

SUNDAY INTERVIEW

CHARLOTTE GRAY is at Writersfest today to launch her new book on the Prairie firebrand who helped win women the right to vote in Canada. The Ottawa biographer talks to Paul Gessell about rooting around in old trunks, the secret lives of public women and the truth about what McClung would think of politicians today

What would Nellie do?

BY PAUL GESSELL

So, just how "extraordinary" is Charlotte Gray?

Well, the Ottawa author was awarded the Order of Canada on Friday in recognition of the three decades that she's been explaining Canada to Canadians, most incisively, through books and magazine articles.

Not bad for a once thoroughly British woman who landed here 29 years ago, her bags packed with little knowledge of Canada but considerable self-described smugness and reserve.

Gray discovered over the years that, as she became more and more Canadian, she loosened up, started talking to strangers and fell in love with the great outdoors. Now she's the one convincing uptight British friends and relatives that skinny-dipping in the Rideau Lakes is just dandy.

People can catch a glimpse of Gray, fully clothed, at an "extraordinary" event today at Library and Archives Canada. This is the launch of her latest book, a short biography of early 20th-century feminist and politician Nellie McClung. The release of this book, less than half the size of a regular Gray biography, is part of the opening day of the spring edition of the Ottawa International Writers Festival.

The McClung book is one of three short biographies of Extraordinary Canadians to be published this spring by Penguin and edited by author-philosopher John Ralston Saul. During the next three years, there will be at least 18 books on such Canadian icons as Lester Pearson, L. M. Montgomery, Tommy Douglas and Norman Bethune. The books are being written by authors who could have just as easily been chosen as a subject. But Adrienne Clarkson, Douglas Coupland, Rudy Wiebe, along with Gray and other authors, were instead picked to chronicle the lives of others.

Gray is considered by many to be the heir to the late author Pierre Berton, whose popular history books educated and entertained generations of Canadians.

So, it seems fitting that tomorrow Gray will head to the Yukon to live in Berton's old family home in Dawson City. There, Gray will gather material for a book on the 1898 Yukon Gold Rush.

Gray says her book will be very different from Berton's celebrated writing about the Klondike.

"He focused on the macho world of the miners. They are only part of my story: I'm also exploring the loves of women who made their fortunes and their careers up there."

Writing women into Canadian history is Gray's trademark.

Her books have tackled the rather eccentric mother of the just plain weird prime minister, W.L. Mackenzie King, the "Indian poetess" Pauline Johnson and the sod-busting Moodie Sisters of rural Ontario.

Even when Gray started to write her recent biography on telephone inventor Alexander Graham Bell, she realized the book, *Reluctant Genius*, would, in essence, be a double biography covering Bell and his rather extraordinary wife, Mabel.

Gray seemed a natural for the McClung biography.

She loves to root around in old trunks and attics to uncover the stories and secrets of women, especially those born in the 19th century. The result is a lively account of the Prairie firebrand McClung, who helped win women the right to vote in Canada.

We also see the darker, politically incorrect side of McClung, including her support of eugenics, the sterilization of the mentally handicapped.

The following is an edited transcript of our e-mail discussion about Gray's new book and her own life:

In the introduction to the book, John



Nellie McClung is one the Famous Five immortalized on Parliament Hill.

Ralston Saul says Nellie would be speaking out on Iraq if she was around now. What would she be saying?

Unlike some of her close friends, Nellie was not a pacifist. She felt both the First and the Second World Wars were justified.

However, John is absolutely correct. If she were alive today, she'd be extremely critical of the war in Iraq. She would not react on gender lines, but on humanitarian grounds. She would be

horrified by the number of deaths in Iraq, both of young American soldiers but more particularly of Iraqi civilians. I expect she would be very critical of Washington, and the way it fails to respect multilateral institutions and national sovereignty. She was a delegate to the League of Nations in 1938, and she very much wanted it to work.

Most particularly, she would be appalled by a government that lies to its citizens — about the causes and the motives for war. Nellie was a plain-speaking person of great integrity, and she expected elected representatives to share those qualities, too.

You say Nellie was successful because she kept her causes in the mainstream. Why was that necessary? Is it still necessary today?

If you are going to change society, you need to have your hands — or the hands of your allies — on the levers of power. Changing public opinion is important, but (as we can see on environmental issues today) not enough.

