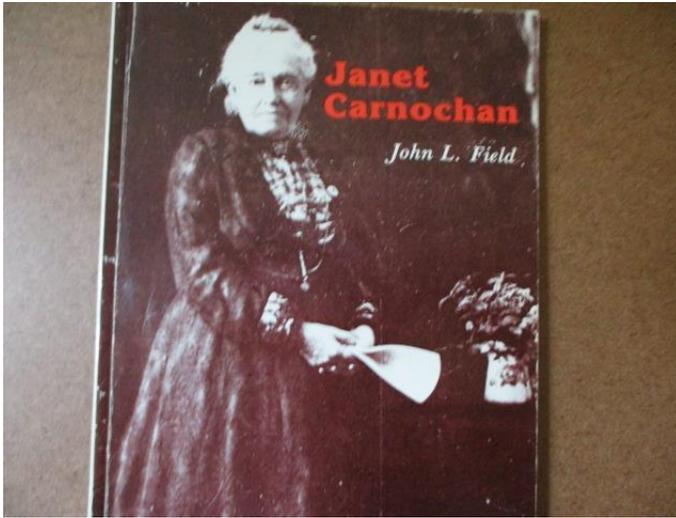


Janet Carnochan (1839 – 1926)

By Rod Fraser



In 2007, while researching the family history, I met a distant cousin ('Mary Pat Finn') for a chat about her branch of the Fraser family. In addition to telling me some lovely stories about her parents, she asked me to be sure to include the story of Janet Carnochan in my upcoming book, *The Pickerel Lake Road*.

I had never heard of Janet Carnochan – but always on the lookout for an interesting story, I arranged to spend a few days in Niagara-on-the-

Lake to find out what I could. It turns out Janet was an important person in the cultural life of that little town (called '*Niagara*' for a time in the nineteenth century and '*Newark*' before that).

It seems Janet was an important person in our family as well. She was the younger sister of my g-g grandmother Margaret Carnochan Slack (1834 – 1917), and she was well known to my grandfather's generation. When my great aunts Amy and May came to visit Janet in Niagara-on-the-Lake, circa 1921, they found her to be warm and friendly, and amusing in her conversation.

On meeting my two aunts, who were in their early 20s at the time, she told them they were quite lovely, but not as good looking as their mother. It was a remark delivered with a warm smile and a twinkle in her eyes, so no offence was taken. But the story was repeated often over the years. It might also have been true – their mother was a good-looking woman.

Janet's parents, James and Mary, came to Upper Canada, from Ayrshire, Scotland in 1830, about the time of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Trail. It is fair to say James and Mary Carnochan were far-better suited to making a go of it in Upper Canada (than either of the celebrated sisters).

James Carnochan was a skilled carpenter and cabinet maker, so his labour was always in demand. And rather than settling in the backwoods of Upper Canada, he chose to earn his living in an area that was more prosperous and in need of his skills.

For this reason, the Carnochan children got a good start in life. Not only did they have parents who had the income to properly care for them, they had access to good schools and opportunities unavailable in the backwoods, where the families of Susanna and Catharine took up residence.

While the children of the famous sisters often had inadequate food and clothing, and little access to schools, Janet Carnochan attended school in Niagara for her early years, such that, at the age of 16, she obtained a third-class teaching certificate that set her on a teaching career that spanned four decades – initially in Niagara, then in Brantford and Kingston, later in Peterborough and finally back in Niagara-on-the-Lake for the final twenty-eight years of her career.

The third-class certificate was issued to student teachers who completed what we would today call a high-school equivalent, had a recommendation from a church minister and/or school inspector (Janet had both), and completed a period of 'teacher training' at a model school. To meet this latter requirement,

Janet taught for two years at an elementary school in Niagara under the supervision of experienced teachers.

In the fall of 1859, Janet enrolled at the '*Toronto Normal School*' where upon graduation, she received a first-class teaching certificate. She studied classroom management, educational history, and teaching methods. Student teachers who obtained high marks and good ratings were given a first-class certificate. Those with lesser marks – while still meeting the overall standard – were awarded second-class certificates. Both qualifications allowed graduates to teach at either elementary or high schools in the province.

After teaching in the various communities mentioned earlier, Janet returned to Niagara in 1872 when the principalship of Niagara Public School became vacant. She remained there for six years and then accepted a position as assistant to Principal Albert Andrews, at the Niagara High School.

Janet taught arithmetic, algebra, geometry, English literature, spelling, history and geography to the junior grades, while Mr. Andrews taught the senior grades. Her salary was \$400 annually. There she remained for the next twenty-three years until her retirement in 1900.

Had this been the sole accomplishments of her life's work, it would have been commendable. But in retirement, Janet Carnochan was to make an even-larger footprint in her community.

Early in 1892, to promote interest in the local history, Janet published one of her first works, a 35-page history called, *'Niagara One Hundred Years Ago: The Ancient Capital and its Vicinity'*.

It told the history of Niagara, as the early capital of Upper Canada, but it also told the story of LaSalle, the local Indians, John Graves Simcoe, Laura Secord, Sir Isaac Brock, the settlement of the 'Loyalists', the war of 1812, the capture and burning of Niagara, and some of the community institutions, including the churches and the newspapers.

Since Janet had never attended college, nor had any training in historical research, her book is a good argument for the ability of ordinary people to learn to do anything they wish, provided they have the energy and cognitive ability to do so. It is a view with which I hardily agree.

In the years that followed, Janet wrote a 56-page history of St. Mark's Church in Niagara, as well as a 70-page history of St. Andrew's Church. Both were well received.

In 1914, when she was seventy-five years of age,

Janet self-published a 352-page *'History of Niagara'*, printed by Wm. Briggs, in Toronto. It sold for \$2.25 a copy and was praised in many local newspapers as well as those in Toronto.

During her retirement years, Janet was also involved in various community organizations, including the Historical Society. One of their priorities was to build a local museum, to showcase the early history of Niagara. Over the years, the Historical Society had accumulated many artifacts, which were temporarily displayed in the main part of the town hall each summer.

In the summer of 1906, the construction started on a new museum which was to be called *'Memorial Hall'*. Part of the land for the project was donated by Janet herself, and she was very involved in the entire project. The outer building was completed in a number of months, with the finishing work lasting through the winter. According to John Field,

"In the Spring, it was ready, a red-brick two-and-a-half story building with stone corners, facing south-west across the military reserve.... The main floor was two stories high."

"The Memorial Hall was somewhat Spartan. It lacked a furnace, washrooms, and had no water supply. But as the first museum building to be

called a museum in Ontario, it was hailed as a great success."

In addition to her involvement with '*Memorial Hall*', Janet was also a key figure in the local library, since becoming secretary of the board in 1891. In addition to her duties as secretary, she often filled in for the Librarian and acted as Treasurer for three or four years. She was also active on the committee that ordered books each year.

Older members of the library board retired or passed away in the early part of the twentieth century, but not Janet. She continued with the Library Board and the Museum until two years prior to her death in 1924, when she retired at the age of 85.

Janet Carnochan lived next door to the museum and took many of her meals with her three nieces who lived nearby. She was well known throughout a large extended family, although she never married and had children.

For those who claim women of yesteryear could never get ahead in life, her lived experience shows this was just not so. If she had a choice of family, or career, she bravely chose a career and never looked back. Today her portrait is still shown at '*Memorial Hall*' in Niagara-on-the-Lake. For those who visit the

town from time to time, you should drop in to have a visit.

Janet is buried at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, the place where she worshipped, taught Sunday School and participated in its affairs for many decades. The stone that marks her grave is simple and dignified. May she rest in peace.



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