she became chairman of the concert committee, an office she held until this year.

As a tribute to Mrs. Boyd's services, the club last year named its new scholarship, the Mary Osler Boyd Award. It is an annual award to be given to a young Canadian musician.

Mrs. Boyd also took great interest in the Art Gallery of Toronto. Her home is graced with many fine works of young Canadian artists.

The Garden Club of Terento was another of her absorbing interests. She had beautiful gardens at both her town and country residences.

Mrs. Boyd had been married twice. Her first husband was the late George Gibbons of London. Her second husband was Dr. Edmund Boyd of Toronto.

She leaves a son, Alan Gibbons, two daughters, Mrs. Anne Wilk-inson of Toronto and Mrs. Betty Clarke of Ottawa. There are six grandchildren.

Mary Elizabeth Osler Boyd Obit

ACW's mother was Mary Elizabeth Lamond Osler (1886-1956). Her mom and she were very close, and were best friends in every way.<sup>28</sup> After her mother's death, her writing muse pretty much deserted her. Her mother had sustained a long illness, that presaged ACW's excessive grieving associated with her death.

In April of 1955 ACW wrote in her journal "Desperate as a writer. No talent, imagination, or method. Have written nothing first rate – and at my age I'm not likely to sprout diamonds. My devotion to Macmillan's remains. Their devotion to me has reached the vanishing point."<sup>29</sup>

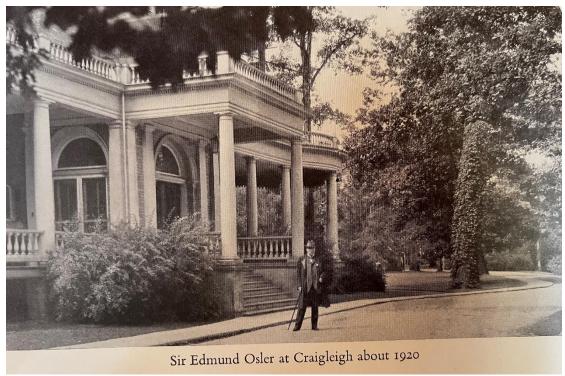
There was very little literary output, or journal entries, after her mother's death, in the last 5 years of Anne's life.



Photograph 16 Anne's Mother, "Mutt"30

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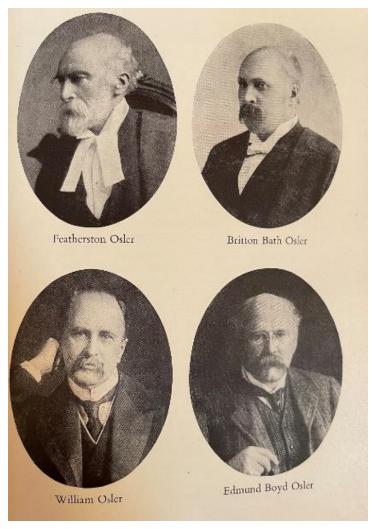
## Craigleigh and Anne's maternal grandfather Sir Edmund Osler



Photograph 17 Craigleigh and Sir Edmund<sup>31</sup>

After the death of Anne's father in 1918, the family left London for Craigleigh. Sir Edmund left instructions in his will to have the place torn down upon his death (1924) and for the land turned to be turned into a public park, which is now called Craigleigh Gardens.

#### The Osler Boys - highly competent and highly distinguished



photograph 18 Osler Boys (Wilkinson, 1956) p. 149

Their father was Rev. Featherstone Lake Osler, (1805-1895) an itinerant Anglican saddlebag preacher. Featherston Osler (1838-1924) was a prominent lawyer and judge appointed to the bench by Sir John A. MacDonald. *Britton Bath Osler* (1839-1901) was a prominent lawyer involved in the trial of Louis Riel. *Sir William Osler* (1849-1919) was the world-famous physician referred to as the "father of modern medicine". Sir Edmund Boyd Osler (1845-1924) was a Canadian businessman, politician, and philanthropist. He was a founder and benefactor of the Royal Ontario Museum.

