

Engineer and Feminist: Elsie Gregory MacGill and the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, 1967-1970

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Article abstract

Can a woman engineer be a feminist? This article argues in the affirmative using a case study of Elsie Gregory MacGill. Elsie Gregory MacGill was Canada's first woman electrical engineer, graduating in 1927 from The University of Toronto. She then became the first woman to earn a degree in aeronautical engineering from the University of Michigan in 1929. While establishing herself in a predominantly masculine profession, MacGill, also a third generation feminist, actively worked for women's equal rights and opportunities in Canadian society. A case study of her role in the Royal Commission of the Status of Women (RCSW), 1967-1970, is used to illustrate that not only can a woman engineering be a feminist, but more importantly that her dual background allowed her to effectively bridge the worlds of the engineering and feminism in engineering the RCSW.

Portrait of Elsie Gregory MacGill taken in April of 1938.



PA-148380

Source : Library and Archives of Canada, PA-148380.

Engineer and Feminist: Elsie Gregory MacGill and the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, 1967-1970¹

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Abstract : Can a woman engineer be a feminist? This article argues in the affirmative using a case study of Elsie Gregory MacGill. Elsie Gregory MacGill was Canada's first woman electrical engineer, graduating in 1927 from The University of Toronto. She then became the first woman to earn a degree in aeronautical engineering from the University of Michigan in 1929. While establishing herself in a predominantly masculine profession, MacGill, also a third generation feminist, actively worked for women's equal rights and opportunities in Canadian society. A case study of her role in the Royal Commission of the Status of Women (RCSW), 1967-1970, is used to illustrate that not only can a woman engineering be a feminist, but more importantly that her dual background allowed her to effectively bridge the worlds of the engineering and feminism in engineering the RCSW.

Résumé : Une femme ingénieur peut-elle être féministe ? Cet article utilise le cas d'Elsie Gregory MacGill pour répondre par l'affirmative à cette question. Elsie Gregory MacGill, diplômée de l'Université de Toronto en 1927, fut la première femme ingénieure électrique au Canada. Elle devint ensuite la première femme au monde à devenir ingénieure en aéronautique grâce à l'obtention d'un diplôme de l'Université du Michigan en 1929. Tout en faisant sa place dans une profession essentiellement masculine, MacGill, qui était aussi une féministe de la troisième génération, milita en faveur de l'égalité des femmes au Canada. L'étude de son rôle au sein de la commission royale d'enquête sur la situation de la femme, qui siégea de 1967 à 1970, servira ici à illustrer le fait que non seulement une femme ingénieure peut bien être féministe mais, plus important, que son double profil lui a permis de réunir efficacement les mondes du génie et du féminisme à travers les rouages de la commission.

1. Author would like to express thanks to Drs. Heap, Gaudin and Kranakis, and anonymous reviewers. Sincere appreciation of support also to Brian, Sandi & Darren Sissons, other family and friends.

Engineering has historically been a male-coded profession. The first generation of women engineers were true pioneers who faced a wide range of challenges. By choosing engineering, they directly challenged the gendered-based division of the professions. In this context, could a woman be an engineer and a feminist? The existing scholarship tends to dissociate women engineers from feminism. Ruth Schwartz Cowan contends that although women engineers were clearly “gender-benders,” they usually stayed away from feminism and organized feminist activities.² Similarly, Ruth Oldenziel notes that in the first decades of the twentieth century, American women engineers and feminists did not actively seek each other’s support towards the advancement of women in society. Nora Stanton Blatch, who is identified as a third-generation feminist, is considered as an exception to the norm.³ Conversely, Lillian Gilbreth’s legacy of hard work and personal sacrifice was held up as the ideal that most American women in the profession sought to emulate.⁴

In Canada, however, Elsie Gregory MacGill, who is celebrated as a pioneering woman engineer, openly embraced feminist goals in addition to pursuing a successful career for more than forty years. While breaking new ground as a woman entering this male-dominated profession in the early twentieth-century—for example, she was the first woman to graduate in electrical engineering in Canada, in 1927, and the world’s first woman engineer to obtain a master’s degree in aeronautical engineering in 1929—MacGill was also a high-profile activist committed to improve the situation of Canadian women.

This article will examine Elsie MacGill’s relationship with feminism, more specifically during her tenure as a member of the groundbreaking Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) between 1967 and 1970. A focus on this significant chapter in MacGill’s career will allow us to raise a number of important questions: How did MacGill establish a bridge between engineering and feminism? Did her engineering

2. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, “Foreword,” in *Crossing Boundaries, Building Bridges: Comparing the History of Women Engineers, 1870s-1990s*, eds. Annie Canel, Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000), xiv-xv.

3. Ruth Oldenziel, “Multiple-Entry Visas: Gender and Engineering in the US, 1870-1945,” in *Crossing Boundaries* (see note 2), 12-13.

4. Due to the proximity of the United States and the dearth of literature on women engineers it is easy to look to the American example for a Canadian comparison. However, it would appear that the United States stood apart as its women engineers remained apart from feminism as Ruth Oldenziel notes, “Unlike their Russian, Austrian, and French sisters, American philanthropists and advocates of women’s education neither paid any special attention to the engineering profession as a vehicle for women’s equality, nor helped to establish separate engineering institutions,” *Ibid.*, 12-14.

background shape her feminist activism? What impact did MacGill's participation in the RCSW have on its outcome? Finally, how can this case study contribute to a better understanding of Canadian feminism?

While American and European women historians have expanded the scholarship on women engineers, we know very little about their Canadian counterparts.⁵ Elsie MacGill's impressive accomplishments have been the subject of only a few scholarly articles.⁶ The recent scholarship clearly shows the strong association between masculinity and engineering. As Ruth Oldenziel argues, technology and engineering specifically became male-coded, a process that was far from accidental.⁷ A comparative study of women engineers in Europe and the United States has assessed the various boundaries they had to cross when entering the profession, and depicted the different kind of strategies they used to break these barriers.⁸ In their respective country, these women directly challenged the dominant societal norms; they were "gender-benders," as they believed they could make it in a male professional world.⁹

Clearly, Elsie MacGill belongs to this category of "mold-breakers." The longevity of her engineering career is truly remarkable. That she combined a successful professional life in this field with her public activities as a promoter of women's rights is also impressive. As we shall see, her participation in the RCSW allowed to her to articulate her feminist views on a series of fundamental issues, and use her professional skills to ensure that the Commission's work was conducted efficiently.

