

Getting to Know Esther

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[See table of contents](#)

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Getting to Know Esther

AFTER I ACCEPTED THE INVITATION TO TAKE PART IN THIS PANEL honouring Dr. Esther Clark Wright,¹ I had to stop and think long and hard about what I could contribute to a better understanding of this interesting and important historian. What did I actually know about her and, perhaps as importantly, how had I come to know it? I am not a specialist in Loyalist history, so I could not talk with authority on her important contribution to that field of Maritime, indeed North American, history. So what could I offer you this afternoon in this tribute?

As I considered my long relationship with Dr. Wright, I came to realize that I had been able to become acquainted with her in a number of interesting, and almost unique ways, and so I concluded that I would offer you some thoughts in a talk I have entitled “Getting to Know Esther.”

I first “encountered” her as a graduate student in George Rawlyk’s colonial America seminar at Queen’s University, back in 1967-1968 – almost 50 years ago. I don’t think I had ever heard of her in my undergraduate days, for Acadia’s lone Canadianist was a post-Confederation specialist, a student of Donald Creighton, who had little interest in the earlier period or indeed in the history of the Maritime provinces. Rawlyk himself was much more interested in the Maritime response to the American Revolution than in the post-Revolutionary period (I am sure you have heard his name mentioned in connection with the Great Awakening!).² But I did read Wright’s important book on the Loyalists of New Brunswick, and remembered being greatly impressed by it and by its implications for our understanding not only of the Loyalists but indeed of American society in general. And that book served me well, for Rawlyk, bless his heart, asked a Loyalist question on my PhD comprehensive exams two years later; so one might say that Dr. Wright helped me through graduate school. And that was that. I came to know her, as so many other students did, as an historian, through her book. Certainly I had no thought that after this introduction through the written word I would encounter her again and again over the next 30-odd years, and in very different ways.

My return to Acadia in 1970 brought me face to face with Dr. Wright, who had long made her home in Wolfville and who turned out to be a real live person – not merely a name on the title page of a book. We attended the same church and I was eventually introduced to her, for everyone of course knew her. We all watched with interest as she arrived Sunday morning, an elderly woman making her way to her customary pew (although come to think of it, she was not much older than I find myself today). Then, like clockwork, 5 to 10 minutes later Dr. Conrad Wright, her husband, would come

1 Although “Esther” may sound catchy in a title, it should be understood that I would never have dreamed of ever calling her anything else but “Dr. Wright” to her face. It just would not have done!

2 See, among others works, Gordon Stewart and George Rawlyk, *A People Highly Favoured of God: The Nova Scotia Yankees and the American Revolution* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada, 1972) and G.A. Rawlyk, *Ravished by the Spirit: Religious Revivals, Baptists, and Henry Alline* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill/Queen’s University Press, 1984).

puffing in, ceremoniously advancing down the aisle to seat himself beside his wife. I never once saw them arrive together. I found out later, from reading her letters to her mother, that this pattern had been going on since the 1930s; Conrad would **not** be ready on time, and Esther would **not** be late! Suddenly I was confronted by a flesh-and-blood person: not just a writer, but an individual with strengths and weaknesses, quirks, and foibles and, as I eventually discovered, great warmth and compassion.

The latter came out very clearly when I married and eventually brought my young sons to church as well. Meeting Dr. Wright, one might be struck by her somewhat prickly personality, not immediately suspecting that a great love of children lurked just below the surface. She soon began the habit of a Christmas Eve afternoon visit to our home, bringing her annual Christmas card for Sharon and me and homemade cookies for the children, seemingly oblivious to the chaos that reigned on such a day in a family with four small children. When we eventually moved to the Annapolis Royal area, those visits of course stopped, but I was taken aback when, meeting her on the street one afternoon, and after enquiring how we liked the move, she asked me rather gruffly: "Why did you take those dear little children away from me?" I remembered those words when, years later, after her death, I read in her letters to her mother of her miscarriages and then acceptance of the fact that she would not be able to have children. Another dimension of the woman indeed.

Another insight into Dr. Wright came when Margaret Conrad and I were invited to tea (summoned might be a better term). She had invited Dr. Watson Kirkconnell as well, a former president of Acadia, so that the four of us could discuss a research project that she had in mind. Her interest had turned in the years since the 1950s from a focus on the Loyalists towards those British and Germanic settlers who had come to the Maritimes in the years before the American Revolution. It was her intention to begin the process of doing for these settlers (1749-1775) what she had been able to do for the Loyalists – to rescue them from obscurity and confusion. As she wrote in her introduction to *Planters and Pioneers* (1978), "The settlers who came to Nova Scotia before the influx of Loyalists have been relatively ignored, and the importance of their contribution to Nova Scotia, to the Loyalists who followed them, to Canada as a whole, and to North America and beyond, has not been adequately known or emphasized."³

Although we assisted in minor ways, Dr. Wright was the driving force behind the project as well as providing the funding for the research assistant who did much of the legwork. On looking at *Planters and Pioneers* one is struck, I think, not by the omissions and errors, but by the scope and magnitude of what was being undertaken. I got to witness first-hand a bit of the approach used, the approach that had sifted and examined the thousands of Loyalists of New Brunswick two decades earlier – the countless small pieces of paper filed in shoeboxes. Later I had cause to wonder what this woman would have been able to do with a computer! And keep in mind that by this time Dr. Wright was over 80 years of age, still tireless. It was this work that later led to the establishment of the Planter Studies Committee at Acadia by Marg Conrad and a few of the rest of us and 30 years of conferences and publications on those crucial decades leading up to the Revolution.

