

# **Interconnecting the Personal and Public: The Support Networks of Public Health Nurse Mona Wilson**

**Douglas Baldwin**

La vie de l'infirmière de santé publique Mona Gordon Wilson montre l'importance de la vie privée des femmes pour expliquer leurs activités publiques. Même si la vie et la personnalité de Mona ont été également façonnées par son sexe, sa classe sociale, son groupe ethnique, son célibat et sa place dans une société patriarcale, le présent article affirme que l'établissement de réseaux féminins et de groupes de soutien a été essentiel à sa réussite en tant que personne publique. Après le résumé des points marquants de sa vie publique, l'étude montre l'importance de l'établissement de réseaux féminins et de groupes de soutien au cours de ses années d'études en sciences infirmières, durant les années qu'elle a passées à l'étranger avec la Croix Rouge américaine, puis comme infirmière en chef de santé publique à l'île du Prince-Édouard et enfin alors qu'elle était à la retraite.

The life of public health nurse Mona Gordon Wilson reveals the importance of women's private lives in explaining their public activities. Although Mona's life and personality were also shaped by her gender, class, ethnicity, single status, and place in the patriarchal society, this article contends that female networking and support groups were essential to her success as a public person. Following a brief synopsis of the highlights of Mona's public life, this study examines the importance of female networking and support groups in Mona Wilson's early years as a nursing student, in her years overseas with the American Red Cross, as chief public health nurse on Prince Edward Island, and in retirement and old age.

In 1975, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's path-breaking article, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," revealed that a network of intimate supportive relationships among American women during much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries enabled them to function successfully in society.<sup>1</sup> Nancy F. Cott's subsequent examination of the diaries and letters of young women written between 1780 and 1835 confirmed the importance of female friendships in providing women with needed emotional security.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent studies have shown that the role of women's friendships and networks of love and support have been crucial to their success as political activists, Western pioneers, missionaries, and professionals.<sup>3</sup> To these studies, anthropology has contributed

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the concepts of kinship ties and networking as decisive factors in shaping women's lives and providing emotional nurturing.<sup>4</sup>

Until the late 1970s, the importance and even the existence of women's friendship were obscured and trivialized by historians, who based their theories of adult development on male experiences.<sup>5</sup> In addition, male-biased research methodologies emphasized the public life of their subjects over their private lives, and praised independence and autonomy versus interdependence and connectedness. Feminist scholars, however, argue that it is equally as imperative to gather and analyze information about people's private lives, and to reveal the relationships between a person's public and private lives.<sup>6</sup> As Veronica Strong-Boag acknowledged in 1991, "Canadian women's history is now recognizing biography as a genre which, for all its largely conservative antecedents, may allow that detailed consideration of the interplay of private and public worlds which is essential if women's lives are to be understood."<sup>7</sup>

### **Career Highlights**

Mona Gordon Wilson, the third child of Harold and Elizabeth Wilson, was born in 1894 in the prestigious Rosedale area of Toronto, Ontario.<sup>8</sup> Her father owned a popular sporting goods store in Toronto, and belonged to several of the city's exclusive organizations. The family mingled with the city's commercial, political, and social elites. After graduating from the Toronto Model School, Havergal Ladies' College, and the Lillian Massey School of Household Science in Toronto, Mona departed for Baltimore, Maryland, in 1914 in quest of a nursing diploma at the Johns Hopkins Hospital School of Nursing. Following graduation from Johns Hopkins in 1918, she enlisted in the American Army Nursing Corps, and sailed to France in December 1918. The next year she joined the American Red Cross Society in Siberia. Quartered in Vladivostok, Mona worked in a women's medical ward and trained Russian nurses' aides in the principles of practical nursing. By the time Mona left Siberia at the end of February 1920, she had witnessed a failed coup attempt and had watched helplessly as mounted Bolshevik soldiers rode into her hospital ward looking for deserters.

In May 1920 the Red Cross sent Mona to Tirana, the capital of Albania. Since Muslim women refused to be examined by male doctors, Mona and several other American Red Cross nurses conducted home visits in this war-ravaged country. Mona accompanied the mobile clinic into the mountains to preach the benefits of toothbrushes and soap and to conduct baby clinics. In Tirana, she helped to establish a small school

for training local nurses. In late June 1920, Mona hurried by car to the Adriatic coast, amidst a barrage of shells, to work in the Red Cross medical unit located about 10 kilometres from the warring Albanian and Italian armies. When the fighting ceased, the Italian Red Cross decorated Mona for her efforts.

Following the Armistice in August 1920, the American Red Cross dispatched Mona to Ragusa (now Dubrovnik) on the Dalmatian coast to care for 30,000 White Russian refugees who had escaped from the Crimea. Here, she clothed, fed, and nursed the expatriates back to health so they could be relocated elsewhere in Europe. In April, Mona travelled to Vir Pazar, Montenegro, where for the next nine months she organized Mothers' and Little Mothers' clubs, conducted home visitations, accompanied mobile clinics into the mountains, initiated school inspections, and was the resident nurse in an orphanage.