5. Ruby Heap, "Writing Them into History: Canadian Women in Science and Engineering Since the 1980s," in *Out of the Ivory Tower: Feminist Research for Social Change*, eds. Andrea Martinez and Meryn Stuart (Toronto: SUMACH Press, 2003), 49-51.

6. Susan E. Merritt, "Elsie MacGill (1906-1980): Aeronautical Engineer," in *Her Story III: Women From Canada's Past* (St. Catherines: Vanwell, 1999), 180-193; Pamela Wakewich, "'The Queen of the Hurricanes': Elsie Gregory MacGill, Aeronautical Engineer and Women's Advocate," in *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Sharon Anne Cook, Lorna R. McLean and Kate O'Rourke (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 396-401.

7. Note that she also argues that the male coding inherent in engineering is similar to the same process in science. Ruth Oldenziel, *Making Technology Masculine: Men, Women and Modern Machines in America, 1870-1945* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 10-11.

8. *Crossing Boundaries* (see note 2).

9. Cowan, xiv.

Elsie Gregory MacGill: Third-Generation Feminist

Like American engineer Nora Blatch, Elsie MacGill was a third generation feminist. Her grandmother Emma Gregory had been an active suffragette in British Columbia while her mother, Helen Gregory MacGill, was the first female judge appointed in that province. MacGill was also instrumental in producing educational material to educate British Columbian women about their rights and the procedures required to exercise them.¹⁰ As a pioneer in a male-dominated profession and as an activist, Helen thus represented a strong role model for Elsie, as well as for Canadian women in general.¹¹

Earlier in her career, Elsie MacGill was most probably unaware of the widespread discrimination which prevailed in her chosen field. She certainly did not openly discuss this issue. Like many of her contemporaries, she resorted to the coping strategy of hard work, focusing on the job at hand.¹² During World War II, she was appointed as Chief Aeronautical Engineer at Canadian Car & Foundry in Fort William, Ontario (presently Thunder Bay). MacGill achieved fame as a pioneering woman engineer through articles in popular magazines such as *Chatelaine*. She also inspired a cartoon vignette in the American *True Comics* series entitled "Queen of the Hurricanes," which highlighted her determination to persevere in a non-traditional occupation.¹³ As such, MacGill served as a role model for other women who aspired to enter male-dominated fields. However, once she became aware of the various discriminations, she challenged these problems publicly, through her pioneering work and activism in various organizations.

As she established herself in her career, MacGill started to more openly voice her views on the inequalities between men and women within the engineering profession and society as a whole. During the 1950s and 1960s she served as a key member of the Business and Professional Women's Clubs (BPWC) of Ontario, rising to the position of president,

10. *Laws* and "How to Conduct Public Meetings in Canada and Where to Find the Rules," were Helen MacGill's two key productions. Elsie MacGill, *My Mother the Judge: A Biography of Judge Helen Gregory MacGill* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1955), 224, 229.

11. Naomi Black, "The Canadian Women's Movement: The Second Wave," in *Changing Patterns. Women in Canada*, eds. Sandra Burt, Lorraine Code and Lindsay Dorney, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), 153-4.

12. Martha Trescott, "Women Engineers in History: Profiles in Holism and Persistence," in *Women in Science and Engineering*, eds. Violet B. Has and Carolyn C. Perrucci (Rexdale: John Wiley and Sons Canada, 1984), 183-4.

13. Merritt, 190; Wakewich, 397-399.

which she held between 1956 and 1958.¹⁴ The BPWC's main focus during the 1950s was to fight for equal-pay legislation for women.¹⁵ As an engineer and a business woman, MacGill was obviously concerned with the problems these women faced, especially women engineers, whose employment options were quite limited.¹⁶

*Watching the flight of a Hurricane aircraft in Fort William [Thunder Bay], Ontario in 1941.
From left to right: David Boyd, Brian Sheaver, Elise MacGill and Mary Boyd.*



PA-148465

Source: Library and Archives of Canada, PA-148465.

During this period, Elsie also expanded her views on women and politics. In 1954, in a speech entitled, "A Blueprint for Madame Prime Minister," delivered to the Business and Professional Women's Clubs in Toronto, she challenged the idea that women were given the franchise due to a "noble" goal, dismissing such ideas to "romantic nonsense."¹⁷ She

14. "Leader in Industrial Engineering to Address B&P Conference," *The Oshawa Times*, May 7, 1960.

15. Black, 158.

16. Elsie MacGill, "Position of Women in Canada in the Engineering Profession," *Saturday Night*, October 19, 1946.

17. Library and Archives of Canada (hereafter LAC), MG31-K7, vol. 21, no. 9, Miscellaneous Speeches by E.G. MacGill, 1954-1975, "A Blueprint for Madame Prime Minister," July 27, 1954.

argued that “It was women’s *voting potential* rather than their *use* of the franchise that caused male administrators to pay heed to their petitions, learn from them, accept their leads and suggestions and frame and pass bills embodying the changes *they* called for.”¹⁸ She believed that increasing the number of women in government and ultimately having a woman prime minister would bring about even greater changes in Canadian society. However, she echoed her mother by admitting that rising to this ultimate leadership position was difficult for women, since they were repeatedly denied access to upper-level positions. Without the opportunity to hone and demonstrate their capabilities within “king-sized” positions, women were, indeed, unable to prove that they could be effective leaders.¹⁹ For MacGill, involvement in public causes and activities was essential for any individual who aspired to serve, as it developed those traits required for leadership positions and public service, while increasing the techniques and skills of the individual, and his or her potential for advancement.²⁰

In 1962, she served as the president of the BPWC’s national body, the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs (CFBPWC).²¹ She used this national platform to argue that women, because of their sex, were discriminated against in the professional and business worlds:

Men do not find it necessary to form organizations to promote the objective for themselves, they may, as individuals, suffer discriminatory practices, but as a group they are not handicapped as women are, otherwise there would probably be a similar *male* Federation.²²

MacGill’s views on gender equality clearly expressed her stance as a liberal feminist. She identified the fact that women because of their gender, were discriminated against in all spheres of society. This situation needed to be changed, as women were entitled to the same rights as those enjoyed by men in the public sphere.²³

18. *Ibid.*, 2-3.

