

Rebel Daughter

KATHERINE GOVIER

C'est une entrevue avec Doris Anderson en 1971, que l'auteure, fort impressionnée par sa présence et sa réputation, nous rapporte alors qu'elle était jeune journaliste à Toronto. Elle retrace brièvement la carrière de Doris comme rédactrice en chef de Chatelaine et comme chroniqueuse au Toronto Star, et elle souligne sa position unique qui lui permettait de s'adresser aux femmes de la base à travers le pays et sa croisade de toute une vie pour l'égalité des femmes.

When I left Edmonton for Toronto to go to graduate school, I had an assignment. It was to interview a fellow alumna of the University of Alberta, one Doris McCubbin Anderson, then editor of *Chatelaine* magazine. I was 23. It was 1971. I had never interviewed a famous person. *Chatelaine* was a fat and outspoken national women's magazine, ubiquitous, glossy, and the only magazine in the country that could claim to be read by hundreds of thousands. Doris was that fearsome female icon, the magazine editor. There is a reason this stereotype exists: these broads were tough! She could have been played by Meryl Streep. But she did not wear Prada.

I remember crossing the threshold of her office with my little tape recorder in my hand. After the pleasantries I set it down on her desk and turned it on. It didn't run. Battery failure. This is a known phenomenon: batteries go dead on contact with important subjects. Flustered, I pulled the plug-in thing from my purse. Short cord. Where to find a socket? I was dissolving. My clever questions were deserting me. And Doris Anderson, widely credited as having discovered the secret feminist in Canadian women on farms, in cities, and especially in that haven of conservatism—small towns—got down on her knees behind the desk and crawled on the floor to find one.

What to do? I got down and crawled too. She found a socket, I handed her the cord, and she got me the power.

When Doris Anderson died on March 2, 2007, age 85, I remembered that day 36 years ago. I had not written about the crawling; I suppose I thought it made me look

like an amateur. But that was the image that stuck. This was the Anderson who got what she wanted by threatening to quit if she didn't, who promised she could do her job better than any man and did, the woman who called down her publishers and managers as unrepentant sexists (and they were), the only real brawling women's leader this country has ever produced, down.

On the floor in her smart business suit, with her trim coif, to save the day for a neophyte journalist from the hometown who was shaking in her boots. To quote a favourite line of Doris Anderson's: "It wouldn't have happened if I'd been a man!"

She was three years younger than my mother, also named Doris, a popular name in the 1910s and 1920s. She'd cut her teeth in magazines during the '50s, when attitudes to women were prehistoric. In her 20-year tenure she tripled the readership of *Chatelaine*, which had been languishing when she took it up in 1957. Although little broadsheets like *The Velvet Fist* announced "women's liberation," the battles weren't over. It's hard to remember how frightened we were, and yet how entitled we felt to a full life, to enter any profession, to earn the top salary, to raise our children with the 50 per cent participation of their fathers. Still to come were laws on pensions, divorce, child support, abortion, and discrimination. Doris raised the awareness of Canadians with her crusading magazine, and in many ways we have her to thank for the real progress that has been made.

Doris had the common touch; she understood ordinary women. How can you say "ordinary" without sounding patronizing? I mean women you didn't see at lunch in Toronto, women whose lives weren't noticed outside their community, women who seemed, on the outside, to be conventional. She understood that they left their conventionality at the door when they discovered they were getting a raw deal. To take just one example: *Chatelaine* publicized the case of Irene Murdoch, farm wife in Alberta, whose husband broke her jaw and kicked her off the farm when

he wanted to marry another woman. She was given bare subsistence—\$200 a month—and no assets, in a decision that even the Supreme Court of Canada affirmed, saying that she had made only the contribution required of “any ranch wife.” Although she had worked every day of her 25-year marriage, she was entitled to nothing. Public feeling aroused in favour of Mrs. Murdoch forced family law to change across the country.

Doris surprised me that day in 1971, not only by getting down on her knees, but by something she said: “I edit this magazine for my aunt in Taber.”

Doris did not have the personality for politics. She didn't compromise and she took no prisoners: she spoke her mind chin-forward, without considering the tender egos of men and even other women. A better fit was the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. She was part of the fractious group that got women's rights enshrined in the Constitution: section 28, which points out that these guarantees of freedoms and rights belonged to women as well as men. There was considerable opposition.

And she wrote novels—racy novels, page-turners, not

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I have often wondered about that unnamed aunt in Taber, whose strange fate it was to stand in for all readers in Doris Anderson's mind. Auntie was not chic, but she was interested in fashion. She liked recipes you could make ahead to feed six or eight, often using Campbell's soup. She probably didn't “work”—as in “be employed outside the home.” Fitness? She was active. She liked a good read—*Chatelaine* used to publish fiction, and stories by Alice Munro appeared in the magazine early in Doris's tenure. She had started to travel. And she had a serious side: the mythical aunt cared about laws that affected her finances, marriage and children, her community, her ability to choose pregnancy or termination, and her country. She could be moved to outrage. She cared about the lives of other women.

I don't know if the mythical aunt in Taber was a mother, but Doris was. In 1971, her three sons were 9, 11, and 13. She had been editor since the day she married, a job she got in 1957 when she told the company that if she didn't get it, she'd quit. Maclean Hunter didn't give her the title until she'd had her first child and come back to work. (This was before laws, right?) Working after having children kept her in touch with the concerns of average women.

