

## **Interview transcript**

### **Canada 150: Library work as a profession for Canadian women**

#### **Ernest Fletcher**

We're here today with Miss B. Mabel Dunham, of Kitchener, Ontario.

Miss Dunham is the president of our Ontario Library Association—the first in Canada. Born in 1881, she was educated at the University of Toronto and McGill University where she did a course in library science. Miss Dunham has been the chief librarian of the Kitchener Public Library as well as a member of the Canadian Club and a noted author and historian, having written a number of books including *The Trail of the Conestoga*.

Miss Dunham has just delivered her address to OLA members and it was a doozy.

Miss Dunham, good morning.

#### **Mabel Dunham**

Good morning.

#### **Ernest Fletcher**

So Miss Dunham, how do you see the role of women in the workplace changing today?

#### **Mabel Dunham**

These are days when women are filling a much greater place in public life in Canada than ever before. Half a century ago it was an universally-accepted belief that women's sphere was in the home, but now the most confirmed woman-hater is discreetly silent, though he sees women engaged in all manner of occupations once sacred to the lords of creation. Women work in our factories, our stores, our banks; they are found in medicine, in law and in provincial commissions and they have invaded the unholy realm of politics.

#### **Ernest Fletcher**

These are indeed great changes. Why do you think women are taking up new kinds of work?

**Mabel Dunham**

Perhaps as a result of the nature of their work in the world war, women have come to realize that, as citizens, it is their native right and also their duty not to compete with men as rivals but to cooperate with them in their common task of making Canada a better place for men and women and little children to live in.

**Ernest Fletcher**

Do you think that they are ready to take on this challenge?

**Mabel Dunham**

Unfortunately, the great majority of women of Canada are allowed to begin the battle of life with but very little training. When they have passed through the elementary schools at the age of fourteen or fifteen, they enter industrial or domestic, or commercial life. Naturally enough, they are fit for little else than manual labor.

**Ernest Fletcher**

Surely this reality is enough to make women think twice about their role in the work life of Canada?

**Mabel Dunham**

Well, they give themselves up to the monotony of a life of routine and rarely rise above it. Some are fortunate enough to be able to attend the secondary schools and at eighteen or thereabouts they find themselves called upon to choose among the callings that are open to women of their training. A very few favored ones there are for whom the choice of a profession is postponed until after they have graduated from the university.

**Ernest Fletcher**

So those who engage in library work are among the favoured few?

**Mable Dunham**

Canadian women are availing themselves of the advantage of higher education and year by year an increasing number of young women graduate from our universities. Prominent among the professions that come up for consideration when a girl is choosing her vocation in life is library work. She has learned to love

the college library, its corridors, its books, its very silences. It is a profession eminently suited to women.

**Ernest Fletcher**

But are there any drawbacks?

**Mabel Dunham**

Although there are good positions in library work in Canada, there are few openings and advancement in the profession is slow and uncertain. There are too many instances of university women who have taken library courses but who have failed to get a footing in the library world. When vacancies occur, preference is usually given to local applicants without special regard for educational or professional qualifications. Library appointments, when once made, are more or less permanent. The result of this practice has been that library work in Ontario at least is called a profession by courtesy only.

**Ernest Fletcher**

So what is the solution?

**Mabel Dunham**

The librarian has so much to do with her library board that she is wise if she considers well, before accepting an appointment, whether or not she can work with them. It is not always an easy task to please nine men with nine different minds, and the presence of women on the board may accentuate the difficulty.

**Ernest Fletcher**

Well Miss Dunham, you have given us much to think about. Thank you. And for those of you who wish to read the full transcript of Miss Dunham's speech, please contact the Archives of Ontario.

**References**

B. Mabel Dunham, "Library Work as a Profession for Canadian Women," 2, (OLA Presidential Address), Ontario Library Association fonds, MV 2246, F1195, Archives of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario

**Music**

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