## Anne the poet



unbearable - all that beauty and all that heartbreak."

photograph 19 Anne Wilkinson ca 1956

Anne was well established in the Canadian literati circles which included friendships with such luminaries as P.K. Page, F.R. Scott, James Reaney, Phyllis Webb, and A.J.M. Smith.

She did, however, suffer from the angst of measuring up.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, some critics were quite harsh about her writing, and others were equally opposite in praise. Although she is, in Earle Birneys's words a "Toronto housewife, without a university education", her status as a highly sophisticated mythopoeic poet is undeniable.<sup>33</sup>

She wrote in her journal that she was "constantly in love with life, and always on the brink of despair."

And P.K Page would write "There was always something about Anne that one felt was heartbreak. I think that was one of the things one was aware of through all her poetry. Something almost

In spite of her privilege, and sometimes because of it, ACW did not have an easy life. She lost her father at a young age, two young children in infancy, and for many years she endured a rather difficult marriage which ended in divorce and the suicide of her ex-husband. She was ill a lot, and seriously so at times<sup>34</sup>. She could be consumed by self-doubt, and perhaps, as Sir William Osler's biographer,

It must be said though that ACW had written an Osler family biography (*Lions in the Way*) and she and Bliss differed on a matter of paternity<sup>36</sup> that involved Sir

historian Michael Bliss would remark, she was a "sometimes neurotic poet". 35

William Osler. It seems that certain folk did not want Willie's reputation besmirched in any way.

She could have had a life of leisure and pleasure, but money and status alone cannot satisfy a need for love or approval. With her difficult marriage she found romantic refuge and some happiness with other poets, notably Frank Scott and AJM Smith. These were decent men. Women seemed naturally attracted to Scott who broke more than one woman's heart. She remained close with AJM<sup>37</sup>, and in fact he published some of her work after her death.

As a tiny example of her gift for language, consider the efficient unflinching beauty in her description of whatever was going on inside her, be it emotional or physical, as the "mutiny within". Two words, to convey so much so perfectly.

#### Or this description of her life:

"I've always been a tightrope walker, but now the rope has shrunk to a string and I sway, paralyzed, almost wishing the string would break and make an end of my circus."

Anne died in 1961, all too young, of lung cancer, and is buried at Roches Point near her maternal summer estate "Beechcroft" on Lake Simcoe, along with others of the Osler family.

The last entry in her journal July 10, 1956, a full five years before her passing, reads in part:

"Tomorrow is J.'s birthday – 21. His days, so far, have not been too happy. I pray for him, quietly – but to whom? A letter from Frank today telling me that Phyllis is in Vancouver. I suppose I'll recover. One thing I can't permit myself is long grieving over a lover. That side of my life is a luxury. I must spend myself on the children, and, if possible, writing. Still, I grieve! ....Am ashamed of my loneliness...."

## The Tamarack Years

Although Anne did not write much after her mother's death, in 1956 she did become a founding editor and patron of the literary quarterly *The Tamarack Review*. This no doubt connected her back to the literary world and with some of her old friends, as the advisory board included F. R. Scott, A.J.M. Smith, and London's James Reaney.

Although it was a literary success, it struggled financially, and Anne, along with other board members, had helped to keep the little magazine afloat. It continued to publish for another 21 years after her death.

Robert Weaver dedicated the Summer 1961 edition to her memory, and Robert Fulford wrote in the Toronto Star of 23 May of her "intelligence, wit, humane tolerance, and warm generosity"<sup>39</sup>.

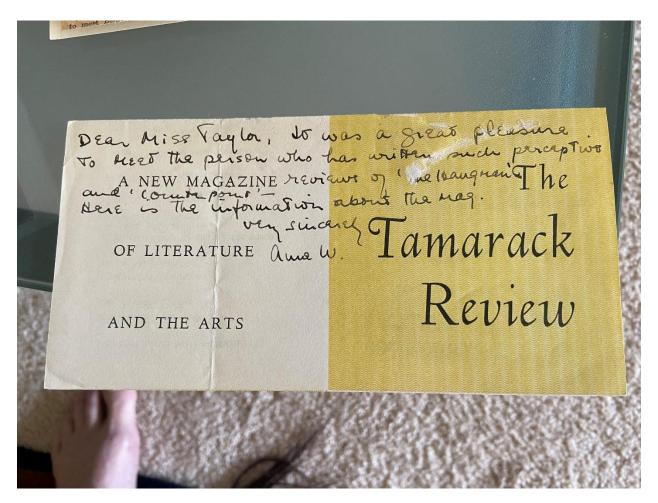


photograph 20 Frances Beatrice Taylor

about The Tamarack Review.

