

**The Spinster and the Prophet: Florence Deeks, H.G. Wells, and the Mystery of the Purloined Past.** A.B. MCKILLOP. Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 2000. 477 p. ISBN 1-55199-047-4.

The title of this book follows a trend made popular by Simon Winchester's, *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of The Oxford English Dictionary*, published in 1998. The use of double-barreled titles like this must increase sales in the non-fiction book market, judging by recent titles such as *The Poet and the Murderer: A True Story of Literary Crime and the Art of Forgery* or *The Count and the Confession: A True Mystery*.

In the *Spinster and the Prophet*, the descriptor "spinster" brings an old-world feeling along with a pejorative tone. To many ears the term *spinster* has a negative connotation, especially when compared to the male equivalent, *bachelor*. The gender-neutral term *single* has replaced both in modern-day language, and as a result, when the term *spinster* is heard now it creates a definite image. Its use in the title of this book is apt, both in symbolizing the era it documents and in underscoring its use as an epithet during the events of the book.

The author, A.B. McKillop, a professor of history at Carleton University in Ottawa, has written a fascinating account about a little-known event in Canadian history. He bases his story primarily around archival research he carried out on fonds and collections held in Toronto, Hamilton, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, and London, England. He first came upon the story through a footnote in a biography of Frank Underhill, the well-known University of Toronto historian. His interest piqued, McKillop headed off to the Toronto Reference Library to start what would become a massive quest to unravel the facts behind a charge of plagiarism levied on the famous British author H.G. Wells by a Canadian spinster, Florence Deeks.

The book provides much detail into this complicated case and the main points are summarized as follows. Miss Florence Deeks spent the years during the First World War, writing a unique history of the world entitled *The Web of the World's Romance*, highlighting the pivotal role women played in many major historical events. Deeks became concerned that she had borrowed too heavily from one source in particular, held in copyright by the head office of the English publishing company, Macmillan. In July 1919, she left her manuscript with the Toronto office of Macmillan of Canada, with the understanding that they would look into this issue on her behalf. She would not see her book again for almost nine months, until April 1920, when she retrieved it from the Macmillan office and was told that it was not publishable in its present form. They did not address the copyright question at all.

In December 1920, Deeks read a review of H.G. Wells' new two-volume book, *The Outline of History*, and after examining it became alarmed by how closely it followed the outline of her book, *The Web*. She became suspicious

that Wells must have had access to her book; coincidentally or not, Wells' book was published in Canada by Macmillan, the same firm where she had left her manuscript for so many months. The plot thickens when Deeks examines the manuscript she had left with Macmillan and finds it dog-eared and stained.

A careful and meticulous woman, Deeks spent the next few years comparing her book to Wells' *Outline of History*. She hired historians to prepare expert witness statements comparing the two and engaged a law firm to present a court case charging Wells and his publishers with plagiarism. The majority of McKillop's book documents the resulting court case, appeals, and finally the ultimate appeal to the King of England. Deeks' major assertion was that Wells must have had access to her manuscript because his book made the same factual errors as hers and omitted the same seminal events in the evolution of civilization. This was too much of a coincidence for Deeks, and the historians she had consulted with concurred. She recognized that a major difference between the books was that *The Outline of History* did not portray women as having any role in historical events. She felt that this could be explained by her contention that Wells had discarded the parts of her book he did not agree with.

Along with the minute legal aspects of the case, McKillop also weaves in important facts about the main characters. Not surprisingly, Florence Deeks and H.G. Wells are examined in detail, but so are many of the people associated with their lives. In particular the lives of H.G. Wells's wife Catherine and one of his mistresses, Rebecca West, are well documented. He also describes in rich detail the management and employees of Macmillan in Toronto, New York, and London.

McKillop's writing style is engaging and interesting. He provides his characters' feelings and motives but only, as he states on page *vi* of the preface, "...if empirical evidence points to the likelihood of the interior monologue or of the private act." This technique makes the book more immediate and enjoyable but the reader is required to remember that it is based on learned conjecture, not fact. McKillop's tone is definitely biased towards Deeks' side of the case, and reasonably so, as he provides much evidence leading to that assumption. One develops a feeling of regret as it becomes apparent how underappreciated Florence Deeks was in her lifetime, due in part to her gender and to unfortunate circumstance. Almost as a means to right this wrong, McKillop sends out a clarion call to feminist historians to examine the works of Florence Deeks, an example of early Canadian feminist scholarship.

McKillop's use of archival sources form the basis and strength of his book. He remarks that the limitations of space preclude citing some specific box and file numbers. This is always a disappointment to archivists who know how important these are for our sanity when a researcher arrives, book in hand, to check out the sources. He has a good assortment of photographs, but their cita-

tions too are brief and confusing. The index is excellent; it is well presented and comprehensive. Like in many books which use archival sources, the statement “found languishing in a dusty archive” is used, but more to set the scene for his exciting “discovery” than to perpetuate the stereotype that archivists aren’t good at dust control!

I highly recommend this book to historians, archivists, and the general public. It chronicles the interesting role played by a Canadian woman in an international law case, and suggests a side of the famous author H.G. Wells that is little known.

**Lesley Buchan**  
**Yukon Archives**