A year after we met, in 1972. Doris's marriage broke up. She finished raising her teenage boys alone, and she had her dream job only until 1977. Doris was restless. Maybe she'd outgrown *Chatelaine*, maybe the revolution, such as it was going to be in Canada, had passed. She wanted a bigger podium. She wanted to be in the political and business arena.

It was not to be. Not at Maclean Hunter, which after losing Doris watched the magazine decline in relevance and circulation for two and a half decades. Not in politics. She ran for the Liberals in 1978 and was defeated.

terribly good novels, full of gossip, scandal, and feminist outrage. They never found the enormous audience she'd been accustomed to. For 15 years she had a column in the *Toronto Star*. This should have been a great fit—the small-l liberal paper with the big heart and the big circulation. But Doris faded into the background at the *Star*: it was a family newspaper.

Life after *Chatelaine* never quite added up for Doris.

She had been in the right place at the right time, and strong enough to push for real change. She had tackled abortion, divorce, abuse, alcoholism—difficult subjects. It was always a balancing act with advertisers. She knew more about her readers than did the advertising salesmen (all male in her time). And she was not shy about telling them so. She said to Sandra Martin just two months before her death that she had never learned to be subservient to men. “What I learned to do was cope.”

In 1996 Doris Anderson wrote an autobiography called *Rebel Daughter*. I reviewed that book, and I have it in my hand now, yellow stickies still on the edges of the pages. Doris's early years explain her toughness. They read like melodrama. “It seemed to me that I had been tagged from birth for the convenience of society with the names of mostly absent men.”

She was born November 10, 1921, in Medicine Hat, the third child of Rebecca Buck. Rebecca's husband had deserted her after taking out a mortgage on the boarding house that supported the family. The pregnant Rebecca had fled south from Calgary to stay with relatives because her own mother had “cut her dead on the street.” Doris was put in a home for unwanted children, but after less than a year her mother reclaimed her. Until she was five, Doris didn't know she had a father. When Thomas McCubbin began to show up at the house, and eventually joined the family, she wished he had been hit by a streetcar, she

would later write. His main attention to the girl seemed to be to use her small body as a kind of barbell while he worked out.

She did well at school. A girl at that time was expected to marry a “good provider” and get some training so she’d have “something to fall back on.” But with the inspiration of several dedicated teachers, she went to Teachers College, spent a summer at the Banff School of Fine Arts and sold a freelance piece to *Calgary Herald* editor Richard Needham for \$5. (“My first hint that writing was never going to be a lucrative profession,” she wrote.) She taught near Airdrie and saved her money to get to the University of Alberta, where she worked on the *Gateway* like so many gifted journalists before and after her time.

The story of her struggle to move up in Maclean Hunter, to get equal wages, to have her ideas heard about the business of the magazine *she* had made successful, is epic. It takes 30 pages of the autobiography. Doris was obsessed with getting what she deserved. *Chatelaine* was the big money-maker for the Maclean Hunter group of companies, but the boys at *Maclean’s*—Peter Newman, Peter Gzowski, Charles Templeton—were paid at least half again as much as she was. Though a seat on the board and the editorship of *Maclean’s* were promised her, she never got them, and quit in frustration.

Although Doris’s position of power was gone, her friends stayed with her: there were parties for her significant birthdays, where a roll call would show all the known Canadian feminist warriors.

Once, she came to my house in 1997 for an “Alberta mafia” party. The room was full of Albertans who’d come east to make careers in media and the arts. I think Doris was curious. Having graduated in 1945, a good 20-plus years earlier than anyone else in the room, she wore her political causes on her sleeve the way people did in the 1960s and ’70s. But amid the “me generation” and their successors she seemed a bit lost.

In my life so far I’ve known three journalists who were truly gifted with genius in this instinctive, seductive craft. One was the late Beland Honderich, feared and sometimes loathed editor and then publisher of the *Toronto Star*. He was born dirt poor to a Mennonite family that had been excommunicated from its own church—that is, they were cast out by the outcasts. He had a Grade 8 education. The second was Alexander Ross, once editor of *Toronto Life*, then *Canadian Business*, and legendary columnist for the *Toronto Star*. The third was Doris Anderson.

Beland, my former father-in-law, never lost his belief that simple political and financial facts printed on sheets of paper could change the lives of the common man, the poor, the ill educated, the immigrant. It was his mission to make that happen. “Sandy” Ross was a charmer who found something of interest in every single person he met. When his son died of leukemia, he took a daily column for the *Toronto Star* for one year. He wrote about normal people and their lives, their heroism, their failings, their

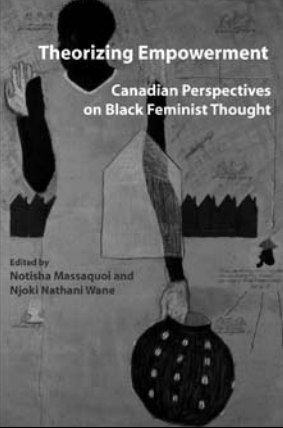
grace. He was the best columnist the paper ever had.

And then there was Doris. She too never forgot where she came from. She was a crusader. Journalism is about timing—being in a position to reach people. Doing big things in journalism is about having that big desk and the power that goes with it. It is also about commitment to ideas. Doris’s idea was that life should be fair to women. She *knew* what women wanted (that aunt in Taber again). She fought for it and sometimes won. Her triumphs were ours. She never gave up her crusade. How could she? A man can escape his poor beginnings. A woman can rise, too—but at the end of the day, she’s still a woman.

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