19. *Ibid.*, 10.

20. *Ibid.*, 1-11.

21. “Elsie MacGill New President CFBPWC,” *The Moncton Transcript*, July 13, 1962.

22. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 6, no. 14, Speeches Given by MacGill Concerning the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, 1963-1975, “Exploring our Capabilities,” 2-3.

23. Kate Nash, “Liberal Feminism,” in *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*, ed. Lorraine Code (New York: Routledge, 2000), 303-304.

MacGill's Appointment as Member of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women

The Royal Commission on the Status of Women was a commission of public inquiry created by an Act of Parliament on February 16th, 1967, under the Liberal administration of Lester B. Pearson. Several factors were conducive to its establishment. The 1960s was, overall, a decade of prosperity in Canada; as a result, the federal government was more inclined to expand its health, welfare and community programs.²⁴ This was also a period of increased social protest. In the United States, the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-war movement and the student movement mobilized a large segment of the population, including a large number of women. The latter began to openly question their own situation, and to denounce the status quo. Canadian women took a similar stance.²⁵ In the 1960s two high-profile women in Parliament, Secretary of State Judy LaMarsh, and MP Grace MacInnis, from the New Democratic Party, were able to express their views to the government and to call for the creation of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada. The wide support of the women's organizations all over Canada and the increasing pressure for change helped to force the hand of the federal government.²⁶

Similar commissions of inquiry had been created by the federal government in the United States and by the United Nations.²⁷ While there is debate surrounding the real motives underlying the government's decision,²⁸ the RCSW was established with the official mandate "to report upon the status of women in Canada, and to recommend what steps might be taken by the Federal Government to ensure equal opportunities with

24. Cerise Morris, "'Determination and Thoroughness': The Movement for a Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada," *Atlantis* 5, 2 (Spring 1980): 5.

25. Jill Vickers, "The Intellectual Origins of the Women's Movements in Canada," in *Challenging Times* (see note 25), 40, 52-54.

26. As Cerise Morris reminds us in her exhaustive study of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW), the well-defined lobby effort of groups such as the Committee of Equality of Women in Canada was critical, but there was also an international movement for change. Laura Sabia as the president of CEW was a major contender for change, see note 31. Cerise Morris, "No More Than Simple Justice: The Royal Commission on the Status of Women and Social Change in Canada," Doctoral Dissertation, McGill University, 1982.

27. Morris, "Determination and Thoroughness," 19.

28. *Ibid.*

men in all aspects of Canadian society.” The Commission would sit for 3 years, producing its key report in 1970.²⁹

Florence Bird, a well-known media personality, was appointed as chairperson by the federal government. Her appointment has been interpreted in various ways; ultimately as Judy LaMarsh recalled, the fact that she was the conservative alternative to Laura Sabia, the leader of the Committee of Equality of Women in Canada,³⁰ justified this choice.³¹ It then fell to the government to select the commissioners, a task Prime Minister Pearson performed with the assistance of Judy LaMarsh. The individuals ultimately chosen were Lola Lange, a farm union representative, Jeanne Lapointe, professor of French Literature at Laval University and a former member on the Parent Commission, Doris Ogilvie, a lawyer and a judge, Jacques Henripin, chair of the Department of Demography at the University de Montréal, Elsie Gregory MacGill, an engineer and private consultant, and Donald Gordon, a broadcaster and professor of political science.³² Donald Gordon resigned from the RCSW after eight months and the government appointed *John Humphrey*, a professor of law and former secretary-general of the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations, to take his place.³³

As Cerise Morris notes, this selection can be perceived as a deviation from the norm, but also as a reflection of old practices:

29. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* (Ottawa, Crown Copyrights, 1970), vii.

30. Laura Sabia was the president at this time of the Canadian Federation of University Women, which she used to create the Committee on the Equality of Women in Canada (CEW). She was considered to be a radical most notably due to her statement recorded in the *Globe & Mail*, which has also been considered instrumental in bringing the commission into existence: “Two million Canadian women may be asked to march on Ottawa if the federal government fails to announce by the end of the month a Royal Commission on Women’s Rights.... “We’re tired of being nice about trying to get an official inquiry into women’s rights in Canada. If we don’t get a royal commission by the end of this month, we’ll use every tactic we can. And if we have to use violence, damn it, we will.” Cerise Morris, “Determination and Thoroughness,” 14-15.

31. Judy LaMarsh, *Judy LaMarsh: Memoirs of a Bird in a Gilded Cage* (Toronto: Pocket Books, 1970), 133. The CEW’s response: “Bird’s appointment was not well-received within the CEW. Some of the women felt Bird was a poor choice because she was “establishment orientated” and preferred not to be labeled a feminist. Nevertheless, CEW accepted Bird’s appointment with good grace and a public show of solidarity, because members felt they had achieved their major objective and should not jeopardize their new-found strength by any sign of divisiveness.” Personal communication with Laura Sabia, Marc, 1977 in Cerise Morris, “No More Than Simple Justice,” 139.

32. LaMarsh, 316-17.

33. Florence Bird, *Anne Francis: An Autobiography by Florence Bird* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company Limited, 1974), 265.