Mona returned to Toronto in January 1922. The following year she earned her Public Health Nursing Diploma at the University of Toronto and accepted the position of Red Cross Chief Public Health Nurse in Prince Edward Island. In the absence of a provincial health department, Mona and her small staff ministered to the Island's health needs for the next eight years. She initiated medical inspections in the schools, established dental clinics, Junior Red Cross clubs, tuberculosis chest clinics, crippled children's camps, and organized province-wide smallpox and diphtheria vaccinations. Touring the countryside, Mona preached the necessity of planting vegetable gardens, drinking milk, and eating wholesome food.

When the provincial government established a Department of Health in 1931, it appointed Mona Wilson Provincial Director of Public Health Nursing. In this position, Mona was later instrumental in training dental hygienists to conduct educational programs for improved dental health — the first time such personnel had been used in a public health department in Canada. She also played a major role in the establishment of the Division of Nutrition, and in the introduction of Child and Maternal Health programs. Except for the Second World War years, Mona held this position until she retired in 1961. In October 1940 the Canadian Red Cross seconded her as Red Cross Assistant Commissioner for Newfoundland. Here, she took charge of administering to the needs of shipwrecked soldiers and sailors on the North Atlantic Run. For this work she earned the nickname "the Florence Nightingale of St. John's," and received the Order of the British Empire.

In addition to these accomplishments, this dynamic woman helped to establish the Girl Guides, the Zonta Club, the Business and Profes-

sional Women's Club, and several other Island associations that sought to broaden people's vision and boost women's self-confidence. By the time of her death in 1981, Mona had been awarded the highest honour in Girl Guides (the Beaver, in 1957), in international nursing (the Florence Nightingale Award, in 1963), and in Prince Edward Island (Island Woman of the Century, in 1967).<sup>9</sup>

### **Network Formation as a Student Nurse<sup>10</sup>**

Shortly after Mona's arrival at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1914, Elsie Lawler, Superintendent of Nurses, welcomed the prospective nurses into the Hopkins "family" and outlined the rules and regulations. The young women were instructed where to sit in the dining room, to stand in the presence of a superior, to obey orders immediately, to keep their rooms neat and ready for inspection at all times, to ask permission to leave the hospital grounds or to have visitors in the dorm, to keep their hair in a bun and tucked under their cap, and when to rise, eat, study, and retire. The nurses were expected to avoid boisterous laughter and frivolous activities, and to confine conversation while on duty to professional matters. Lower orders were not to fraternize with their superiors; nurses were not to become friendly with the patients or the staff. Careless work was punished by suspension, and dating a doctor brought dismissal.<sup>11</sup>

How did young women such as Mona Wilson cope with the constant surveillance and physical and psychological stresses of nursing school? Social scientists have shown that friendships are especially important during times of transition, and admittance to nursing school certainly qualified as a transitional stage.<sup>12</sup> Separated from their families for the first time, alone, and immersed in a strictly disciplined environment, it seems only natural that the student nurses would create what Nancy Tomes has termed "a little world of our own."<sup>13</sup> The fact that they shared their living arrangements with others in similar positions inevitably led to the blossoming of intimate friendships, and encouraged the young nurses to think of themselves as sisters. Like girls in boarding schools and colleges, the young nurses helped each other overcome homesickness and incorporated each other into their kinship systems.<sup>14</sup>

In discussing friendships formed at women's colleges, Barbara Solomon notes that it was natural for a girl to create a small group of peers "who knew each other's deepest thoughts and feelings....and gave each other respect and affection akin to love, as well as encouragement in their new adventure."<sup>15</sup> Mona Wilson's personal correspon-

dence indicates that she formed her own surrogate family at Hopkins, which provided her with companionship, support, and self-respect. In keeping with the school's family metaphor, Mona's little clique of six or seven like-minded students of similar class and ethnicity referred to themselves as "our family," and adopted nicknames for each other.

Mona's Hopkins family included Marion Rossiter (Mary Anne), Phyllis Higginbothan (Phyl), Ruth Barton (Rufus), and several other students.<sup>16</sup> These women provided each other with the emotional and spiritual support to endure the trials of nursing school. United by similar experiences and expectations, the nurses acquired an occupational identity that was later reinforced by membership in professional associations and through subscriptions to *The Johns Hopkins Nurses Alumnae Bulletin*.<sup>17</sup> When graduation day came, the thought that she might not see her friends again cast a pall over Mona's mood. "I'm quite lost and forlorn these days," she wrote to her Toronto family, "it's awful to be bereft of one's dearest friends."<sup>18</sup>

### **Network Formation Overseas**

In subsequent years, wherever Mona went, she quickly formed her own "family" of like-minded women, who shared experiences and assumed an emotional centrality in each other's lives. Although membership in the family expanded and contracted over the years, Mona always gained strength from her female friends and relied upon them for personal validation and career opportunities. Correspondence, visits, and international health conferences provided an informal network of health professionals that bridged the gap between public and private life. Many of these family members remained Mona's life-long friends and provided continuity and intimacy in her middle and old age.