Nellie McClung was smart enough to realize that, unless she had allies across the board, women's issues would get marginalized because women would be seen as a "special interest" (despite being 50 per cent of the population.) Of course, there were plenty of women in her day who didn't think women "needed" the vote. But Nellie knew that plenty of men agreed with her campaigns for the vote, against alcohol, for better regulation of factory conditions, for more schools.

Her political life began on the Prairies, where men and women had worked alongside each other breaking sod. On pioneer farms, everybody's labour was crucial: she and her five siblings were put to work minding cows, weeding the vegetable patch or collecting eggs. Men who had grown up on pioneer farms could see the innate justice of Nellie's campaigns on behalf of women's rights. They also

supported her efforts on behalf of immigrants and the very poor.

Support was one thing. Turning it into political victory was another. She was always careful to ensure there were men as well as women at her rallies, and she worked hard to get the Manitoba Liberal party to endorse the Votes for Women campaign, in 1914. Of course, the fact she was an irresistible political orator made her a very attractive "catch" for an established party.

Would Nellie have been able to meet with political success had she not been a bestselling author?

Even if Nellie's books had not sold well, we would have heard of her. Alongside her literary achievements she was already speaking out as a leader in the temperance movement. And she was such a charismatic public speaker that demand for her on public platforms spread rapidly.

Today, the temperance movement seems like a really weird starting point for a social reformer, but the fight against alcohol was a struggle for social change and had the backing of the churches and many political leaders. However, her books certainly enhanced her appeal. In novels like *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, she wrote about the lives of poor families across the Prairies in an affectionate, humorous way that endeared her to readers.

Her audiences felt comfortable with her, even if she was pushing some revolutionary ideas, because they knew she

was one of them — she had first-hand experiences of bitter winters, small-town snobbery and the isolation of pioneer farms. She had watched the toll that family violence, alcohol abuse and loneliness could take.

Nellie was accused of neglecting her children to further her various political causes.

The criticism was completely unjustified. Nellie always made sure her children were well cared for before she left home to make speeches, sit in the Alberta legislature or lobby politicians. The McClungs had a series of young immigrant women living with them who became part of the family.

Nasty remarks about her so-called "neglect" of her children always stung, but she tried to deflect it by saying, before she began an evening speech, "Now don't worry, I've called home and my children are all safely tucked into bed."

Wes, her husband, encouraged her activities, and was usually home when she wasn't.

Women who combine motherhood with careers outside the home face less criticism today because it is the norm. But they still face prejudice. First, many have internalized their own mother's sense of guilt about leaving their children in other people's care. And second, our institutions still haven't adapted to the fact that most women combine motherhood with paid employment. There is no national daycare program. Many employers make inadequate provisions for their employees' family responsibilities.

She was a force in the temperance movement yet her four sons developed alcohol problems.

I think it is likely each became an alcoholic (and each was a "high functioning alcoholic") because they were

young adults in an era that was awash with booze. I am always amazed when I read memoirs and diaries of high-profile men from the 1930s, '40s and '50s how much they drank — three martinis before dinner, wine with the meal, port or Scotch afterward. Some people can handle it: others (perhaps for genetic reasons) can't, and get addicted.

You have just received the Order of Canada. How have the 29 years you have been in Canada changed you?

Most of my adult life has been spent here. I return to England regularly, to see family and friends, but it is no longer the England I left. On each visit I feel more Canadian. I have a Canadian's horror of the over-crowding and expense of London, and the Canadian hunger for an open landscape. I have a Canadian unselfconsciousness about talking to complete strangers (the norm here: weird there). I've lost my British assumption that I live in the most important and best country in the world (I wish they'd lose it too!)

I am completely addicted to lazing on docks and swimming in crystal clear lakes during Canadian summers. When my British friends visit, they always worry about snapping turtles and water snakes and being caught skinny-dipping. I'm amazed at their physical caution, then remind myself that I was once like that. Too much Enid Blyton.

Tell me more about your trek to Pierre Berton's Dawson City home.

I'll live there until the end of June. I want to climb the mountain behind Dawson on the longest day of the year (June 21) to see the sun dip below the horizon for about 20 minutes!

My stay there will be quite a contrast to my busy Ottawa life, but I'm taking my dog Jake with me for company.

In Books: Paul Gessell reviews Nellie McClung by Charlotte Gray and the "Extraordinary Canadians" series' other two biographies being launched today at the Ottawa International Writers Festival. Page B1

Online: For a complete list of Writers festival events, go to www.writersfestival.org