It was a predominately female commission chaired by a woman, and this fact is without historical precedent. In these respects, the RCSW was not a typical Canadian royal commission. In all other respects, however, the RCSW was typical: its commissioners were drawn from the upper levels of society, were mainly of English Canadian origin, and resided mainly in central Canada. The majority of the commissioners had acquired impressive social honours through their occupation accomplishments.³⁴

Why was Elsie selected? Judy LaMarsh invokes above all her dual legacy as a pioneer woman engineer and as an experienced third generation feminist.³⁵ Naomi Black in turn argued that, “regional significance,” was important as she was a former resident of British Columbia, added to the fact that Elsie also represented women in business and women in science. Black also refers to her critical role also as the fundamental educator of the commissioners with respect to the history, theories and practices of Canadian feminism.³⁶ For her part, Elsie MacGill claimed that “Royal commissioners are not supposed to be experts, but rather the kinds of people who can come up with acceptable recommendations...we can buy the expertise. It’s a learning experience for the commissioners, and teaching for the public.”³⁷

Engineering a Feminist Report

From the very beginning, MacGill took a leading role in the organization and orientation of the RCSW. Her work as an engineer had required precision and focus to accurately assess given situations and to reach carefully defined goals. Here, she resorted to the same approach. As early as March 11th, 1967, she sent a letter to her fellow commissioners concerning the inquiry overall, its terms of reference, and a plan of operation. She outlined direct plans of action with corresponding clear follow-through toward the defined goals as she saw them. She advocated fresh approaches, flexibility, focused work at a brisk pace, with periodic meaningful publications, and the completion of the final report by 1968.³⁸ MacGill wanted the Commission to operate in an objective perspective in order to produce reliable evidence that could be presented in a clear and concise manner in the written report. Its research questions should be well-defined in order to lead to firm recommendations. She feared that

34. Morris, “No More Than Simple Justice,” 150.

35. LaMarsh, 316.

36. Black, 160.

37. Personal interview with MacGill, September 1978, quoted in Morris, 153-154.

38. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 6, no. 3, Memoranda and Reports Concerning Various Chapters 1967-1969, “Comments on the Inquiry, the Commission’s Terms of Reference,” February 16, 1967.

visible disagreement amongst the commissioners would severely hamper the overall impact of the report. She further argued that presenting larger reform ideas in a step-by-step approach would generate greater acceptance by the government as opposed to a request for immediate changes.³⁹

Nova Scotia Premier George Issac Smith with Judge Doris Ogilvie (left) and Elsie G. MacGill (right).



Source: Library and Archives of Canada, PA-195726. Taken by Wambolt-Waterfield Photography Ltd., permission granted by Jim Clark.

MacGill's training as an engineer, it can also be argued, informed her detailed action schemes for the Commission. One innovative idea she introduced was a schematic plan that provided a means for comparing the current situation of women to the projected improvements desired by the RCSW, with respect to women's presence in various sectors of public life. For example, MacGill used the problem of women's representation in the Canadian Senate. With the use of her plan the RCSW could work through four key steps to achieve reform. First, it could examine the past or present trend, of which women held 12 seats of the 102 available, then

39. *Ibid.*

chart the projected trend, given the current situation and the “natural” increase of women in the Senate, which would only see an increase to 30 seats for women by 2030. The commissioners could then generate the desired minimum numbers, in this case 50 seats, and measure the resulting “discontinuity” between the two projections.⁴⁰ This data would allow them to recommend concrete procedures in order to rise above what MacGill called the “discontinuity step” or gap between the natural growth and the RCSW’s projected growth of women in the public sphere.⁴¹

MacGill still with respect to process, argued that all sections of Canadian society deserved a voice; she was thus instrumental in convincing the commissioners to operate within the broadest terms of reference possible. She reminded them that they were bound by a variety of limitations due to their backgrounds and corresponding positions in society. Furthermore, she challenged them to reflect upon those personal prejudices that might affect their objectivity when formulating and defending the final recommendations. To assist her colleagues with this task, she distributed a detailed list for contemplation; in fact, this list consisted of a full-fledged feminist program that raised some very controversial issues.

First, she asked them to assess their willingness to accept the idea that women should have a power of decision-making free from male influence, and be able to exercise this power in all aspects of life. Secondly, she questioned their support for equal opportunities for women to partake in existing hierarchies, be it government or the family. Thirdly, she asked if they would be willing to fully support women’s access and entry into “so-called masculine pursuits—professions, trades, [and] avocations.”⁴² Fourthly, she questioned their acceptance of shared responsibility of domestic duties and care of children by both parents. Her last set of questions dealt with the more controversial issue of sexual conduct and sexual orientation. She asked the commissioners if they would have “[e]qual tolerance for women in matters of sexual morality including ‘free love,’ lesbianism, [and] homosexuality.”⁴³

40. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 5, no. 21.

41. “As Commissioner MacGill explained, such an analysis could show that, in certain cases, the natural trend does correspond to the goals set by the Commission, thus requiring no ‘discontinuity step.’” She added that whether the Commissioners agree on the discontinuity step needed or not, the analysis was still of value. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 4, no. 16, 27th Meeting of Commission—Minutes, August 11-14, 1969 (1-2), “Memo: Commissioners’ Limitations on Final Recommendations,” Elsie Gregory MacGill to Commissioners, January 17, 1968.

42. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 6, no. 3.