In Europe, Mona's "private family" consisted of a tight-knit group of eight Hopkins graduates with similar tastes who remained together throughout their stay in France. They liked sweet foods, the theatre, long walks, dancing, visiting historic sites, and good conversation. These women were between 24 and 28 years old (except Ruth, who was in her mid-30s), and demanded that the males who temporarily attached themselves to their group be amusing and fun-loving.

Following demobilization, Ruth Barton and Judith Saville returned to work at Johns Hopkins, Alleyne Clarke began child relief work in New York, and Phyllis Higginbothan commenced private nursing in Ontario. Thus when Mona and Marion Rossiter sailed for Russia in 1918 they did so without their support group. Like the Johns Hopkins



School of Nursing, the American Red Cross (ARC) strictly enforced hospital discipline, and the Chief Nurse completed monthly efficiency reports for each nurse, evaluating off-duty deportment as much as nursing skills. Civilian clothes could be worn only in the personnel quarters, and nurses travelling in groups were requested to dress similarly.<sup>19</sup> Violation of the rules met with swift punishment. One nurse was dishonourably dismissed from the service for getting married, and was asked to refund her expenses and return her Red Cross pin and membership card. Several other nurses were placed under close observation even though their work was excellent.<sup>20</sup> Dallas Ireland, for example, was doing "good work," but her attitude toward co-workers was reported to be "very undesirable." Like many of the other nurses, including Mona and Marion Rossiter, Dallas had enrolled in the ARC with her best friend (Julia Harrison), and they expected to remain together; but Dallas rarely saw Julia, whom the ARC sent into the interior. "The poor child is so unhappy here," Mona noted in her diary, "and so fearfully 'in wrong' with the Red Cross."<sup>21</sup>

As she had done elsewhere, Mona and other like-minded nurses formed their own little group, or family. Linked by common tasks and placed in an unfamiliar environment, the nurses in Vladivostok banded together for comfort and companionship. Mona's family included Marion, with whom she shared a room, Virginia Ward, Dallas Ireland, and about 10 others. Mona and Marion maintained a regular correspondence with Ruth Barton, signing their letters with such declarations as "Your children," and "One of the Inseparables." As she had done in France, and would later do in Albania and at the University of Toronto, Mona used her growing network of female friends to ensure future employment. When it became evident that the ARC would be leaving Siberia, she contacted Hopkins schoolmate Katherine Caulfield at the Rockefeller Foundation in China about working there, and wrote to another friend about opportunities in India.<sup>22</sup>

### **Friendship with a Special Person**

During her travels overseas, Mona's special relationship with Marion Rossiter sustained her through hard times. As roommates at Hopkins, and later as travel and work companions, Marion and Mona were inseparable. They talked about life into the early hours of the morning, visited each other's families, and spent summers together. In letters home, and in her diary, Mona referred to Marion as "my MaryAnne" or "my dearest friend." Perhaps the best example of their special relationship comes from August 1919 when the ARC summoned Marion to

Vladivostok but left Mona behind in Japan. "Absolutely desperate," the two friends pleaded with the ARC officials to allow Mona to accompany Marion, but to no avail.<sup>23</sup> The tone of Mona's diary now turned morose and desolate. On her 25th birthday she wrote in her diary, "How tragic it is to have to grow old despite oneself." Hospital work now seemed a terrible ordeal, and she stopped taking her evening walks. Each day Mona waited expectantly for a call to Vladivostok, and as the days dragged on she became more and more depressed.<sup>24</sup> Informed that she had to take the evening hospital shift, Mona was "on the verge of losing my disposition, and had to go on a walk to get in a better frame of mind."<sup>25</sup> Two days later she was almost at the end of her tether, and could alleviate her misery only by writing to Marion. Ultimately, Mona became sick, which was most unusual for her, and was possibly stress-related.

Finally the cable came. After seven weeks, Mona was about to "see my MaryAnne again."<sup>26</sup> Immediately, the tone of her diary lightened. The day after the cablegram arrived she wrote that "the harbour was lovely with the moon and the lights on the small boats bobbing up and down."<sup>27</sup> Reunited in Siberia, the two friends continued to "tremble in our boots for fear we will be separated." At such times a "black cloud" seemed to be hovering over them.<sup>28</sup>

Although Mona and Marion separated in 1922 when they returned to North America, they stayed in close contact. They exchanged frequent letters, and Marion visited Mona in Prince Edward Island in the summers and was introduced to her new friends. In 1925 Mona's private life was devastated. Whereas Mona had been prospering in her work on the Island, Marion was becoming increasingly depressed. In May 1924 Marion wrote that she was "in the depths" and longed "for a buddie — some congenial soul to talk with — and bat about the country."<sup>29</sup> Since the autumn of 1922 Marion had been medical superintendent at St. George's School for Boys in Newport, Rhode Island, but was now considering a change. She wrote that she might just "drift for awhile and might take a PH [public health] course, after which you will simply have to work with me."<sup>30</sup>

All such plans were abruptly terminated in September 1925 when Marion died from tuberculosis. Mona's older sister, Helen, was sympathetic:

