

DEPARTMENTS / DÉPARTEMENTS

A word from the President

Margaret Ridley Charlton

It's official! She's historically significant!

I had the honour of being invited to a very special ceremony that took place in Montreal on 1 May 2006. On this date, a Parks Canada plaque was unveiled at the Osler Library, McGill University, commemorating Margaret Ridley Charlton's contribution to health sciences librarianship as well as her contribution to the study of the medical history of New France. Margaret Ridley Charlton died on 1 May 1931; this was the 75th anniversary of her death. The ceremony was brief but meaningful with greetings from the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada offered by its Chair, Jean-Claude Marsan; a stirring rendition of "O Canada" sung by McGill Faculty of Music student Jessica Wise; welcoming remarks from David Crawford, McGill Librarian Emeritus, on behalf of Dr. Abraham Fuks, Dean of the McGill Faculty of Medicine; historical notes provided by Frances Groen, Emeritus Trenholme Director of Libraries; and speeches delivered by Janine Schmidt, McGill's Trenholme Director of Libraries, and Francine Émond, Director, Western Québec Field Unit, Parks Canada. The plaque was then unveiled by the speakers (Fig. 1), and the text imprinted on it was read by Jean-Claude Marsan (Fig. 2). The ceremony was followed by a tour of the Osler Library and a reception. The plaque will

be mounted outside the main building of McGill's Faculty of Medicine, which houses both the Osler Library of the History of Medicine and the Life Sciences Library.

For those who aren't familiar with the career of Ms. Charlton (as David Crawford pointed out during his address, it wouldn't be fitting to refer to her as "Margaret"), a brief overview of her life and achievements is available on the McGill Osler Library Web site [1]. In reading this overview, I was intrigued by the following statement contained therein:

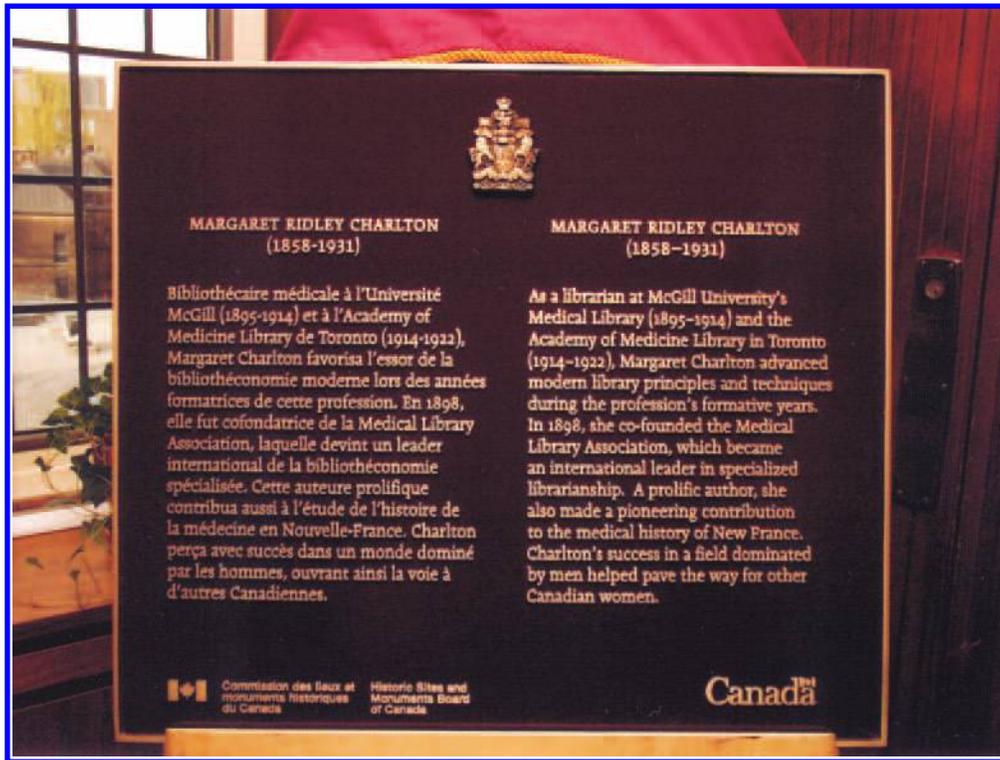
She remained at the McGill Medical Library in this position until 1914, when she resigned *under less than happy circumstances*, and moved to Toronto as Librarian of the Toronto Academy of Medicine. In 1922 she resigned from the Academy, *also under less than happy circumstances*, and returned to Montréal to live with her sisters. (Italics mine.)