43. *Ibid.*

MacGill also proposed a “scientific” method she designed on November 9th, 1967 to assess the situation of Canadian women. Detailed in a memo entitled, “Developing the Commission’s task using a certain scientific process,” the method entailed the creation of hypotheses and the collection of facts which would prove or disprove the original ideas. From that point the hypotheses could be re-written and the process could be repeated as many times as deemed necessary.⁴⁴ She submitted three initial hypotheses which in this case, were based on basic liberal feminist principles,

HYPOTHESIS I: THAT in Canada the status of women is not equal to that of man... HYPOTHESIS II: THAT in Canada Women’s deprivation of opportunities results from a) cultural attitudes; b) the physical environments in which women find themselves placed... HYPOTHESIS III: THAT in Canada, women’s deprivation of opportunities in education, employment, government, and in major decision making, can be overcome and women be given equal opportunities with men by a) adjustment to the environments in which women find themselves placed, b) by adoption of egalitarian cultural attitudes.⁴⁵

MacGill then outlined the lack of opportunities for women caused by cultural practices such as the dominant gender stereotypes, courtship and marriage expectations, and the many social and psychological barriers women faced in the workplace.⁴⁶

Finally, MacGill argued that if the RCSW wished to produce a report representative of the views of Canadian women as a whole, it was necessary to reach as many sections of society as possible. Individuals and groups should not be dissuaded from presenting their arguments at hearings simply because their briefs lacked a certain degree of coherence and clarity.⁴⁷ MacGill also strongly felt that the Commission needed to assess the role of the provinces in regards to women’s status; otherwise, a notable gap in the final report would result.⁴⁸ Technically, the Commission’s mandate was to consider those changes that could be accomplished at the federal level only. However, MacGill’s insistence to consider the multiple layers of Canadian federalism generated support for the broadest interpretation of the Commission’s terms of reference; which allowed for the study of “such other matters in relation to the status of

44. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 3, no. 6, Fifth Meeting of Commission—Minutes, Reports and Submissions (Part I), November 1-3, 1967, 1.

45. *Ibid.*, 2-4.

46. *Ibid.*, 3.

47. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 4, no. 2, Thirteenth Meeting of the Commission—Includes Minutes from the 8th to 12th Meetings, September 26-27, 1968.

48. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 3, no. 3, Third Meeting of Commission—Minutes, Reports and Submissions, May 24-26, 1967.

women in Canada as may appear to the Commissioners to be relevant.”⁴⁹ This section thus, effectively condoned an examination of the situation of women in the provinces and territories, and it led to a significant number of recommendations that touched all levels of government.

All along, MacGill’s training as an engineer never allowed her to become side-tracked from the ultimate goal, which was to produce a clear and concise report in a timely fashion.⁵⁰ She acted as a guide and, when necessary, as a referee to keep the other commissioners on track. MacGill believed that the Commission would be able to be the most effective, if its members refrained from the draw to enact change themselves, insisting that they adhere to their mandate and remain focused.⁵¹ While her initial goal to have the report completed by 1968 proved unrealistic, she, nonetheless, was able to maintain a brisk work pace, suggesting, as early as June 5th, 1968, that the Commission hold summer meetings to discuss the final report in detail. Not surprisingly, she took an active role in the editing of draft chapters; she thus made sure the work of the Commissioners was not ignored or overlooked by the final editors.⁵² At the same time, she suggested that tentative dates be set for each chapter’s completion.⁵³

MacGill was eager to be well-informed on every aspect of the Commission’s work. To perform her duties at the highest level, she asked to have her name included in the mailing list for the Commission’s Critical Path and Network (which was the internal administration of the Commission); this kept her abreast of all its internal workings, including those at the most basic levels, such as scheduling and communication.⁵⁴ At the same time, MacGill produced an immense collection of internal memos. She, by far, used them to the greatest extent. Their quality was

49. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada*, vii-viii.

50. As Ruth Oldenziel notes during training and afterwards women engineers learned the value of hard work maintained by unrelenting focus for the goals to be achieved. Oldenziel, “Multiple Entry Visas,” 14.

51. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 4, no. 2.

52. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 4, no. 8, Nineteenth Meeting of Commission—Minutes, April 2-3, 1969.

53. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 4, no. 12, 23rd Meeting of Commission—Minutes, June 9-13, 1969.

54. The Critical Path and Network Section was instrumental in ensuring efficient communication between the various groups and sections within the commission as a whole. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 3, no. 5, Fourth Meeting of Commission—Miscellaneous Reports and Memoranda, 1967-1968.

such that they were repeatedly referred to at the Commission's meetings as points of reference and sources for new perspectives.⁵⁵

Throughout this period of intense activity, MacGill assumed additional tasks as needed or required. For instance she filled the position of acting secretary whenever one was needed.⁵⁶ This was most often the case during private meetings of the commissioners; her level of experience with the rules of meetings and her ability to manage large amounts of information made her a natural choice. Her strength as a public speaker was capitalized upon; she took on a variety of speaking engagements to publicize the Commission's work and promote its goals.⁵⁷ For example, in an address to the annual International Women's Day Luncheon organized by the Pioneer Women's Organization of Montreal on March 6th, 1968, she argued that social change was needed in order to enable women to become full and equal individuals in Canadian society. Democracy would not diminish one group [i.e. men] by raising another group [women] to the same level.⁵⁸ She also argued that change could be brought rapidly. The speedy progress made by space engineers provided a good example:

Let us not fall into easy thinking that social improvements can only be introduced gradually. There is not rule about this. The pattern of the past need not be repeated. Speed of implementation depends probably on the degree of effort expended... Something more than time is required. A unique start must be made. The space engineers did not put satellites into orbit by repeating their flight failures so many hundred times. Improving the status of women in Canada need not be a long-drawn out operation but could be done quickly if Canadians decided they wanted it that way.⁵⁹

Due to her previous work in the area (as chair of the Ontario Jury Committee, 1951-52 and Penal Reform Committee 1955-56), Else MacGill was also very interested in crime and penal reform. She had developed a sharp understanding of the Criminal Code and of the intricacies of the Canadian legal system. As a result, she provided information to the other commissioners, at meetings and in her compre-

55. For example, the minutes of the July 29-31st meeting in 1969 record that at this meeting alone four of her submitted memos were addressed, ranging from her concerns on women's detention facilities to politics and senate reform. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 4, no. 14, 25th Meeting of Commission—Minutes, July 29-31, 1969.

56. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 3, no. 10, Seventh Meeting of Commission—Reports and Submissions, February 15-16, 1968.

57. Ibid.

58. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 6, no. 14, Speeches Given by MacGill Concerning the RCSW 1963-1975, "Changing the Status of Women in Canada," March 6, 1968, 2-3.