I am so sorry Mona, it will be dreadfully lonely for you without her. One grows so away from other people when one has a real real friend — and then there is that hopeless gap in one's life — and it will seem

almost impossible to bridge. My dear — you must be feeling sore and blue, and almost a thing accursed.<sup>31</sup>

This was exactly how Mona felt. "The dear, dear girl," she wrote sadly to her sister Jane:

I feel unutterably lonely to know she is not any place to chat with through letters or have the hope of joining up and going off together — but am glad that her suffering is over at last....but I feel that there is nothing worth while ahead of one now.<sup>32</sup>

The days seemed without meaning. After a short business trip to Montreal, Mona unburdened her feelings to Jane. "How ghastly it all is," she wrote about returning to the old grind, "I'd give my hat to be going in the opposite direction....I shall have to stay on for another year — and then that will be four and time to move on to something else."<sup>33</sup>

Marion's death left a huge emotional gap. At Johns Hopkins they had roomed and studied together. These close bonds were strengthened by their shared experiences in France, Vladivostok, Albania, and Montenegro. They faced imminent death together, called each other by pet names, shared sorrows, joys, and anxieties, and connived to ensure that the authorities did not separate them. Mona had shared her private and emotional world with no one else. Her behaviour changed noticeably after Marion's death, which illustrates the importance of exploring one's private life for understanding the public person. Whereas Mona had once been fun-loving and reckless, just "one of the girls," she now acted the head nurse, became obsessed with her work, and remained aloof from her co-workers.

### **Network Formation as Chief Public Health Nurse in PEI**

When Mona arrived in Prince Edward Island in 1923 she faced a daunting task. Partly because of the province's poor financial situation, there were virtually no public health facilities. PEI was the only province without a Department of Public Health, a tuberculosis chest clinic, a bureau of vital statistics, a hospital out-patient department, a tuberculosis sanatorium, and a provincial laboratory.<sup>34</sup> After meeting with the Red Cross board of directors, and learning how wide-ranging her responsibilities were, Mona felt like weeping, and by the end of the day she was ready to return to Toronto, "so low do I feel."<sup>35</sup> Her lodging at the YWCA provided no reason to change her mind. The women boarders took every occasion to sing hymns, and invited her to evening prayers. "Something tells me," she wrote her parents that night, "that I



will be expected to attend church on Sundays or I will be an outcast — this is certainly no place for me.”<sup>36</sup>

Fortunately, she soon became part of another surrogate family (although she stopped using this word), which stroked her self-esteem, provided emotional support and a sense of belonging, and helped her in her endeavours. Steeped in nursing traditions of hierarchical authority, and restrained by her own sense of class, Mona avoided forming close associations with her staff.<sup>37</sup> Instead, she relied for emotional support upon an expanding network of single women of similar class.

Mona formed close bonds with the Holman family in Summerside, one of the most prominent PEI families. She soon became a close friend of Carrie Holman. Since Gladys Holman had attended Havergal and Nora Holman was a Johns Hopkins graduate, Mona had much in common with the entire family. Carrie was Vice President of the Red Cross Society for Prince County, a member of the Canadian Council for Child Welfare, and secretary of the Prince County Children’s Aid Society, so they met frequently on work-related issues. Half a century later, when Mona donated her antique furniture to the Heritage Foundation, she recalled the early days at the Holman estate:

What gracious living there used to be. I remember how we used to sit around the fire in the living room of the Holman Homestead while Mrs Holman read to us — Carrie, Gladys & me. How I loved the feeling of that cultured setting, the restfulness of the surroundings after a busy day of travelling the country districts & wallowing through the wet clay roads.<sup>38</sup>

She needed just such an environment to rest and recharge her batteries.

In Charlottetown, Mona acquired another circle of friends. Like the Holmans, these companions were usually service-minded, independent, intelligent, middle- to upper-class single women who also liked to picnic, swim, and take walks. Despite her busy work schedule, Mona expanded her circle. With Kitty Peters, Mary Prouse, and Emily McCollum she tramped in the woods on Saturdays, often returning with flowers to decorate the office. In the winter she skated, snowshoed, and played badminton with another group. After Marion Rossiter visited the Island in the spring of 1924 she wrote she liked Mona’s new friends and that “everyone raved about the wonderful work you were doing.”<sup>39</sup>

Such was the strength of her many new friendships that after the first few years in the province Mona never seriously considered

leaving. Her sisters often tried to convince her to move to Toronto, but to no avail.<sup>40</sup> After visiting PEI, an acquaintance remarked:

[Mona] knows nearly everyone on the Island...[always speaking] with love and enthusiasm of her beloved "Island" and its people. [She] is known and respected by all who know her and their number is legion....No one is more highly respected and admired than Miss Mona Wilson.<sup>41</sup>

As Mona's career flourished, she developed close ties with other intelligent and ambitious female public-health leaders in Canada and the United States, such as Charlotte Whitton and Margaret Grier. Mona corresponded frequently with like-minded career women in this expanding network and met them regularly at conferences. When Mona announced her retirement in 1961 a friend wrote, "I can hardly bear it. CPHA annual meetings without my roommate!!!"<sup>42</sup> Mona's public and private lives were intermixed. Each sustained the other.

