

## **Kathleen Coleman's Career and Life in Canada**

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*Parts of this piece have been taken from my PhD Thesis "Investigating the Irish New Woman: Journalists in Media and Fiction"*

Continuing on from Paula's piece on Irish-Canadian journalist Kathleen "Kit" Coleman's (1856-1915) history we know that Coleman and her first husband, Thomas Willis split, either due to his death (which we cannot find record of) or separation. Either way, Coleman left Ireland for England where she lived for a short time. So far, the information gathered on her time in England is vague as it has come from her column. Coleman claims to have done numerous jobs and possibly worked at a boarding house. She also claims to have worked in France but no evidence has been found to support this. After a brief time in England, Coleman sailed to Quebec, Canada on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 1884, and then made her way to Toronto. On her journey over to Canada, Coleman changed her age and reinvented herself. As Paula mentioned in the first part on Coleman, she was born on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 1856, however, she changed her date of birth to the 16<sup>th</sup> of May 1864.

In Toronto, Coleman met and married Edward J. Watkins, an English travelling salesman, in the same year that she arrived. The couple had two children, Edward in 1885 and Patricia in 1888. According to Barbara Freeman, at some point between 1888 and 1890 the couple split, and it is thought that Watkins may have already been married, making the marriage to Coleman void. It is during this time, Freeman explains, that Coleman adopts the middle name Blake, connecting herself to a prominent Galway family and begins referring to herself as

Kathleen Blake Watkins, then Kathleen Blake, and, eventually, Kathleen Blake Coleman. After working at a variety of jobs to earn money, Coleman eventually turned to writing short stories for *The Toronto Daily Mail* and for a weekly magazine, *The Saturday Night*. In 1889, *The Toronto Daily Mail* (which later merges with the *Toronto Empire* in 1895 to become *The Daily Mail and Empire*) hired Coleman as a journalist for the weekly column “Woman’s Kingdom” and published her first signed column as “Kit” on the 26<sup>th</sup> of October. This weekly column would go on to cover a variety of popular and transnational topics and challenge social norms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As a journalist, Coleman travelled across the world covering numerous events and writing travel pieces. From sharing tales of her adventures in Ireland, travelling across the United States, to slumming in London, Coleman excelled at taking risks and entering new or unique spaces for women. Throughout her career as a journalist, Coleman worked hard to get her story even if that meant travelling alone (or creating fake travel companions) and dressing up as a man in order to enter private spaces. Her fame grew after she became the first accredited woman war correspondent covering the Spanish-American War (1898) and her reporting was foundational as she focused on the war’s impact on American soldiers.

At the time of the war, Coleman’s paper, now *The Daily Mail and Empire*, had severely restricted Coleman’s movements by refusing to pay for her travel reporting. Yet, she still convinced them to let her cover the war and the paper agreed, using it as a publicity stunt. The paper continued to print coverage of the war by men reporters on the front pages and used Coleman’s work as supplement to help attract readers and sell advertising. According to

Freeman, the paper aided Coleman by requesting accreditation from the US Army in May of 1898. By the 19<sup>th</sup> of May, 1898, *The Daily Mail and Empire* ran an article on the front page titled “‘Kit’ at Tampa” which said that Coleman had arrived in Tampa and was ready for work.

However, it quickly became apparent that getting to Cuba would be harder than expected. In her article, “The Cubans at West Tampa”, Coleman voices her concerns about making it to Cuba as she explains that the “woman war correspondent ... is carefully ostracized. General will have nothing to do with her. She shall be left behind. The great army of pressmen shall move forward jeering at her. She shall not produce ‘copy’” (31 May 1898, 2). Despite her best attempts, Coleman’s numerous requests to travel to Cuba were ignored or refused and by the time she finally arrived at the end of July, the war was over. Instead, Freeman explains, Coleman turned to reporting on the aftermath of war and the treatment of soldiers. Coleman’s reporting became known internationally and it boosted her popularity. However, according to Freeman, Coleman’s time in Cuba damaged her health and left her “emotionally shaken” (121). Her experiences in Tampa and Cuba remained with Coleman for the rest of her life and influenced several of her articles and fictional works. For example, during the First World War, Coleman wrote several articles for *Canada Monthly* that described the harsh realities of war and included her own experiences as a war correspondent.<sup>1</sup>