3 Esther Clark Wright, *Planters and Pioneers: Nova Scotia, 1749 to 1775* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1978), 6.

By this time, I thought that I knew Dr. Wright fairly well – tireless historian, avid gardener, lover of children, generous benefactor of worthy causes – and I certainly did not expect to have the opportunity to learn a great deal more. How mistaken I was. In the late 1980s, John Reid and Paul Axelrod conceived the idea of a collection of essays on the social history of Canadian higher education, and I was invited to contribute one on Acadia University. After some deliberation, I decided on a paper dealing with Acadia’s response to the Great War and the impact that the conflict had on the institution and its students. I knew that Dr. Wright was a student at Acadia from 1912 to 1916 and so I posed a few questions about the period and her memory of the war years. Finally, after the inevitable summons for tea, she mentioned rather diffidently that she had the letters that she had written home to her family in Fredericton during her university years. Did I think they would be of any use to me? Did I? I did not know quite what to expect, but never the riches of what she gave me. The collection was comprised of at least a letter a week home to Fredericton and covered the entire four university years, over 280 letters all told, plus a few letters from YWCA student conferences at Muskoka, Ontario. Although only half of the collection covers the war years, it nonetheless provided insights that I could not have had from any other source – the devastation of the loss of classmates, the impact of the shifting gender balance of the student body, the general atmosphere of a university at war, and so many other aspects of student life.

Through these letters, I was introduced to a very different Esther Clark – teenager, university student, daughter, and sister – so I got to know, in a fairly intimate way, a very different person from the elderly resident of Wolfville whom I saw in church and with whom I occasionally had tea. The letters reveal a spirited young woman: one who already knew her own mind, who was not afraid to express contrary opinions, and who cared deeply about her family, her friends, her university, her part of Canada. I was getting to know Esther in a very different way. And of course the letters led to questions on my part. I was struck, for example, by the fairly frequent references to fellow student Norman McLeod Rogers – later historian, political scientist, university professor, secretary to William Lyon Mackenzie King, Member of Parliament, and wartime minister of national defence. So I asked her: “Ah, you seem to have known Rogers fairly well. Were you two an item?” She rather bridled, smiled, and said, with her characteristic honesty and straightforwardness: “Well, his mother had plans, but we just didn’t fall in love.” I thought to myself what an interesting and powerful team Rogers and Clark would have made if they had “fallen in love”!

The letters greatly enriched my article and my understanding of Acadia during the second decade of the 20th century. And of course they formed the base for my later *Atlantis* article, “Esther Clark Goes to College,” which covers her Acadia years, 1912-1916. I still have the letters, although they will eventually be added to her other papers at the Ester Clark Wright Archives at Acadia University. I think they are worthy of publication – witty, pithy, frightfully honest and forthright, warm, sometimes annoyed and frustrated, insightful, well-written, revealing. I hope I find the energy and time to pursue further this aspect of this fascinating woman’s multifaceted life.

And still I was not done discovering interesting aspects of Dr. Wright’s life. In the mid-1990s, Allison Prentice approached me to see if I would be willing to write an article on Wright as an historian for a book she and Bev Boutilier were proposing

on Canadian women historians. This led me on a search during which I encountered the graduate student, the young woman in love, the maturing of a fine mind, the joys and sorrows of married life, the rise of the historian and academic. I was getting to know yet another Esther Clark Wright. This was made possible through the survival of a large body of letters to her family, her husband, Conrad Payling Wright, and other Canadian historians, which came to Acadia University on her death in 1990. These letters reveal yet other aspects of Wright, casting light on things that made her very special as a person and as an historian. They highlighted characteristics that were certainly discernable in her undergraduate days, and even more clearly revealed in the elderly Wolfville resident whom I had known personally. Some of these helped create the kind of historian that she became.

She had a great love of and interest in **people** – all people – and not just the elite on which historians had traditionally focused. She could easily have written solely about the upper class Loyalists who settled New Brunswick, but she didn't. Although she herself was from the New Brunswick elite (her father was a prominent businessman, mayor of Fredericton, and then lieutenant-governor of the province while her mother was one of the more important leaders of Maritime Baptist women), she took as her subject all Loyalists, and later other settlers as well; they all deserved those little pieces of paper in her shoeboxes, regardless of social status or economic standing. In looking at the past, everyone matters.

She was a proud Maritimer at a time when few historians thought the region worth taking seriously. Its history, its people mattered, as fully as those of any other region of the country.

She was unapologetically female. She never, even as an undergraduate, felt that her gender should be any bar to her accomplishing whatever she wanted. Major in the unwomanly subject of economics as an undergraduate? Why not? Criticize the university's administration for some of its sexist rules even though her father was a member of the board of governors at the time? Again why not? Take a PhD in economics? Receive a license to preach and pastor a church – one of the first Baptist women in the Maritimes to do so? Travel to California unchaperoned to visit her friend Conrad Wright at Stanford over her scandalized mother's objections, telling her if she didn't want the neighbours to talk then don't tell them about it? Challenge her husband on what she saw as his procrastination and his elitist views? All this and more is revealed in her letters and informed her writing. She was confident and secure in her own self, which gave her the drive to pursue what she wanted, unhampered by conventional wisdom or what she might see as restrictive views or regulations. She was no radical, but she did not readily accept others' definitions of what she could and could not do. She was very much her own person.

Much more could be said about Esther Clark Wright, but I had better draw this rather rambling reminiscence to a close. I hope that my long journey of discovery about this fascinating woman is not yet over, that I will get to know Esther in additional ways in the years ahead, for I do not feel that I have yet finished with this woman nor she with me.