### **Network Formation and Voluntary Associations**

Like the friendships that bridged the public and private spheres of Mona's life, the Girl Guide movement united her personal and work worlds. In 1934, she became the first president of the Charlottetown Girl Guides Association. The fact that Guiding was grounded in British values and attracted "respectable" women such as the wives of the premier, the lieutenant-governor, Island physicians, and members of the clergy appealed to Mona's class-consciousness. Camping dovetailed with her love of the outdoors and conformed with the public health movement's emphasis on fresh air and country living. The Guiding movement also provided opportunities to cultivate female friendships. When she sailed with 34 other Canadian Guiding leaders to England in 1936 to attend the Coronation of King George, for example, Mona enjoyed herself immensely. She was selected patrol leader, and had a great time singing camp songs, chatting with the other Guiders, giving concerts for the passengers, and joining in frequent gales of laughter. At the same time, she took advantage of the opportunity to learn as much as she could about Guiding practices elsewhere in Canada.<sup>43</sup>

Under Mona's leadership the Guiding movement blossomed. She established a permanent summer camp, created a Ranger Company, wrote a weekly newspaper column for Guides, published a monthly bulletin for out-of-town companies, and created a crippled children's Extension Company. When Mona stepped down as Provincial Commissioner in 1937 the number of Brownies and Girl Guides had multiplied by thirteen.<sup>44</sup> In these efforts she was aided by the large

number of friends, such as Carrie Holman, and public health nurses, Mary MacNutt and Elaine Harrison, who joined Guiding under Mona's leadership.

### **The Importance of Family**

Mona also drew upon the supportive love of her family to sustain her. At Hopkins, she hung a family photograph on the wall to keep up her spirits, and wrote regularly to her parents, including messages of encouragement for her younger sisters. Her letters were colourful and wonderfully descriptive, revealing an irrepressible excitement with life. Separate notes to her father were addressed to "My Dear Dad," 15-year-old Jane was "Jinnie," and Margaret was "Monkey." Mona often signed these letters with such flourishes as "the Idiot Abroad." In the following years, she corresponded regularly with her sisters, who often holidayed on the Island and interacted with the women in her network.

Mona's family was also important to her success as Chief Public Health Nurse. After less than three months on the job in PEI, Mona faced her biggest and most important task. The climax of each Island summer was the Provincial Exhibition in Charlottetown. Islanders came from all over the province to view livestock and crop displays, exhibit their best pure-bred stock, watch harness races, and be entertained by vaudeville shows. The Red Cross executive expected Mona to organize a booth to inform Islanders of the Society's activities and to teach them proper health habits. Mona had been worried about this aspect of her job for several months and in desperation had enlisted the help of her mother and two younger sisters. Her mother procured health brochures, while Margaret and Jane inspected the Red Cross booth at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto and sent their sister detailed accounts and drawings of its physical appearance, copied examples of graphs and charts on such topics as infant mortality and tuberculosis, and noted the title of each poster. "What you want," Jane explained, "is a few lurid pictures of these old bugs at work — or as I suggest some microscope play for the PE Islanders!"<sup>45</sup> Following the success of her exhibit, Mona wrote in appreciation:

I do want to thank you most awfully for sending all the literature and dope on the Toronto Ex — for your letters crammed full of suggestions, and yours Jane about the posters etc — and your remarks on bugs etc. and microscopes were so delicious that I went around grinning all day and chuckling over them.<sup>46</sup>

In old age, Mona grew even closer to her siblings, whose shared experiences provided her with an important anchor to the past.<sup>47</sup>

Although her brother never visited PEI, he wrote every week, reminded her of approaching family birthdays and anniversaries, and enclosed clippings from Toronto newspapers. Mona once replied that she felt especially good on Sunday knowing her brother was thinking of her.<sup>48</sup> Margaret and Jane became frequent visitors after Mona suffered strokes in 1974 and 1978. The sisters enjoyed their time on the Island. They visited Mona's friends, who became theirs, and sat on each other's beds at night gossiping about family, friends, and old times.<sup>49</sup>

Although Mona was steeped in female communities in her public and private lives, her sense of sisterhood rarely extended beyond class boundaries. As Chief Red Cross Nurse, and later as Superintendent of Public Health Nursing, she possessed considerable community status and wielded significant power over her public health nurses. Mona kept her distance from the nurses. She ate lunch in her office, rather than with the secretary and the nurses. Twice a year or so she invited the staff to her home, but she rarely developed personal friendships with her workers, and when she did it was usually after they had left her employ.

