

Anna Templeton and her legacy

by Ellen Power, for the Provincial Historic Commemorations Program

Anna Templeton is perhaps best known today for the craft centre named in her honour in downtown St. John's. Yet this centre—and, in fact, Newfoundland's modern crafting scene—would not exist as it does today without the woman herself. Anna Templeton was a pioneer of the province's cottage craft industry. Through her work with the Jubilee Guilds and the Department of Education, Templeton made craftwork accessible and profitable for women across rural Newfoundland. In doing so, she empowered these women to learn rewarding new skills, gain personal confidence and earn their own income in an era when 'women's work' in outports was often restricted to unpaid household labour.

The second of eight children, Anna Catherine Templeton was born in St. John's on January 19, 1916. She was the eldest daughter of local businessman Robert A. Templeton and his wife Agnes Templeton. Growing up, Anna Templeton attended Prince of Wales Collegiate. She completed a pre-science diploma at Memorial University College, and initially wanted to continue on to a degree in mathematics. In the 1930s, however, the only option for a woman with a math degree was to become a math teacher, a job which held little interest for Templeton.¹ Instead, with encouragement from her family, she pursued a bachelor's degree in Household Science at Macdonald College (now part of McGill University).

Fresh out of university, the 22-year-old Templeton returned to Newfoundland and was hired as a field worker with the newly-created Jubilee Guilds. The Jubilee Guilds were founded

¹ Linda Cullum, "Herstories: Anna Templeton," *St. John's Women's Centre Newsletter* (St. John's, NL), March 1997.

in 1935 by Lady Muriel Anderson (wife of the then-Lieutenant Governor, Sir David Murray Anderson). At the time, Newfoundland was in the grip of the Great Depression. Poverty was widespread in rural communities as fish prices plummeted and logging and mining companies cut jobs.² The Jubilee Guilds aimed to give rural women the skills to improve their quality of life, beyond relying on the limited assistance provided by the government dole. Teaching these skills fell to the field workers. These workers were expected to travel alone to isolated outports around the island (still a difficult journey in the 1930s and 1940s) to start Jubilee Guilds and to teach domestic science and craftwork to outport women. It was an unusual job for a young, single woman at that time, but Templeton took it on with enthusiasm and determination.³

Templeton considered herself as an average craftswoman at best, who “wouldn’t be caught dead at [a] sewing machine”, preferring to read in her free time.⁴ What she did have a talent for was organizing women in outport and adapting the executive board’s instructions to the unique circumstances of each community. The role of a field worker was to introduce new crafts skills and nutritional information, but she did more than that. She encouraged women to expand their horizons and to recognize their potential as skilled craftswomen. Word of her work soon spread. Outport women jumped at the opportunity to come together and develop profitable new

² Jenny Higgins, “Great Depression - Impacts on the Working Class”, Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage, <https://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/politics/depression-impacts.php>

³ Women’s History Group, “Anna Templeton (1916-1995)”, Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage, <https://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/arts/anna-templeton.php>

⁴ Anna Templeton. Interview by Linda Cullum. November 2, 1989, transcript, MUNFLA. St. John’s, NL.

skills. More than once, Templeton arrived in a community to find a Jubilee Guild had already been organized by local women in advance of her coming!⁵

Anna Templeton travelled from outport to outport for six straight months, with little direction from the Guilds' executive board. Returning to St. John's from Notre Dame Bay—a two-day journey via dogsled, boat, snowmobile, train and taxi—Templeton arrived home at 9 o'clock on Christmas Eve morning. "Having received no instructions", she promptly reported to the Jubilee Guilds' office—and was granted the rest of the day off.⁶ "You know, I didn't get much helpful input from [the executive board]", she later reflected. "But, tell you the truth, I didn't want it, I was happy doing what I thought the women [in communities] wanted."⁷

While her role was as organizer and instructor, Templeton understood that it was just as important to listen to communities as to teach them. The Jubilee Guilds' board had good intentions, but there was a certain amount of disconnect between the executive in St. John's and the women in rural Jubilee guilds. The middle- and upper-class executive board initially encouraged craftwork not to provide a source of income for women, but to promote household industry, beautification and moral improvement in outports. The Guilds were also to serve as salons, where women could talk about issues of the time. These organizing women had little understanding of the economic and time restraints faced by women in outport Newfoundland.⁸ In her first-hand experience of these communities, Templeton soon found that the "practical women

⁵ Linda Cullum, "'It's Up to the Women': Gender, Class and Nation Building in Newfoundland, 1935-1945," in *Creating This Place: Women, Family and Class in St. John's, 1900-1950*, ed. Linda Cullum and Marilyn Porter (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2014): 195.

⁶ Angela Sullivan, "Anna Templeton Tribute", *NLWI Newsletter* (St. John's, NL), n.d.; Templeton, interview transcript, 1989.

⁷ Templeton, interview transcript, 1989.

⁸ Cullum, "'It's Up to the Women'", 192.

of Newfoundland” were keen on “doing something”, not simply talking.⁹ They enjoyed knitting and weaving as a hobby, but they were particularly interested in selling their finished craftwork to earn extra income for themselves and their families (something which the Jubilee Guilds’ board had never intended). Templeton heard these outport women, took initiative and brought some of their textile crafts with her on a return trip to St. John’s to see if they were marketable. The successful sale of these products proved that there was indeed a market. Selling craftwork soon became a vital part of the Jubilee Guilds’ work, and a shop was opened in downtown St. John’s.¹⁰ In the years that followed, Templeton always had an eye out for traditional or new crafting styles which could she thought might be sellable for the craft market.¹¹ But her work was about more than just teaching women a new hobby. In helping to organize Jubilee Guilds, Anna Templeton worked with them to help create a non-denominational social space, a chance for them to earn their own money, and a sense of pride in their abilities. For many rural women, a Jubilee Guild was a rare opportunity to move beyond the household sphere and build support networks with other women.