Frances Groen's article [2] on Ms. Charlton's life and career provides some clarification of these "less than happy circumstances". The minutes of the McGill Faculty of Medicine Library Committee note at various times laxity in procedures for circulating journals, a cataloguing backlog, and errors in the library accounting books. Possibly a more important factor in creating the "less than happy circumstances", though, appears to be Ms. Charlton's personality. Accounts from the time paint her as a woman who "did not conceal her fervid likes and dislikes" [2] and who may have been

Fig. 1. Left to right: David S. Crawford, Francine Émond, Frances Groen, and Janine Schmidt after unveiling the plaque. Photo courtesy of Parks Canada.



Fig. 2. The Plaque. Photo courtesy of Parks Canada.



“uncivil” to certain library users. However, one of her champions, Dr. Frederick Gault Findley, Honorary Librarian during most of Ms. Charlton’s tenure at the McGill Medical Library, noted in a letter that her “vagaries” were “more than balanced by her energies and abilities” [2], and Frances Groen notes that Ms. Charlton resembles “other outspoken Canadian women of her period.... Although recognized for their work, they were frequently viewed askance by their contemporaries” [2].

In modern society, it is thankfully becoming less and less the case that women with strong opinions or women who advocate for change are “viewed askance”. It is also the case that librarians, whether female or male, are demanding a place at the table when discussions of organizational and technical change take place, particularly when these changes have the potential to affect our ability “to provide timely, relevant, and accurate information to our user communities”. That being said, it still takes a certain amount of fortitude to ensure that one’s voice is heard, particularly for those of us whose nature it is not to rock the boat. Perhaps, then, at times when we are tempted not to risk speaking or acting for fear of looking foolish, annoying the powers that be, or any of the many other reasons we might give for letting change happen to us rather than seizing the opportunities change has to offer, we should look to the example of Margaret Ridley Charlton, who from all accounts did not appear to worry about whose boat she was rocking and whose accomplishments in the fullness of time far overshadow any “vagaries” of her personality. Whether Margaret Ridley Charlton was an unpleasant woman redeemed by her professional expertise or simply an accomplished woman whose assertive behaviour was an affront to the social practices of her time, we’ll never know unless and until further details of her life are uncovered.

As most association members know, the Canadian Health Libraries Association / Association des bibliothèques de la santé du Canada has honoured Ms. Charlton by naming our award of outstanding achievement after her. In addition, her image was included on the Medical Library Association’s 75th anniversary medal struck in 1976, which depicted the three cofounders of MLA (two of whom were Canadians — Ms. Charlton and William Osler). While the health science library community has already acknowledged Ms. Charlton’s contribution to our profession, it is extremely gratifying to see the contributions of this remarkable woman recognized by the broader community. Kudos to David Crawford who initiated the submission [3] to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada proposing that Ms. Charlton be honoured.

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References

1. Crawford DS, editor. *Margaret Ridley Charlton* [Web page]. Montreal; 2004 [cited 2006 June 25]. Available from <http://www.health.library.mcgill.ca/osler/charlton/>.
2. Groen F. Margaret Ridley Charlton, medical librarian and historian: An evaluation of her career. *Fontanus*. 1989; 2:55–63. Available from http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/fontanus/search/issue.php?issue=Fontanus_Vol_02_1989. Reprinted in BMC, 2001 Spring;22(3):108–11.
3. *Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada Submission Report – Margaret Ridley Charlton* [Web page]. [cited 2006 June 25] Available from <http://www.health.library.mcgill.ca/osler/charlton/charlton.pdf>.