When the Canadian Red Cross Society supplied Mona with several young female volunteers to assist her in Newfoundland, she attempted to limit the women's social activities and insisted that they behave like officers and maintain a cordial but not-familiar attitude with the rank and file. One day, after Mona insisted that a staff member write a note thanking the Governor for hosting a dinner party, and deliver it the next morning before breakfast, the young women just shook their heads and thought of her as *pusser*, a naval word for a person who insists on ceremony and traditional behaviour.<sup>50</sup> Although they occasionally shared a good laugh, Mona and her staff tended to exist in two separate worlds after working hours, and when the Red Cross recommended that Mona share a house with these women she objected to living in such "close proximity to my workers."<sup>51</sup>

Although the nurses referred to Mona as a "dictator," the "colonel," and a "strict disciplinarian," Mona took a great interest in the well-being of her staff. She regularly visited retired nurses and took them for drives in the country. When Dorothy Cox accepted a job with the World Health Organization in India, Mona personally redirected all her mail, looked after her finances, and corresponded with her several times a year. If the Division's secretary was swamped with work, Mona cheerfully assisted her.<sup>52</sup> When Ruth Ross talked about quitting because she was having trouble with her old car, Mona said, "'You take my new car'. She was very anxious for her staff, you see."<sup>53</sup> Eleanor Wheler,

who had worked with the Victorian Order of Nurses in New Brunswick and had been a nursing supervisor in Ontario before going to PEI, was particularly impressed with Mona's supervisory abilities:

I don't know how she did it. She made me want to work my fingers to the bone, but I don't know how she did it. That's one thing I couldn't do when I was supervising in Ontario. She loved directing, she had a tremendous enthusiasm for it, it was her whole life. You could just feel the magnetism, you tried to live up to it.<sup>54</sup>

It is doubtful, however, that Mona could have maintained such working relationships without her rich friendships and networks of support.

### **The Importance of Support Groups in Retirement and Old Age**

Several of Mona's friends commented that she was not prepared to retire in 1961. "For many of us," Mona wrote a nursing friend shortly after her forced retirement, "there just is no such state. You are one of those and so am I."<sup>55</sup> Contemporary studies show that occupational prestige is critical for single, working women's sense of self-esteem and satisfaction.<sup>56</sup> The literature on aging suggests that loss of self-esteem after retirement can be prevented by participation in community activities. Volunteer work provides social contacts, a chance to share skills and life experiences, and an opportunity to contribute to society.<sup>57</sup> Prior to her retirement, Mona was generally too busy to participate in many volunteer organizations. In 1961, however, she threw her energies into establishing a branch of the Zonta Club in Prince Edward Island. Olga Cloke, the Canadian organizer for Zonta, described how she relied upon Mona in recruiting members:

[Mona] knows nearly everyone on the Island....I cannot speak too highly of her and of what she had done for Zonta and for me. She was ever ready to drive me, to advise me on personalities, to introduce me to men and women she thought might be helpful.<sup>58</sup>

Zonta International recruited executive women who wished to promote high ethical standards, improve the status of women in business and the professions, serve the community, and advance the cause of world peace.<sup>59</sup> As an honorary member, Mona chaired a committee that discussed the role of the United Nations, researched the need for day-care centres in Charlottetown, and worked at Red Cross blood clinics. As Zonta historian she helped edit the club's book, *Women of the Century*. And as chair of the Zonta committee on highway safety, Mona designed a grey reflector armband for pedestrians to wear at night. She also organized PEI's first defensive driving course.<sup>60</sup>



In addition to the importance of volunteer activities in bridging the gap between paid employment and retirement, studies on aging indicate that friendships become more important in retaining self-esteem in the elderly. A study of 50 never-married women born between 1884 and 1918 discovered that their female friends were the chief source of validation, companionship, and intimacy in their 20s and 30s; these friendships solidified and deepened in middle and late-middle age; and retirement brought even deeper commitment.<sup>61</sup> Friends who share gender, personal and generational experiences, and economic position become more significant for each other after retirement and are a major source of intimacy and emotional support. Old friends are valued listeners and confidantes, and can be depended upon for moral support and short-term aid in times of sickness.<sup>62</sup>

Mona's Hopkins classmates such as Ruth Barton and Ruth Wood served as reminders of past adventures and as eager travelling companions; and Islanders such as Kitty Peters, Marge Malone, and Kitty Sadler provided spiritual nourishment and intimacy. These long-time friends shared similar experiences and supplied a sense of meaning in her old age.<sup>63</sup>

Prior to her stroke in 1974, Mona and several friends made a pact not to tell their relatives if anything happened to them until the problem was solved one way or the other.<sup>64</sup> Mona favoured equitable friendships, in which one party was not always reliant upon the other.<sup>65</sup> Such a relationship was no longer possible with her sisters Jane and Margaret: they were younger than her and still quite healthy, and she did not want to be a burden to them. The first stroke awakened Mona to her own mortality, and she made a will. Several friends had already died. Ruth Wood died in 1967, and two years later her "very, very, very dear friend," Ruth Barton, had a fatal heart attack. In 1971 her older sister Helen suffocated in her sleep when her house caught fire. Mona's letters began to contain numerous references to her past. For the first time in 50 years Mona referred to Marion Rossiter. Although the literature on such self-reflection equates reminiscence with the approach of death and an increased sense of vulnerability, life-review also serves to provide the elderly with a sense of significance and meaning to their life and prepares them for death.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

When Mona Gordon Wilson died quietly in a nursing home on November 11, 1981, she left her adopted province considerably better than she had found it. The *Charlottetown Patriot* wrote upon her retirement in 1961: "Nurse extraordinary, personal friend and confidante of countless Island farm wives, Miss Wilson had a career in this province which can only be equalled by the depth of her understanding of the health problems of its people."<sup>67</sup> The Island had changed a great deal in 38 years. Children drank milk rather than sweet tea for lunch, and their mothers provided them with balanced, nutritional meals. Every family had toothbrushes, and children under 13 received free fluoride treatment. Smallpox, diphtheria, tuberculosis, and maternal mortality were no longer menaces, and crippled children were cared for by the province.