An interesting connection of *The Tamarack Review* to London is by way of Frances Beatrice Taylor. <sup>40</sup> F. B. Taylor was a drama critic, poet, playwright, and women's editor for the London Free Press from 1919 until about 1960. <sup>41</sup> She was one of the founders of the London Drama League. She had reviewed ACW's work (Taylor, 1956) and they had been back and forth and obviously had been in touch with ACW over her publications and was asking

Here is some of their correspondence: (Reaney, F. B. Taylor, Private Collection)



FOUR CLUNY DRIVE
TORONTO

DEC. 8 '56

Re
Dear Miss Vaylor,
The your can well imagine

El how delighted I was

with your review of

Lions - And such a

pleasure so have something
well written instead of

the gobbledigook of so many

hook reviews in Canada
Thank you, thank you.

Next Time I'm hondon

I hope I'll have an
opportunity to catch to
than a glimpse of you.

very sincerel

Anne wilken

## A closing benediction, and some words of her own...

In this Year of Our Lord, 2023, dear lady, we hope you are Resting In Peace.

"And Death, in black and white Or politic in green and Easter film, Lands on steely points, a dancer Disciplined to the foolscap stage, The property of poets Who command his robes, expose His moving likeness on the page."<sup>42</sup>

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#### **End Notes**

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Not sure how ACW and Bob met. Anne had two fiancés at the same time, and on a trip to the Mediterranean decided on which to marry, and chose Dr Frederick Robert Wilkinson, a pediatric surgeon. Married in 1932, separated in 1952, divorced in 1954. He committed a suicide in 1959.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See https://househistree.com/houses/craigleigh for more information

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> ACW was the godmother of Catherine Harris, daughter of her cousin Robin Harris and Patricia Gunn.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> In a 1998 interview by the author with Edna Catherine she said that a Mr. McCormick actually purchased Beechwood at auction after Birrell's widow's death, but that his wife didn't want to live in the "sticks", so he offered it to Gartshore, who purchased it from him.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> John Lutman, The South and The West, P.49 (Lutman, 1979)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Brackets and Bargeboards, p. 171 (Conservancy, 1989)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> John H. "Jake" Moore was Edna's 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin once removed. John McClary (1784-1848) was Jake's 2<sup>nd</sup> great grandfather, and Edna Theresa's grandfather.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Nancy Poole, The Art of London, p.147. (Poole, 1984)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> For more on Margaret Wade see the LFP article by James Stewart Reaney (Reaney J. S., 2012)

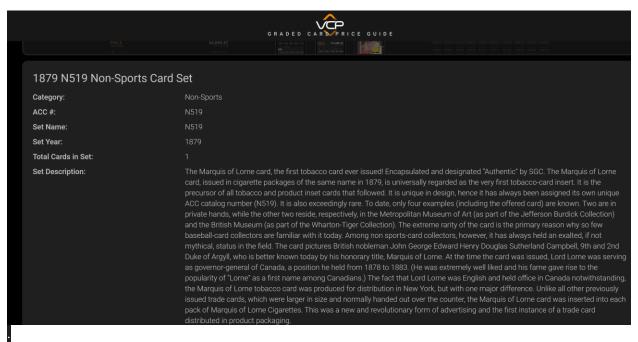
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The author also has a 1962 original handwritten addendum with "specimens of poems written later"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> (Carty, 1937)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> See Peter Neary's entry in the <u>Dictionary of Canadian Biography</u>, as the list of his contributions to society and business in London are too numerous to list here.

