

The Shoeboxes: Esther Clark Wright's Papers at Acadia

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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The Shoeboxes: Esther Clark Wright's Papers at Acadia

ESTHER CLARK WRIGHT WAS A WOMAN WHO KNEW HER OWN MIND and possessed a razor-sharp wit. Her philosophy of history and research were summed up by a statement she gave in a 1968 interview: "The most important things are the people, what they did and how they lived, where they came from."¹

Archivists are strange characters as we often pick up the remnants of people's lives. Esther willed "all files, notes and manuscripts in my possession at the time of my death to the Acadia University Library for its Archives." Shortly after her death in June 1990 Barry Moody and I went to her home on Hillside Avenue in Wolfville to see what was there. This initial trip was followed by several more to pack and pick up the many boxes and the many shoeboxes. It appeared that she never threw anything out, or perhaps very little, and for an archivist this is always wonderful! Dr. Wright's papers are a goldmine for the study of the Planters, the Loyalists, and the rivers of New Brunswick to name but a few areas.

Esther Isabell Clark entered Acadia University in September of 1912. For the next 46 years she wrote a weekly letter to her mother Harriet Hannah Richardson Clark until Mrs. Clark's death in 1958. These letters provide a rich insight into the development of Esther Clark Wright as a researcher and an historian of the Maritimes. A prolific author, Dr. Wright began her writing career as a young woman. "Public Opinion" (1916) and "The Challenge to Canadian Womanhood" (1919) were her first published works. The author of 15 books and numerous articles, she is best known for her pioneering studies *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* (1955) and *Planters and Pioneers* (1978).²

What got Esther interested in the Loyalists in the first place? Esther's father William George Clark, a direct descendant of Alexander Clark, a New Jersey Loyalist who settled in New Brunswick, was born 1 October 1865. A prominent merchant and political figure in New Brunswick, he celebrated his 75th birthday on 1 October 1940. Esther's first book related to the Loyalists – *Alexander Clark, Loyalist: A Contribution to the History of New Brunswick* – was published in September 1940.³ There is evidence in her papers to suggest that this book, and of course all of the research that went into it, was a birthday present for her father. She was "Clarking" as she put it in letters to her mother and to her husband Conrad. The publication of the "birthday book" merely whetted her appetite. As she stated in a 28 December 1941 letter to Conrad:

I am invited out to tea at Mrs. Jones tomorrow, such giddiness. I shall not be sorry to have a little social life, for really Fredericton is

1 Interview with Esther Clark Wright, Esther Clark Wright Papers, unprocessed, Acadia University Archives, Wolfville, NS.

2 "Public Opinion," *Acadia Atheneum* 42 (June 1916): 565-8; "The Challenge to Canadian Womanhood," *Maritime Baptist*, 14 August 1919, 11; Esther Clark Wright, *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* (Fredericton: Author, 1955); Esther Clark Wright, *Planters and Pioneers* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1978).

3 Esther Clark Wright, *Alexander Clark, Loyalist: A Contribution to the History of New Brunswick* (Kentville, NS: Kentville Publishing, 1940).

hopeless. I miss the Wolfville friends so much. Alden's [her brother] is the only house here where I can run in. Well I suppose it is good for the Loyalists, whom I dug out the morning after Christmas. I am on a rather dull job, copying out on cards long lists of grantees in the Passamaquoddy region. The two day's work have rather packed my four shoeboxes and I shall have to hunt up a fifth tomorrow.

Further in the same letter she says: "I went down to Gagetown and ferried across to Jemseg, called on the ferryman's parents, who had some old documents about Loyalist ancestors. The next morning, I got a good start and drove up the Millstream to Havelock, stopping at graveyards along the way. Saturday I went to Petitcodiac to see some papers." She then makes her way to Wolfville and finally on to Halifax where she "settled in at the Archives for the day."⁴

This 1941 letter illustrates so many things about Esther and her research. The shoeboxes referred to are voluminous. They were literally empty shoeboxes that were filled with her research notes. Sometimes they are handwritten index cards, but most often small pieces of paper, frugally written on both sides and usually tied together with string. This letter also illustrates the travel and physical nature of her research. The attics searched though, the visits to historical societies up and down the east coast of the United States, the hunt for records in the dusty basements of the Public Records Office in London, the endless searches for deeds and probate material in Saint John and all the county seats in New Brunswick – all of this went on for many, many years. Her papers illustrate what can only be called a dogged "sleuthing ability" as she painstakingly put together lists of individuals and families and all of their interconnections. When we think today of the access we have to primary sources, through databases and digital images at the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick and the Nova Scotia Archives as well as similar resources at institutions in New England, what Dr. Wright accomplished is nothing short of amazing.

As her research continued, so too did her publications. The *Canadian Historical Association Report* for 1944 contains an article entitled "The Settlement of New Brunswick: An Advancement Toward Democracy," which highlights the arrival of the Loyalists. Her research notes and correspondence with historians Lilian Maxwell, John Clarence Webster, and Alfred Bailey illustrate her interest in the rivers of New Brunswick and the people who settled along their banks and inlets. *The Miramichi* (1944), *The Petitcodiac* (1945), and *The Saint John River* (1949) are examples of the culmination of her research on that front.⁵ Needless to say the shoeboxes continued to be filled.

Looking at her papers and at her substantial productivity as an historian of the Maritimes, it is clear that she always came back to "the people, what they did and how they lived, where they came from."⁶

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4 Esther Clark Wright Papers, Acadia University Archives.

5 Esther Clark Wright, *The Miramichi: A Study of the New Brunswick River and of the People Who Settled Along It* (Sackville, NB: Tribune Press, 1945); Wright, *The Petitcodiac: A Study of the New Brunswick River and the People Who Settled Along It* (Sackville, NB: Tribune Press, 1945); Wright, *The Saint John River* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1949).

6 Interview with Esther Clark Wright.