These were Mona's public successes. However, without the support, love, and nurture of her siblings, her network of professional associates, and her private "families" of female friends, she would not have endured the rigorous training of nursing school, the perils and loneliness of conditions in Siberia and the Balkans, and the male-dominated public health profession in Prince Edward Island. These support groups gave her self-respect and confidence, supported her public endeavours, secured her employment, offered sage advice, and provided recreation time to recharge her batteries before re-entering the hectic world of public health nursing.

If Mona Wilson's life is representative of those of other single, working women born at the turn of the century, then it is imperative that an examination of their life stories include the contributions of female networking and support groups to their success in the public sphere.

## Endnotes

1. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, (1975).
2. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) p. 173. Also see Carol Lasser, "'Let Us Be Sisters Forever': The Sororal Model of Nineteenth-

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3. For example, see: Blanche Wiesen Cook, "Female support networks and political activism: Lillian Wald, Crystal Eastman, Emma Goldman," in Nancy F. Cott, Elizabeth Pleck (eds.), *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1979) pp. 412-444. Elaine Silverman, *The Last Best West: Women on the Alberta Frontier, 1880-1930*. (Montreal: Eden Press, 1984); Ruth Compton Brouwer, *New Women for God: Canadian Presbyterian Women and Indian Missions, 1876-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Rosemary R. Gagan, *A Sensitive Independence: Canadian Methodist Women Missionaries in Canada and the Orient, 1881-1925* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).
  4. Leila J. Rupp, "'Imagine My Surprise': Women's Relationships in Historical Perspective," *Frontiers*, 1981, 5; and Karin Schultz, "Women's Adult Development: The Importance of Friendship," *Journal of Independent Social Work*, 1991, 5.
  5. Schultz, "Women's Adult Development," p. 19.
  6. Elspeth Cameron, "Biography and Feminism," in Libby Scheier, et al. (eds.) *Language in Her Eye: Views on Writing and Gender by Canadian Women Writing in English* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990); Joan Berzoff, "The Therapeutic Value of Women's Adult Friendships," *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 59, no. 3 (June 1989); Joel D. Block and Diane Greenberg, *Women and Friendship* (Toronto: Franklin Watts, 1985).
  7. Veronica Strong-Boag, "Making a Difference: The History of Canada's Nurses," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 8 (1991), p. 234.
  8. Mona's siblings included Helen (1890), Harold MacKenzie (1892), Jack (1896), twins Jane and Doris (1900), and Margaret (1905). Doris died in 1906, and Harold during the First World War.
  9. Primary sources of information for understanding Mona Wilson's private life included the large collection of letters, diaries, speeches, photographs and other memorabilia that she stored under her bed, which, along with the PEI Red Cross records, are now housed in the Public Records and Archives Division, Prince Edward Island; interviews with approximately 30 relatives, friends, and co-workers provided additional insights into her personality; assessments of Mona as a student nurse located in The Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, and material on her work for the American Red Cross located in the American National Archives and at Stanford University; the Zonta Club correspondence located in the PEI Red Cross office in Charlottetown. Additional material written by and about Mona included those contained in such contemporary journals as the *Canadian Nurse*, *The Canadian Red Cross Junior*, and the *Dominion Dental Journal*.
  10. For female bonding at Hopkins see, Douglas Baldwin, "Discipline, Obedience, and Female Support Groups: Mona Wilson at the Johns Hopkins School of Nurses, 1915-1918," *The Bulletin of Medical History* (Baltimore, forthcoming).

