

UPSTAIRS AT THE LIBRARY

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An excerpt.

[Kingston's first library was founded in 1833 but was an exclusive institution. The Mechanics' Institute and Association Library set a steep \$2 annual fee for anyone who wished to borrow its vocational books.]

The local Mechanics had things nicely sewn up librarywise for almost 80 years until they made the mistake of hiring a professional librarian in 1910 as the guardian of their small collection of books. At age 33, Aimee Kennedy looked prim and proper but within a year of being hired, she had added the first children's book – Lang's Fairy Tales – to the collection and everything soon started to unravel. Within the year, she started lobbying politicians to fund a local "free library" so that she could loan novels, magazines and children's books to everyone in town. Being a recent graduate of the University of Toronto's library school, Aimee probably thought that was her job but to many she must have seemed a heretic.

Today, a portrait of Aimee hangs in the periodical section of the Central Library, created in 1950 by local celebrity artist Grant Macdonald in honour of her retirement at age 73. Ironically, while the picture is now almost lost to sight (I had to ask four librarians about it before we found it), an ancient marble slab that honours the recalcitrant Mechanic Institute's of 1833 is much easier to find. It gets pride of place -- near the library's main entrance -- even though it is more gravestone than plaque. Every time the security detectors warn of a stolen book or video, I imagine the Mechanics' ghosts give a little self-satisfied sneer, convinced that public access to expensive books remains a mistake after all.

In these days of government cutbacks though, Aimee's picture might better be switched with the MI slab. Certainly her story seems more relevant to the Central staffers who have their own tough battles to fight against politicians. And she was always more welcoming to the city's readers than the Institute members.

At first glance, Aimee doesn't look very remarkable and one could be forgiven for dismissing her as some boring old library lady. But when he painted her, Macdonald hinted at a lively nature, giving a slightly impish curve to the determined lines of her mouth and colouring her large brown eyes with the warm intelligence of a great children's librarian. She is nattily dressed in a power suit as befit a woman working in a man's world and her short hair is carefully coiffed, but generally, she seems slightly beleaguered, suggesting that 40 years of scrapping with the boneheads at city hall had tired her out.

Despite its upper class origins, the MI library was hardly a distinguished institution when Aimee first arrived in 1910. At a time when other Ontario towns were building magnificent Beaux Arts libraries, the Kingston library was squeezed into a few rooms above a drugstore. It had fewer than 3,500 books and not many paying members. Every community across the province it seemed was taking money from American industrialist, Andrew Carnegie, to build community libraries -- 111 in 20 years -- but Kingston had smugly rejected the advances of the foreign robber baron. While their less-principled counterparts in Brockville, Picton, Smiths Falls and a handful of other local towns took the easy road and built architectural jewels that still stand today, Kingston city fathers fought the notion of public libraries. (Napanee and Belleville also turned down Carnegie gifts but found local benefactors to build and stock their libraries long before Kingston.)

Eventually though, Aimee won out and in 1921, eleven years after she took over the Mechanic's library, Kingston converted it to a public library. The books above the drugstore were finally made available to the public as a free service. But even in victory, Aimee was not one to mince words. During the official dedication, she pointedly thanked the city council for finally "wiping out the disgrace of being the only city in the province without a library."

During the 1921 campaign to establish a public library (the very last municipal vote on libraries to be held in Ontario), Aimee had promised voters a decent library building where they could gather to read and smoke -- pastimes that seemed inseparable at the time -- with a public auditorium suitable for 300. But even after 80 percent of voters supported her, the city dawdled for another four years -- finally accepting money from the registrar of Queen's University, George Chown, to buy and renovate a building at the corner of Bagot and Brock streets even though it meant spending an extra \$35,000 of city money. Aimee herself helped draft the bylaw that approved the expenditure, not willing to trust the councillors to do it properly themselves. [*continued...*]