By the following year, Templeton's successes had her promoted to the position of Organizing Secretary for the Jubilee Guilds. She continued her fieldwork and also trained other field workers. These women—mainly from the outports where Jubilee Guilds were active—supported communities like their own while also getting the chance to work and travel outside their hometowns. One hundred Guilds were organized across the island during Templeton’s

⁹ Newfoundland and Labrador Association for Adult Education. *You and I: living and learning*. Anna Templeton . Hosted by Bill Shallow (St. John’s: Memorial University of Newfoundland, Educational Television centre, 1982). Accessed at: <http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/ref/collection/extension/id/861>

¹⁰ Cullum, “It’s Up to the Women”, 199.

¹¹ Margaret Angel, letter to Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, Feb. 18, 2016.

tenure as Organizing Secretary, leading one historian to conclude that “the enthusiasm and efficiency of Miss Templeton was largely responsible for the great successes achieved [by the Jubilee Guilds] in the next decade”.¹²

Post-Confederation, the Newfoundland and Labrador government began to develop its own rural education programs across the province. With her organizational expertise and years of experience in the field, Templeton was the ideal candidate for the job. In 1965, she left her position as director of the Jubilee Guild and became the supervisor of the Department of Education’s Craft Training Division (later part of the Division of Adult and Continuing Education). As supervisor, she oversaw the craft training programs in the new vocational schools (which replaced the training formerly done by the Jubilee Guilds). These craft training programs were the direct predecessors of what is now the “Textiles: Craft & Apparel Design” diploma at College of the North Atlantic. This program is based out of the Anna Templeton Centre in downtown St. John's, a public craft education centre named in her honour in 1994.¹³

Templeton published several craft instruction books during her time at the Department of Education. One of these books, “Operation Homespun”, is now considered a classic reference for Newfoundland knitting. Many patterns in the book, such as the well-known Newfoundland trigger mitt, were written down and charted for the first time in Templeton's publication; historically, they had been passed down by outport women through word of mouth.¹⁴ Other patterns, including several of the sweaters, were inspired by then-current fashion and by

¹² Agnes Richard, “Women’s Institutes give service, support to people, families,” *15th Industrial Review and Business Forecast* (St. John’s, NL), March 27, 1987; Agnes Richard, *Threads of Gold: Newfoundland and Labrador Jubilee Guilds, Women’s Institutes* (St. John’s, NL: Creative Publishers, 1989), 171.

¹³ Beverly Barbour, letter to Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, Feb. 4, 2016.

¹⁴ Department of Education. Division of Adult and Continuing Education. Craft Training Section. *Operation Homespun*, (St. John’s, NL: Anna Templeton Centre for Craft, Art and Design, 2011).

traditions from around the world.¹⁵ A true innovator, Templeton was always on the lookout for new crafting skills and styles that could be adapted for use by Newfoundland craftspeople. She was as passionate about the preservation of traditional Newfoundland craft skills as she was about the development of new ones. In 1967, she received a Centennial Medal from the Government of Canada for her work.

Anna Templeton retired in 1981, but remained involved in community life. One biography, written when Templeton was awarded an honorary doctorate at Memorial University in 1985, suggested that “retirement...simply meant more time for her many volunteer activities.”¹⁶ Templeton served on the Provincial Libraries Board for 18 years. She stayed active in her church community, and was one of the few women to be designated a church elder at St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church.¹⁷ She also stayed connected with the Jubilee Guilds (called the Newfoundland and Labrador Women’s Institutes since 1968) and was a member of the St. John’s branch of the NLWI—still known today as the Templeton Branch, in recognition of her life’s work. By the time of her death in 1995, Anna Templeton had been awarded lifetime memberships in the NLWI, the Newfoundland Home Economics Association and the Newfoundland and Labrador Association for Adult Education.

Throughout her life, Templeton was modest about her “happy involvement” with the development of craft and vocational training in the province.¹⁸ “There were no great adventures,” she said of her years in the field, “but I enjoyed the travel...and the friendliness encountered

¹⁵ Ibid. These modern and international influences are seen in the Nordic snowflake motif, p. 26, and the “pop top”, p. 35. See also: Angel, letter to HFNL.

¹⁶ “Fifty-second convocation scheduled,” *MUN Gazette* 17, no. 15 (1985): 5.

¹⁷ Cullum, “Herstories: Anna Templeton”

¹⁸ Sullivan, “Anna Templeton Tribute”.

along the way.”¹⁹ She emphasized that the outport women she worked with were developing “skills that they would [already] have themselves”, with the Jubilee Guilds supplying materials, equipment and any required instructions.²⁰ Despite her words, Templeton defied societal expectations of women through her fieldwork and her leadership. All those she met remembered her as a strong-minded, energetic woman who strove tirelessly to inspire others.²¹ Although the realm of craft was often (and continues to be) dismissed as ‘women's work’, Templeton worked hard to achieve recognition for the province's traditional crafts and craftspeople. She contributed to the creation of the Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador and to the textile arts diploma at the College of the North Atlantic. The province’s vibrant craft industry owes its modern prominence in no small part to the foundations laid down by Anna Templeton. She is a pivotal figure in the story of craftwork in Newfoundland and Labrador, and in the wider social and educational history of the province.

¹⁹ Emily Dyckson, “Ninety years of progress,” *The Evening Telegram* (St. John’s, NL), Feb. 14, 1987.

²⁰ Cullum, “Herstories: Anna Templeton”

²¹ Bruce Templeton, letter to Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, Jan. 19, 2016.

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