59. Ibid.

hensive memos, clarifying and interpreting ably various laws, rules and regulations, such as those pertaining to the position of women within the *Criminal Code*.⁶⁰

On another front, MacGill assumed the initial planning and production of a brochure for the RCSW.⁶¹ Her experience in industrial engineering, especially as a private consultant, led her to appreciate the importance of marketing ideas, and of generating interest in the public realm. Entitled “What Do You Have To Say About the Status of Women?” the brochure was part of a well-planned promotion campaign, which informed Canadians about the Commission and requested their input in the form of briefs. A “how to” list for creating and submitting briefs was included in the brochure. This project was a complete success: more than 275,000 brochures were distributed in cooperation with major supermarket chains including Steinberg’s Dominion, Loblaws and IGA. In fact, a second printing of 190,000 brochures was necessary due to their instant popularity with the public.⁶² Most importantly, the success of this strategy is reflected in the sheer volume of input from the public: more than 468 briefs and 1000 letters of opinion were submitted, to the RCSW, in addition to the public’s active participation in its hearings.⁶³

Finally, MacGill advocated the use of technology through the production of a public education video.⁶⁴ She referred to the United States’ *Society of Women Engineers Newsletter*, which promoted the use of films in the career guidance of youth.⁶⁵ Due to budget constraints, the video was never produced; however, the idea was seriously considered by the RCSW, yet another indication of MacGill’s large influence within its ranks.⁶⁶

Indeed, as Florence Bird readily acknowledged, MacGill had been her indispensable “right hand,” when assessing her work on the RCSW.⁶⁷ The

60. One of many examples is the memo “February 1970 Proposed Amendment to the Criminal Code Regarding Abortion—Chapter VIII” where she actually goes to the trouble of typing out whole sections of the Criminal Code in order to clarify her position. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 5, no. 1, 42nd Meeting of Commission—Minutes, February 11-13, 1970.

61. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 3, no. 8, Fifth Meeting of Commission—Miscellaneous, 1967.

62. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 3, no. 10, Seventh Meeting of Commission—Reports and Submissions, February 15-16, 1968.

63. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada*, xi.

64. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 3, no. 9, Sixth Meeting of Commission—Minutes, Reports and Submissions, December 13-14, 1967.

65. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 3, no. 10, Seventh Meeting of Commission—Reports and Submissions, February 15-16, 1968, James H. Anderson, “Using Career Guidance Films,” *SWE Newsletter*, October 1967, 2.

66. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 3, no. 10.

67. Bird, 265.

combination of her engineering training and feminist activism allowed her to create a bridge between the two areas and thus bringing new views to the table, and helping to produce a seminal feminist report. Furthermore, her intense discipline, work style, and commitment, were indispensable to the success of the Commission. In fact, Bird would ultimately label MacGill as “the moving force behind the RCSW.”⁶⁸

The Feminism of Elsie MacGill

From the very outset of the RCSW, MacGill was openly acknowledged to be a leading feminist by the other Commissioners. Monique Bégin, the Executive Secretary of the RCSW, considered her as the only true feminist commissioner at the time, and claims that she was instrumental in rallying the other women members to feminism.⁶⁹ She depicts MacGill, as a proponent of liberal feminism, based her analyses on the so-called public/private dichotomy. Thus, while MacGill agreed that women’s work within the private sphere was valuable, she argued that all individuals should have the opportunity to be active and equal members of the public sphere.⁷⁰ According to MacGill, the Commission was a precious investment in the campaign for equality of opportunity for women. She hoped that the insights it gained would “inform Canadians of the direction of change, and prepare the way for a new social philosophy which would ensure equal opportunities for men and women in all aspects of Canadian society.”⁷¹

However, as suggested previously, MacGill took a more radical stance on various fronts. She did not hesitate to produce a separate statement to defend her views on issues she felt especially passionate about, such as abortion and taxation. In fact, MacGill labelled the *RCSW Report* as a “conservative” document:

The Report has been called a radical document, but only I think by people who have never looked at it. Not only is the Report far from radical, but its Recommendations are very conservative. They had to be kept within the Commission’s mandate....

This is why I say that the Recommendations ask for very little. This is why they are only a first step. Asking for “equal opportunities” is only asking that, that

68. Judith Cummings, “The Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women: A Liberal Feminist Analysis,” Masters Thesis, Carleton University, 1991, 55.

69. Monique Bégin, “The Royal Commission on the Status of Women: Twenty Years Later,” in *Challenging Times* (see note 25), 28.

70. Cummings, 46.

71. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 21, no. 10, Speeches Given by MacGill Concerning the RCSW, 1963-1969, “Why a Canadian Royal Commission on the Status of Women?” 4.

which most people believe should be available to everyone, be made available to women. In simple justice, this should be delayed no longer.⁷²

MacGill's feminist views are most clearly illustrated by three main issues which concerned her more particularly: women's bodies, education and work, and science and technology.

Women's Bodies

From the earliest discussions, she defended her stance that abortion should be a private matter between the patient and the doctor. This view was challenged the most by Doris Ogilvie, whose views were the extreme opposite of MacGill's.⁷³ The abortion issue was hotly debated at the time within Canadian society; the federal government's revision of the *Criminal Code*, in 1969, had finally legalized birth control, contraceptive devices and information but it only allowed abortion in hospitals following the approval of a Therapeutic Abortion Committee (TAC).⁷⁴ Thus, when the *RCSW Report* recommended to keep abortion under the *Criminal Code*, MacGill produced a minority report that stated: "[a]lthough I support our recommendations on abortion as far as they go, I do not think that they go far enough. I think that abortion should no longer be regarded as a criminal offence but as a private medical matter between the patient and the doctor..."⁷⁵ Clearly, MacGill's plea for the liberalization of abortion laws clearly set her apart from her colleagues.

Education and Work

Having been fortunate enough to be raised in a family that was strongly supportive of women's higher education, MacGill insisted upon the right of all women to have similar opportunities. However, she noted that girls were not made aware of the vast opportunities available to them due to the sex-stereotyping of girls and women in elementary school textbooks, which pictured women primarily in domestic roles. These manuals closed doors psychologically to young girls:

72. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 21, no. 9, "Equal Opportunities for Women," October 17, 1972.

