

Tweedsmuir Histories

A Canadian, Mrs. Alfred Watt, took the Women's Institute message to England and in 1915 set up the first Institute group at Angllsey in Wales. Queen Mary heard of the New Organisation, recognised its potential and had a branch formed at Sandringham, where she became the first president. The Queen Mother, Elizabeth, the Queen and Princess Margaret are all members of the Sandringham Institute.

The Institute Motto is "For Home and Country." Home making skills and family oriented projects were the main objectives, but Mrs. Hoodless, the instigator of the W.I. was also concerned about the community and education. She urged that community and village histories be kept. It wasn't until 1936 that Lady Tweedsmuir became involved.

Lady Tweedsmuir was born Susan Charlotte Grosvenor in 1883 to the well to do family of Norman Grosvenor. Her great uncle was the Duke of Wellington (the Iron Duke). After the death of her father in 1898, she, her sister and mother lived with various family members, although they still had their own house in London. Several of the family were noted artists, and from a very early age, both girls were exposed to political discussions, writers and artists, although with their Victorian upbringing they were to "be seen and not heard". Through her maternal grandmother she became involved with emigration schemes and her grandmothers "pet project" an East End mother's rest home. Her formal education was completed in Germany, studying Art and Opera.

In 1904 she met John Buchan, he found her haughty and she thought him conceited and difficult to talk to. He was a promising young lawyer and for the next year he was in South Africa on a law case. On his return they met again through mutual friends and became engaged. A year later, in 1907 they married. They had four children, a daughter and three sons.

Lady Tweedsmuir was a lady of many talents and well matched with her husband, he having an unquenchable desire for life and adventure. They worked together creating and operating the Department of Information after the 1914-18 war. The success of this led to his appointment to the Foreign Office and eventually with his prominence as a writer, he became well known in political circles. In 1935 King George V appointed Lord Tweedsmuir as the 15th Governor General of Canada, a position which John Buchan, always interested in Canada felt had immensely interesting potentialities and great responsibilities.

In 1933 the W.I. convener of historical research has suggested the histories of farms, buildings and places of interest should be saved. It was in 1936 when Lady Tweedsmuir, an active W.I. member in Britain, became involved. At a meeting of the Athens branch, she stressed the need for this preservation. This idea was forwarded to the Provincial Office and branches began to compile "Village Histories". In 1945 they were designated as Tweedsmuir Histories.

The subjects covered are the history of the branch and the part it has played in the community, a general history of the area, including government buildings, settlements, complete histories of farms, families, churches, schools, libraries, industries and any fact about the community that might be of interest in the future.

In 1947 Lady Tweedsmuir donated 3 silver cups as prizes for national competitions in Tweedsmuir Histories and cultural projects and handicrafts. These award are presented at the Triannual Conference, last year it was held in Vancouver.

By 1972 there were 1300 Tweedsmuir Histories being kept throughout Ontario and I believe Ontario is the only province to have them.

Whilst visiting the Southern Prairies after a long drought, Lady Tweedsmuir remarked that the only feature of the place that was not depressing was the fortitude and optimism of the people. She asked some of the women what she could do for them and they asked for books, that started the Tweedsmuir Prairie Library schemes. Help from Canadians, England and the Carnegie Trustees in New York resulted in 40,000 books being sent from Government House. Queen Mary sent many books which were especially treasured both in Canadian households and Prairie Schools.

Lord Tweedsmuir died in Montreal in 1940 and Lady Tweedsmuir returned to her Oxfordshire home, where she died March 24th 1977 at the age of 94. A well loved and respected Governors Lady.

Mrs. Pettifen
Lakefield W.I.