11. Student Records, RG 3, Series B, Johns Hopkins Archives; Mona to Jane, 10 June 1918, *ibid*; Charlotte A. Aikens, *Hospital Management* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1911); Mona to Jane, 23 February 1918, Mona G. Wilson Collection, Public Records and Archives Division, Prince Edward Island, [Henceforth PAPEI], Acc. 3652.
12. Schultz, "Women's Adult Development."
13. Nancy Tomes, "'Little World of Our Own': The Pennsylvania Hospital Training School for Nurses, 1895-1907," in Judith Leavitt *Women and Health in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).
14. Smith-Rosenberg, p. 77. Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community of Single Women 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 142. For similar conclusions see Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). According to Lasser, voluntary female kinships serve to soften the harsh realities of isolation in daily life and reinforce women's shared gender. Lasser, "Let Us Be Sisters Forever," p. 164.
15. Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, p. 98.
16. Ruth was 31 years old when she entered Hopkins, and Mona often referred to her as "mother."
17. For occupational identity and nursing culture see: Veronica Strong-Boag, "Making a Difference;" and Barbara Melosh, "The Physician's Hand," *Work Culture and Conflict in American Nursing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982).
18. Mona to family, 6 May 1918, PAPEI; also see Mona's comment in her Diary about "those very dark days" when she left Hopkins. *Diary*, 13 March 1920, PAPEI, Acc. 3028.
19. Mona to family, 20 December 1919, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
20. Anna Tittman to Clara Noyes, 14 July 1919, Box 918, file 987.118, American Red Cross Papers, American National Archives, Washington, D.C.
21. *Diary*, 27 September 1919; "Nursing Personnel," 26 June 1919, Box 919, American Red Cross Papers, American National Archives, Washington.
22. Mona to family, 18 December 1919, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
23. Mona to family, 16 August 1919, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
24. Letters from Marion to Ruth Barton and Harold Wilson reveal that Marion was equally upset about the forced parting. Marion to Ruth, 23 August 1919; Marion to Mr. Wilson, undated, *ibid*.
25. *Diary*, 20 August 1919, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
26. *Diary*, 6 September 1919.
27. *Ibid.*, 7 September 1919.
28. Marion to Ruth Barton, 12 October 1919, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
29. Marion to Mona, 22 May 1924, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
30. Marion to Mona, 8 December 1924, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
31. Helen Lea to Mona, 2 October 1925, letter in author's possession.

32. Mona to Jane, 9 October 1925, *ibid*.
33. Mona to Jane, *nd*, *ibid*.
34. For a discussion of public health care on the Island, see Douglas Baldwin, "Volunteers in Action: The Establishment of Government Health Care on Prince Edward Island, 1900-1931," *Acadiensis*, Spring 1990.
35. Mona to family, 2 June 1923, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
36. *Ibid*.
37. According to those people I interviewed, Mona got along exceedingly well with all classes of people in her work. One day, Eleanor Wheler recalled, Mona "went with me out to this dirty, neglected home, where the kids were full of head lice. I wondered how she would tackle it, and she was wonderful. Unlike Miss Kathleen Russell [Director of the Department of Public Health Nursing at the University of Toronto], who really couldn't get down to the people, she could get down to their level. Mona was great.... I still think that she was the best Public Health Nursing Director in Canada." Eleanor Wheler, "Some Memories of Public Health Nursing in PEI" (January 1973), PAPEI, Acc. 3150.
38. Mona to Katherine Hennessey, June 1974, PAPEI, Acc. 3028.
39. Marion Rossiter to Mona, 17 March 1925, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
40. Interview with Jane Hamilton.
41. Olga Cloke to J. Maria Pierce, president, Zonta International, California, 29 October 1962, PEI Red Cross Archives.
42. Anne ? to Mona, 18 November 1961, PAPEI, Acc. 3652. On the risk of overemphasizing the separation of public and private spheres, see Patricia T. Rooke, R.L. Schnell, "The Making of a Feminist Biography: Reflections on a Miniature Passion," *Atlantis* 15 (Fall 1989).
43. Diary of trip to Girl Guide Coronation Camp, May-June, 1936, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
44. Calculated from *Annual Survey of Education in Canada* (Canada Dominion Bureau of Statistics) for 1929 and 1936.
45. Jane to Mona, 9 September 1923, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
46. Mona to family, 27 September 1923, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
47. Carolyn J. Rosenthal and James Gladstone, "Family Relationships and Support in Later Life," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 28 (Spring 1993), pp. 127, 129.
48. Mona to Jack Wilson, September 1980, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
49. Interview with Mona's sisters, Margaret Keenleyside and Jane Hamilton, August 1987.
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51. Mona to Ruth Barton, 20 June 1943, PAPEI, Acc. 3652.
52. Interview with Vaunda (Stewart) MacKinnon, 28 May 1988.



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58. Cloke to J. Maria Pierce, president, Zonta International, California, 29 October 1962, PEI, Red Cross Archives.
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61. Barbara Levy Simon, *Never Married Women* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), pp. 32, 175.
62. Ibid.; Karen Roberto, Jean Scott, "Friendship Patterns Among Older Women," *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 19, no. 1, 1984; Alan Roadburg, *Aging: Retirement, Leisure and Work in Canada* (Toronto: Methuen, 1985), pp. 114-7; Gee and Kimbal, *Women and Aging*, p. 95; M. Jocelyn Armstrong, Karen S. Goldstein, "Friendship Support Patterns of Older American Women," *Journal of Aging Studies* 4 (1990).
63. Doris Francis, "The Significance of Work Friends in Late Life," *Journal of Aging Studies* 4 (1990).
64. Interview with Peggy Smith, 20 August 1987.
65. Roberto and Scott, "Friendship Patterns Among Older Women," p. 160; Anne M. Matthews, "The Relationship Between Social Support and Morale," pp. 58-60.
66. Roadburg, *Aging*, p. 157.
67. *Charlottetown Patriot*, 31 October 1961.

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