

Bookshelf

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Women Who Give Away Millions: Portraits of Canadian Philanthropists

By Iris Nowell

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It is relatively new for fund-raising professionals in Canada to consider women as a separate category of major donors, i.e., people who have sufficient wealth to be able to afford major gifts to the causes they support and who very often give for different reasons than male donors. They overlook the fact that, for example, among the first recorded donations in the United States was one made by Lady Anne Mowlson in 1643 when she established the first scholarship fund at Harvard College and that during their long history as donors, women donors have given to as many and as varied causes as their male counterparts.

Iris Nowell's book *Women Who Give Away Millions* marks the first major treatise on the subject in Canada. In her book, she dispels many of the myths about women of wealth and demonstrates that women are perfectly capable of making their own decisions about where to give their money; they care very deeply about the causes they support; and they do not always lead lives in the fast lane.

The subjects of her book are 14 Canadian women — some are household names, others are not — who have given away at least \$1 million each without requiring the permission of husbands, mothers, fathers, or siblings and usually without the advice of their often male advisors although their money is inherited. Their reasons for giving are as unique as the women themselves; their causes as personal as their stories.

Ms Nowell spent as many as 20 hours with each of the seven women she was able to interview personally. The rapport that developed from this intensive interviewing process is evident in the warmth with which she portrays each of

those interviewed. For the others, she depended on material gathered from sources other than the women themselves. The common thread is that each has been a major donor and together they have donated close to \$1 billion to an astonishing variety of causes: large and small organizations, the arts, religious causes, educational institutions, hospitals and cultural agencies, the homeless, the sick, and the hungry.

A brief review of the work of four who are still alive and still giving will illustrate the power of these women philanthropists.

Margaret McCain, who was Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick when the book was published, spoke openly of the pain her family suffered from the acrimonious relationship between her husband Wallace and his brother Harrison during the well-publicized struggle for future control of McCain Foods. With a degree in social work, she was able to use her professional skills in analyzing her own family's dysfunction. It was her interest in family life that led her to be a founding member of the Muriel McQueen Ferguson Centre for Family Violence and she has given generously to it, even including her salary as Lieutenant Governor.

Mrs. McCain believes that money alone does not solve society's problems: she likes to give seed money and then something of herself. She exemplifies this in her own charitable work: organizing the school choir, playing the organ in church, helping to establish the local library and cooking hamburgers in the hockey arena. When she decides on a cause to support, she looks at the credibility of the organization and examines how her donation is going to benefit people and whether it will have a long-term benefit. The guardianship of the money is important to her. She has given about \$5 million to a variety of organizations: universities, cultural institutions, the church and social agencies, especially those dealing with family life.

Anne Tannenbaum, born into the family of a New York City candy maker, has always taken care of people, starting with her brothers and sisters after her mother's death when she was very young. She made her first charitable donation when she was 12 — milk money to a man who said he had no money to feed his children. Shortly after moving to Toronto, Anne met and married Max Tannenbaum. Her commitment to the nurturing of her seven children did not prevent her from volunteering or from pursuing the education denied her in her younger years. She also began giving money to causes that were of particular interest to her, e.g., university scholarships, her synagogue and Mount Sinai Hospital.

One of the most important gifts ever made in Canada was Anne Tannenbaum's gift of \$10 million to the University of Toronto and four of its affiliated

hospitals to endow five chairs in medical research. A particular interest is Alzheimer's research because her sister-in-law fell prey to the disease at a young age. Mrs. Tannenbaum has instilled the same values in her family, whose donations have benefitted the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Canadian Opera Company, The National Ballet of Canada and the Royal Ontario Museum, among others.

Joan Chalmers also grew up in a home where volunteering was a way of life and where there was a keen interest in music and other arts and crafts. The fortune made by her father was used to establish the Chalmers Foundation, a fund that grew to \$11 million, the largest private arts fund in Canada. Today, Ms Chalmers continues the family tradition of giving to musicians, orchestras and the opera but her special interest is Canadian crafts. Her announcement last year that she would remove the Chalmers Fund from the jurisdiction of the Ontario Arts Council because of dissatisfaction with its donations decisions highlighted the need for close and continuous communication between philanthropists and fund managers. [See also "Looking a Gift Horse in the Mouth", pp. 42.]

Nancy Ruth (formerly Jackman) has given away over \$4 million in the same no-nonsense way that she has lived her life. To illustrate: she once plunged into the frigid waters of Georgian Bay without a life jacket to retrieve the boat that had carried her and a group of friends to a deserted island and then escaped its mooring. It might be said that the frigid waters of her life have shaped her philanthropy. She describes a desperately unhappy and lonely childhood spent at private girls' schools where she was tormented because she was fat and a stutterer. Her father treated her differently from her three brothers. Before his death she discovered she had no control over her money. (She had to make a presentation to get money from him.) After his death, she had little influence on the causes that were supported by the family foundation.

Eventually, she was able to negotiate a cash settlement of \$6 million by selling her shares in Jackman companies. This left her financially secure and gave her the time to devote her considerable energy to feminist causes. She became involved with the National Action Committee on the Status of Women and worked hard to get equality for women entrenched in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Then LEAF (the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund) commanded her attention. A donation of \$75,000 to LEAF by the Federation of Women Teachers triggered her matching gift of \$75,000 and increased her interest in women's causes. She founded the Canadian Women's Foundation designed to help women and girls achieve greater self-reliance and economic

independence. She and her mother each donated \$500,000 to start the foundation on its way to a goal of \$5 million.

When she turned her attention to fund raising, Nancy Ruth found it difficult to raise money from other wealthy women for women's causes. She suspects that women who marry into wealth are afraid to fund "unpleasant" social causes such as homes for battered women. They are, she believes, "afraid of upsetting the apple cart". Upsetting the apple cart has never stopped Nancy Ruth from taking on the opponents she felt should be challenged because of their attitudes to women. At one time, she suggested she would sue the Pope because he refuses to ordain women. A commissioned deaconess, she nevertheless sued the United Church of Canada, won her case, and promptly resigned her commission.

In her interviews with Iris Nowell, she spoke often of love, hope, kindness, justice and peace. Her goal in life is to ensure that as many women as possible will have the opportunity to live a life in which this security is present. Her reasons for giving? Giving makes her happy and she has always believed in the social gospel and the moral imperative to do something for others.

This is not a textbook; it is a valuable tool for the resource library of a volunteer or staff fund raiser. It is a study of the care with which women give away money and the reasons behind that care including: the desire to change society, to support those in need, to better their communities. It appears true that women "put their money where their emotion is" (so do some men). Nevertheless the decision to give away money is a thoughtful one, not taken lightly, the result of research and intelligent probing of the recipient organizations.

Women philanthropists *are* making a difference. In the United States in 1992, three of the four top money-raising colleges were Wellesley, Smith and Mount Holyoke — all women's colleges. Women tend not to be as interested in buildings as in programs; for example, Elizabeth Chace endowed the women's basketball coaching position at Brown University in the United States earlier this year. But we don't have to look south of the border for all the "big" examples: women in Canada have made some spectacular gifts. Iris Nowell has written a warm and engaging profile of 14 women who are philanthropists in the best sense of the word.