<sup>13 (</sup>Miller, 1954)

<sup>14</sup> Lornehurst may have been named after his first born – Lorna Craig Gibbons (1876-1954) who married George Henry Ronalds Harris. Gibbons purchased the site in 1878 from the crown. Or the name (most likely) could have been prompted by the appointment of the new Governor-General for Canada in 1878 – the Marquis of Lorne (Sir John Douglas Sutherland Campbell). "West Lorne" also derives its name from the Marquis. Lorne Ave in London is also named after the G-G, previously called Timothy Street. Dufferin Ave, previously called Duke Street, is named after the G-G that preceded the Marquis of Lorne. (Priddis, 1908-9) A very interesting fact about the Marquis is that a cigarette brand was named after him and trading cards were inserted into the pack to stiffen it to prevent the cigarettes from being broken. The first card was of the Marquis, and it is very valuable today



- <sup>15</sup> ACW's grandfather, Sir George Christie Gibbons, was also the grandfather to Georg Gibbons Ronalds Harris, Amelia Lucy Ronalds Harris, and Ronald "Robin" Sutton Harris.
- <sup>16</sup> Upon Amelia Archange Harris' death in 1959 she left Eldon House to the City.
- <sup>17</sup> The Tightrope Walker, p. 193 (Coldwell, 1992)
- <sup>18</sup> A sketch can be found on p 76 of (McEwen, 2005), and a photo at (Cooper Sanders, c 1905)
- <sup>19</sup> (Landon) p.16
- <sup>20</sup> (Campbell, 1966) p.226
- <sup>21</sup> (Conservancy, 1989) p. 31
- <sup>22</sup> (Carty, 1937) p.31
- <sup>23</sup> Catherine (Katharine?) Moore Campbell (1849-1940) wife of Henry Becher (1846-1880)
- <sup>24</sup> (Buchanan, 1986) p.57
- <sup>25</sup> (Grainger, 2016) p. 172
- <sup>26</sup> ACW recounts riding in the electric car with her grandfather (Coldwell, 1992) p. 195
- <sup>27</sup> (Coldwell, 1992) p.161 ff
- <sup>28</sup> The Tight Rope walker, letter to mom, p.150 (Joan Coldwell, 1992)
- <sup>29</sup> (Coldwell, 1992) p.143
- <sup>30</sup> (Coldwell, 1992) p.161 ff
- <sup>31</sup> (Wilkinson, 1956) p. 244
- <sup>32</sup> Take this passage from her Journal from February 17, 1950 (Coldwell, 1992):

"When the writing jag is on me, the words seem so vital, alive and flaming I worry in case they'll set the paper on fire! A week later, when I am cooler, I look at them and see row upon row of dead, very dead fish. The fish that were jumping in the sea are now too old and stinky to feed to the pigs. The flame that was in me never escaped my GRA web rev 3 May 2024

fireproof skull. My skull is proof against letting the fire out. It permits a merry blaze, only within its bony walls. It is better to be a good cook than a bad poet. For all I know, it is better to be a good cook than a good poet. ....Being a mother and being a poet, both need a lot of getting away from."

- <sup>33</sup> Melissa Dalgleish 's master thesis gives a thorough critical account of ACW's place in Canadian literature. (Dalgleish, 2007)
- <sup>34</sup> Eg, Typhoid fever, pericarditis, removal of a cancerous lung
- 35 (Bliss, 1999) p.494-5
- <sup>36</sup> Also see https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31488011/
- <sup>37</sup> (Coldwell, 1992) p.144. When talking about her excessive grief over her mother's death, she wrote "And yet the last year gave me A.J.M. Even if I never see him again, he has added a special bounty to my life, has made my skin shine, and my heart."
- <sup>38</sup> In this passage, "J" is her elder son, Robert Jeremy "Jay" Wilkinson (1935-2008), who was an "excellent companion" to his mum. "Frank" is F. R. Scott. "Phyllis" is Phyllis Webb. Their affair was the cause of the breakup between ACW and Frank.
- 39 (Coldwell, 1992), p.xiv
- <sup>40</sup> LFP article (Reaney J. S., My London: Frances Beatrice Taylor a poet, playwright and pioneer, 2016)
- <sup>41</sup> Several of her reviews of plays at the Grand can be found in (Johnston, 2001)
- <sup>42</sup> (Irvine, 2003), "Lens", p.84

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