Returning from the war, Coleman married Dr Theobald Coleman on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 1898 in Washington D. C., and after some time living in Copper Cliff, Ontario, the family eventually settled in Hamilton. In 1911, after a disagreement about a pay increase, according to

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<sup>1</sup> See articles “Christmas at the Front” (Dec. 1914) and, specifically, “With the Women Who Wait” (Nov. 1914) where Coleman discussed hardships she experienced in Cuba and on her return aboard the ship *Comal* where she travelled with sick soldiers, slept in a room infested with cockroaches, and was served rotten food (10).

Freeman, Coleman quit her column and began freelancing. At this time, she was one of the most famous journalists in Canada and, along with other Canadian women journalists, helped create the Canadian Women's Press Club (1904).<sup>2</sup> In 1915, after getting pneumonia, Coleman's health declined and on the 16<sup>th</sup> May, she passed away and was buried at the Hamilton Cemetery.

For much of Coleman's journalistic career, she worked for *The Toronto Daily Mail/Daily Mail and Empire*. Chiefly known for her column "Woman's Kingdom", Coleman made her name with those articles covering the Spanish-American War. Additionally, Coleman published her collection of articles covering the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in book form, titled *To London for the Jubilee* (1897) as well as wrote several short stories including five for *The Canadian Magazine* between 1895 and 1912. Writing for the magazine, Coleman had to appeal to a national readership by including popular topics like the Boer War and the New Woman in her stories. Yet, Coleman's fiction often alluded to her personal life and her own struggles. Her fiction was a place where Coleman could experiment with form, discuss modern or provocative topics, and process events occurring in her life. In this way, Coleman's fiction resembled her column "Woman's Kingdom" as it combined popular topics with personal experiences. Later in her career, after Coleman left *The Daily Mail and Empire*, she wrote several articles as a freelance journalist and a column titled "The Pedlar's Pack" for a monthly national magazine,

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the creation of the Canadian Women's Press Club, see Linda Kay's book *The Sweet Sixteen: The Journey that Inspired the Canadian Women's Press Club* (2012).

*Canada Monthly*,<sup>3</sup> from Jan. 1911 until June 1915 when her last column was posthumously published.

Coleman had a very personable style of writing in her journalism, directly addressing her readers and responding to them with quick wit or candid advice. She preferred to write about topics she was interested in like literature, Charles Dickens being a favourite of hers, current events, or her travelling adventures and that passion came through in her writing. Moreover, she assumed a reading audience of other “liberated” women like herself, and men who appreciated her frank straightforwardness, which seems to have gone down well with her Toronto readership. When explaining the difficulty of being a woman journalist to a reader in *The Daily Mail and Empire*, Coleman says that “to be a newspaper woman you must have unusual health, and what is called ‘staying’ powers – that is, to keep it up from year to year; and you must be ready to go anywhere at a moment’s notice, or to take up almost any line of work” (19 Nov. 1898, 5). Coleman knew this all too well from her experiences while writing the “Woman’s Kingdom” for twenty-three years, yet her passion and dedication for the career comes through as she still tells her reader “if I had to live it all over again, I would be a journalist” (19 Nov. 1898, 5).

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<sup>3</sup> *Canada Monthly* was originally titled *The Canada-West Magazine*, later shortened to *Canada-West*. The magazine was edited by Herbert Vanderhoof until March 1917 when it is then edited by Sidney R. Cook. Between 1909 and 1910 it began to switch between using *Canada Monthly* and *Canada West Monthly* as its title. Historical information on the magazine is scarce but it appears to have started around 1906 and was associated with the Western Canadian Immigration Association. The magazine was originally published by the Walter E. Gunn Company which later becomes the Vanderhoof-Gunn Company.

## Works Cited

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