73. Doris Ogilvie, "Separate Statement Commissioner," in *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada*. For reference to the actual debate during the commission itself, see: LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 4, no. 12, 23rd Meeting of Commission—Minutes, June 9-13, 1969.

74. Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin AND Margaret McPhail, *Feminists Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), 46.

75. Elsie MacGill, "Separate Statement," *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women*.

[h]igher education and advanced training appear “unfeminine,” and to be shunned. Although economic conditions have changed the traditional domestic pattern of life for most women, such a girl may still anticipate a lifetime of domesticity, may cut short her education, acquire no lively interests of her own, no marketable skill, no professional competence. Her idea of what is ahead for her—her “time horizon—scarcely extends beyond her twenty-fifth year, or the year she marries.”⁷⁶

This situation greatly preoccupied MacGill. She was convinced the report’s recommendation 69, which called for textbook reform, and recommendation 73, which proposed better guidance programs, would ensure change: “We can do better than this for our girls. Our homes and our schools can furnish [them] with the [nutrients] that develop recognition or opportunities, aspirations to accomplishments, [and] a long-term view of life.”⁷⁷

MacGill also called for measures that would open up the labour market to women, thus providing a further incentive for women’s higher education. Above all, she advocated “preferential treatment.” This implied a period of hiring focused solely on increasing the number of women in the labour force; this, in turn, would create opportunities for their advancement within the various labour hierarchies. The ultimate goal was to achieve “equal opportunity” and to “stabilize the position of working women, and women generally, not only in labour and management circles, but in all aspects of Canadian society.”⁷⁸ MacGill’s call for “preferential treatment” illustrated, in her view, the seriousness of the problem, the level of change that she considered necessary, along with the means to achieve it:

In Canada women, to a greater or less degree, are at a disadvantage educationally, socially, economically, legally, politically and psychologically compared to men. This all-pervasive inequality is generally condoned by society, and various devices operate to make it difficult for women to overcome these disadvantages... Indeed it is rational to recommend preferential treatment for women... for at least a period of time, to enable them to overcome their present disadvantages.... Moreover it is simple justice to require society to promote this preferential treatment, even at some financial and other cost, in compensation for its earlier failure.⁷⁹

76. NLAC MG31-K7, vol. 14, file 6, Speeches given by MacGill concerning the RCSW 1963-1975, “Equal Opportunities for Women,” October 17, 1972, 16-17.

77. *Ibid.*

78. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 4, no. 11, 22nd Meeting of Commission—Minutes, May 28-29, 1969, “Memo: EGM/R175: Some Reasons for Recommending Preferential Treatment for Women in Order to Ensure for Them Equal Opportunities with Men in All Aspects of Canadian Society,” May 21, 1969.

79. *Ibid.*

As Jane Arscott points out, MacGill's support of what we now refer to as "affirmative action" was most likely generated by her own personal experience as a professional engineer. Her pioneering presence in this male-dominated field made her acutely aware that while women were fully capable of accomplishing the same work as men, they would not be given the credit they deserved for this work until their numbers were significant enough to demonstrate their merit. She was also aware that the scarcity of women both in engineering and in other professional areas would be used as an argument against increasing their number, therefore making "preferential treatment" a critical component of her scheme.⁸⁰

Another major issue raised by MacGill was women and taxation. Her key concern was directed at Income Tax Legislation, which she contended reduced women to searching for a male "husband-provider" versus having economic independence of their own.⁸¹ Her stance as a liberal feminist led her to call for women's equal treatment as individual citizens. She therefore opposed the adoption of recommendation number 132, which proposed that a married couple be taxed as a unit unless otherwise specified.⁸² While she acknowledged that married women were discriminated within the federal tax system, she noted in her separate statement that

The current "individual" basis of taxation accords more nearly with this view [of rectifying women's position under the current taxation regulations] than does the "marriage unit" basis. It is a facet of the independence of the individual, and also of tax equity between individuals. For these reasons, I am against the introduction of the "marriage unit" basis...there are ways other than that of eliminating taxation policies that discriminate against married women.⁸³

Although she stood alone in this single issue, MacGill's other views on education and work strongly impacted the final report. Thus, her proposal for "preferential treatment" policies was weaved throughout the various chapters.⁸⁴

Science and Technology

As a commissioner, Elsie MacGill pressed her colleagues to pay attention to the views of engineers and scientists. She noted that

80. Jane Arscott, "More Women": The RCSW and Political Representation, 1970," in *Women and Political Representation in Canada*, eds. Manon Tremblay and Caroline Andrew (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1998), 152-153.

81. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women*, 429.

82. *Ibid.*, 413.

83. MacGill, "Separate Statement."

84. Cummings, 48-52.

“[p]erhaps the basic question is: In a technological society, how do technological changes affect human thought, behaviour and society?”⁸⁵ She insisted that representatives from these fields be consulted on social issues, as they did assume major social responsibilities, and as their very work had a significant impact on the development of society. As early as the third meeting of the Commission on March 28th, 1967, MacGill suggested the use of an expert with “knowledge of computer implications for social changes.”⁸⁶ To this effect, she openly challenged one of the experts hired by the RCSW, Charles W. Hobart, who contended that engineers are “rarely looked to for pronouncements on social issues;” in his opinion, they should not be consulted on social issues or be included in his research area.⁸⁷ MacGill’s presence and role on the RCSW contradicted his claim that engineers were not active on social issues; as not only was she an engineer, but she was most definitely a social activist and a feminist.

MacGill’s passion on this issue continued beyond her participation on the RCSW and she urged women in the field to get socially involved. Speaking to the graduates of the St. Lawrence College of Arts and Applied Science, in Kingston May 31st, 1975, MacGill challenged the next generation to continue the work that she and others had begun:

I take for granted that you will advance your particular discipline, and I hope that you see it as more than something that gains you a livelihood. I think that with your training you are well placed to promote social goals, to open opportunities for everyone and to free people from the stultifying attitudes and practices that hamper their development.

