

Kate O'Rourke, 1968–2012



Image courtesy of Michael Bryson

If you had never met Kate O'Rourke, you would not have been exposed to her raucous laugh, her exuberant spirit, her sometimes profane opinions about archives and professional life, her intellectual brilliance, and her generous nature, but above all to her warm and loving personality and her zest for life.

The daughter of Ted and Maureen O'Rourke, Kate was born in Seattle and grew up with her sister, Stephanie, and brother, Andrew, in locations as diverse as Kabul, Afghanistan, Thunder Bay, Ontario, the United Kingdom, and Montreal, the latter being where she spent most of her youth. She attended Carleton University in Ottawa, graduating with an honours degree

in art history in 1990. I first met her when she participated in a practicum credit course based on carrying out archival projects at the National Archives (now Library and Archives Canada) and preparing a paper based on the experience. After Carleton, Kate went on to Concordia University in Montreal to pursue a master's degree in art history, defending her thesis, entitled "Labours and Love: Issues of Domesticity and Marginalization in the Works of Paraskeva Clark," in 1995. Before this, she had joined the Documentary Art and Photography Division at the National Archives (NA), working first as a summer student in 1990 and 1991, and from April 1992 as an art archivist. As was the practice in that period, Kate attended the month-long NA training course, where she met and befriended archivists from across the country.

As Kate's supervisor at the NA from 1992 to 1996, I got to know her very well, and admired her intellectual strength, her ethical concerns, her genuine care for researchers' needs, and her commitment to her work. She made many major acquisitions from both the private and the public sector (since NA art archivists managed both private and public fonds), including the visual records of the National Arts Centre and the Sir Daniel Wilson watercolour collection. Kate also spent part of her time in the photography section, learning more about the nature of photographic records, as well as two months working with the Records Disposition Division in order to prepare four generic disposition authorities for government documentary art records. Her most important contribution may have been her efforts to create retrospective automated accession records for the art collections; this provided longer-term accessibility to the holdings and to the implementation of the *Rules for Archival*

Description by NA in 1994, and also brought her into contact with many students whom she supervised to do this work. In addition, Kate organized exhibitions, published articles in *The Archivist*, the magazine of the National Archives of Canada, and produced the *Documentary Art and Photography Division Supplement to the Women's Archives Guide*, which became a useful tool for many historians working in the area of women's studies. The latter would lead to her being named a co-editor of *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century*.¹ Kate was very proud of her involvement in this important work.

Kate also got involved in the archival profession, joining the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA) and the Eastern Ontario Branch of the Archives Association of Ontario (AAO), eventually serving on the AAO executive. At the 1994 ACA conference in Ottawa, she presented a paper and chaired a session, which whetted her appetite for further work with the archival community. She became a books and exhibitions reviewer for *Archivaria*, was one of the organizers of the 1997 AAO conference in Toronto, and attended various archival conferences during her career.

After meeting Lawrence Lee, Kate decided to move to Toronto to be with him. In November 1996 she joined the Special Collections Unit of the Archives of Ontario (AO).² She threw herself into the work of Special Collections, especially photos and documentary art, and quickly put her archival and art history knowledge and skills to use in arranging, describing, and highlighting some of the hidden gems in the collection and, along the way, teaching her colleagues the finer points about the importance and value of Canadian documentary art. Because of her strong interest in improving and promoting access to the AO's holdings, she completed many arrangement and description projects, selected high-quality, rarely seen images for the AO's fledgling visual database, developed standards and guidelines for describing images, and contributed to a new exhibit program.

Kate's colleagues remember her as a valuable and versatile member of the Archives of Ontario team, and a pleasure to work with. Her incisive intelligence, considerable energy, and passion for archives were a real asset to a thriving organization at a time when it promoted professional excellence. She actively contributed to various internal committees and was instrumental in updating policies on donor relations and intellectual rights management. She took on many assignments with characteristic enthusiasm and professionalism, whether it was arranging and describing government records, preparing

1 Sharon Anne Cook, Lorna McLean, and Kate O'Rourke, eds., *Framing Our Past: Constructing Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal, 2001).

2 I am grateful to former colleagues Mary Ledwell and Susan McClure for information about Kate's career at the Archives of Ontario, and to Michael Bryson for details of her later career in the Ontario public service.

records for monetary appraisal, or working as a reference archivist. Kate was the first archivist chosen to rotate into full-time reference for a year and, as one colleague put it, “of course she was brilliant at it and hated it and regaled us with stories at coffee break and lunch.” As she had been at the National Archives, Kate was a committed and strong-willed AO staffer who spoke her mind at meetings and voiced her views about the nature of the profession based on her experience as an archivist, a researcher, an editor, and a woman.

Friends also remember her as the AO’s social convenor. At one staff Halloween luncheon, Kate convinced Ian Wilson, then Archivist of Ontario, to judge the costumes. One former colleague recalls that he appeared quite bewildered and bedazzled by the energy and creativity of his young new hires. With great vigour, Kate threw herself into the activities of the Toronto Area Archivist Group along with her by then husband, Lawrence, with whom she would have two children, Owen and Naomi.

Kate left the archival profession in 2001, although she remained friends with many former colleagues. She continued to be an engaged public servant in the Ontario provincial government, managing and coordinating high-profile events, including the annual meeting of the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment in 2009, the Queen’s visit in 2010, deputy minister’s town halls around the province, and various honours and awards programs at the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration.

In her personal life, she was devoted to her children, and she never lost her love of innovation in the kitchen and the garden. After her marriage to Lawrence ended in 2006, she met Michael Bryson, a Toronto writer and fellow public servant, and they married in 2007. Kate started a blog in January 2010 – Auntiecakeshop.blogspot.com – to share her love of food, gardening, photography, and life. That September, she found the lump that would take her down a different path. She faced breast cancer with intense bravery and astounded her readers with the sharpness of her hard-earned insights and the depth of her ongoing engagement with the process of living, whatever its consequences. Kate refused to let cancer define her. Her persistent hope and intellectual curiosity surprised no one who knew her. As one friend noted, “Cancer ravaged Kate’s body but never could it kill her spirit. She was one of the most effervescent personalities I have had the pleasure of knowing, let alone calling friend.”

Kate will be missed by many colleagues and friends in the archival and heritage communities.

Jim Burant
Library and Archives Canada, 1976–2011