85. Furthermore, she argued in an address to the BPWC of Victoria, BC on December 4, 1967 that it was imperative to consider technology in addressing the changing Canadian society, “For both men and women, technology is rapidly changing the existing patterns of employment, full-time and part-time work, education, training...and the social and economic values upon which status is based... Insight gained by the Commission in these matters could inform Canadians of the direction of change, and prepare the way for a new social philosophy based on equal status which would ensure opportunities for men and women in all aspects of Canadian society.” LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 3, no. 5, Fourth Meeting of Commission—Miscellaneous Reports and Memoranda, 1967-1968. “Memo : Change, Communication, the Future and most important of all the status of women to succeed us,” July 28, 1967.

86. LAC, MG31-K7, File 3, Third Meeting of the Commission—Minutes, Reports and Submissions, May 24-26, 1967, 7.

87. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 3, no. 6, Fifth Meeting of Commission—Reports and Submissions (Part I), November 1-3, 1967, “Appendix V. Courtship and Marriage Patterns in Canadian Youth a Study of Activities and Expectations. A Research Proposal Submitted by Charles W. Hobart,” 11.

All of us, be we nine years old or fifty-five have a stake in the future because we live in it. You who are young have the greatest stake for you have the longest time there *how will you use your extra time?*⁸⁸

Overall, MacGill went on to her audience emphasize the positive impact of science and technology on society:

Our concept of the future influences the direction and development of that future. I believe the future of the human race depends to a great extent upon the expansion of scientific knowledge and further, that the wise use of technology that proceeds from that knowledge is our best hope of improving the lot of people around the world.⁸⁹

More particularly, MacGill held and promoted a positive view of the relationship between women and technology. She argued that technology could free them from the double burden they lived under. Automation in the home, via appliances such as washing machines and microwaves, would effectively liberate women from the time consuming duties which kept them otherwise constrained in the private sphere. At the same time, automation in the workplace would allow for their increased participation, as work would rely to a much greater degree on mental capability rather than on brute strength.⁹⁰ But MacGill also warned that since technologies produced rapid social change, constant vigilance was key with respect to the protection of women's rights. Thus, she also questioned and challenged new technologies during a speech to the University of Manitoba Student's Union on October 17th, 1972,

But is the need for change generally accepted? Well, it had better be—for rapid change is all about us. Atomic energy, antibiotics, electronic controls, television, computers, jet flight, moon landings, space explorations, satellite communications have all become commonplace within the last thirty years. These new technologies bring new solutions to problems, and bring new problems, and these can produce further social changes. Because of this the Commission stressed the point that its Report and its Recommendations were only a beginning, from which a start could be made.⁹¹

Her views clearly echoed the *RCSW Report* when it stated in its "Plan for Action," that "Action that is appropriate today may become obsolete; new approaches may be needed. Moreover there is a need to keep a

88. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 21, no. 10, "Technology: Women's Lib: Our Challenging Future," 3-4, 10-11.

89. *Ibid.*, 10-11.

90. Cummings, 45-47.

91. LAC, MG31-K7, vol. 5, no. 14, University of Manitoba Students' Union, "Equal Opportunities for Women," October 17, 1972, 11.

continuing watch in order that women's rights and freedoms are respected."⁹²

MacGill's overall faith in technology and the potential it held for women's role and place in society was shared by some of her contemporaries including American engineer Nora S. Blatch. Blatch believed that technological changes in the United States were inextricably and inevitably linked with politically progressive ideas.⁹³ Like MacGill, Blatch was a third-generation feminist and engineer who felt that technology fostered overall women's political and social advancement. Blatch's and MacGill's views on technology were not openly contested, at the time, by other women engineers and scientists. However, this situation would change in the 1970s, both in Canada and the United States, with the emergence of a feminist critique of science, articulated by several women in both fields including Ursula Franklin, a professor of engineering at the University of Toronto.⁹⁴

Conclusion

The tabling of the *RCSW Report* in December 1970 did not provide all the answers and solutions with respect to the problems faced by Canadian women. Instead, it provided a "blueprint for change." As Jill Vickers argues, the *RCSW Report* was a "stepping stone" which the women's movement was able to use to further its work. MacGill fully agreed, and, as a result, her activism continued beyond the Commission; until her death in 1980, playing a major role in the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), which developed as a result of the *RCSW*.⁹⁵

While her maternal legacy, handed down to her by her mother, provided her with a clear example of how to combine her professional and feminist activities, her scientific and engineering training gave her important skills and tools for ensuring she could work for change efficiently and effectively. As a result, she was able to articulate a new form of feminist ideas that contained both liberal and radical properties. MacGill's unique dimension of feminism fully emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

92. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women*, 387.

93. Ruth Oldenziel "Multiple Entry Visas," 12, 17-18.

94. Heap, 53.

95. It should also be noted that MacGill constructed LAC's Index of Policy Recommendations for the period of 1972-8, which not only demonstrates the continuation of her active role, but also the continued influence of her engineering training as she continued to function as an organizer and methodological expert within the women's movement. Jill Vickers, Pauline Rankin and Christine Appelle, *Politics as if Women Mattered: A Political Analysis of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 211.

Ultimately, what this case-study of Elsie MacGill's involvement in the RCSW illustrates is that there are three key challenges for historians to pursue including: the need to question assumptions about women's roles in at work, in activism and society at large during the twentieth century; the need to seek out professional women and clearly assess their roles beyond the workplace; and more specifically, the need to locate women engineers and further the assessment of Canadian engineering with feminist analysis. In seeking to pursue these challenges we need to ask, were other Canadian women creating similar bridges to Elsie MacGill and making noticeable impacts? What else can the history of engineering offer to our understanding of Canadian society through a feminist re-assessment? And, was MacGill a unique case in Canadian society, or was she part of a larger group of women engineers and feminist activists?