

The Spirit of Victoria Past, Present, and Future: Writer Viola Pratt and Actress Jane Mallett Recall How Victoria Gave Them Their Start

by Nancy Sandrin
Vic Report 12.2 (1984): 3-4.

Viola Pratt

At age ninety-one, Viola Whitney Pratt (Vic 1T3) remembers “as if it were yesterday” her very first lecture at Victoria College in the fall of 1909. “It was up in the chapel. Our professor was Dr. Rayner. In those days there was no retirement age but he seemed to be over eighty. He told us about the glories of English literature and how privileged we were to become acquainted with its great tradition. Then we went over to Convocation Hall where Sir Robert Falconer, who was the president, gave a wonderful lecture on the ideals of the university and how fortunate we were to be there.”

Mrs. Pratt, who lives in Toronto, is perhaps best known at Vic as the widow of Victoria professor and great Canadian poet Edwin John Pratt, but she has never been one to live in his shadow, pursuing an impressive writing career of her own that included writing three books, reviewing books, and editing a magazine.

Like many of her classmates, Mrs. Pratt went on to the College of Education after graduating from Vic. Continuing the tradition of many in her family, she taught in the small Ontario towns of Amherstburg, Renfrew, and St. Mary’s. The line of teachers in her family includes her mother and three brothers and goes back to her maternal grandmother, who was born in 1827 in Muddy York, as Toronto was known at that time, and taught there in the 1840s.

Viola Whitney didn’t meet Ned Pratt until her final year at Victoria, but, as she recalls, everyone who attended Victoria in those years knew of Ned as the one who helped students in philosophy and got them through their exams. “He never seemed to have time to study himself—he was always coaching others.” That’s all she knew of him, too, until they both happened to attend the wedding of two of their classmates—the bride was in her year, the groom was in his. “We came home on the same streetcar and got talking, and that’s how we became acquainted.”

Married in 1919, they were blessed with one daughter, [Claire](#), who now lives with her mother and is a haiku writer and woodcut artist. One of her prints, “Wings of the Fog,” was used on the stamp issued by Canada Post this year in commemoration of E.J. Pratt’s centenary (*Vic Report*, summer 1983).

Three years on the staff of *Acta Victoriana* helped Mrs. Pratt tackle her job as editor of a new magazine published for young people by the United Church of Canada in 1929. She had definite goals for *World Friends*: “To introduce the children of Canada to the beauties of the Bible and... to make sure none of them would have racial or religious prejudices.” As editor of the magazine for twenty-six years, she nurtured its circulation from 5,000 at its inception to 77,000 in 1955, and saw it translated into several languages.

Focusing her literary skills on journalistic writing, she wrote *One Family* in 1937, a book on the work of missionaries in different parts of the world. *Famous Doctors* was a study for young people of the life and work of three Canadian doctors, Sir William Osler, Sir Frederick Banting, and Dr. Wilder Penfield, published by Clarke, Irwin in 1956. The Women’s Missionary Society of Canada published *Journeying With the Year* in 1957, a selection of stories and editorials she had written for *World Friends*. Her literary

work was recognized in 1956 when Victoria conferred on her the newly established degree of Doctor of Sacred Letters.

Mrs. Pratt's life was so crowded with activities in 1955 that she retired from the magazine and concentrated on her many other interests, including reviewing books for *The Globe and Mail* and doing volunteer work with the Toronto Psychiatric Hospital (later to become the Clarke Institute), the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, and the Bloorview Hospital. She is also a naturalist and a founding member of the Margaret Nice Ornithological Club, Canada's only women's bird club. Her volunteer work has been important to her, and she's particularly proud of her work with the blind. "I read one boy right through university. He was taking philosophy at St. Michael's and he got second-class honours."

Mrs. Pratt's high intelligence and energies showed up early in her student years. She was the only student to take three separate honours courses at once. That is a feat in itself, but, upon graduating, she received a gold medal and tied for first place in English and History and came first in Modern Romance Languages and first in Modern Teutonic Languages.

On top of all this, there is another accomplishment for which she has yet to be recognized, "the distinction of being the first woman to enter Burwash Hall". Liberal leader Sir Wilfrid Laurier was scheduled to speak at Burwash in 1912 and, at that time, no woman was allowed into the building. "I badly wanted to hear him," she says. "I was a great fan too for Wilfrid Laurier's." It was Ned who came up with a plan to sneak Viola up the back stairs to the balcony.

"So that's what I did. But the ironical part of it was I couldn't hear the silver-tongued Laurier. The acoustics were bad and his voice didn't carry at all; I didn't hear one single word." She may never receive an award for that achievement, but there's no doubt that Viola Pratt is one of Victoria's women of highest accomplishment.

Jane Mallett

With a laugh that sounds like a combination of all the characters she's ever played—running from raunchy low notes to a girlish high squeal—Jane Mallett shows off a photograph taken several years ago of a group of actors who were performing at a Toronto dinner theatre. In it she is posed at the centre of a wreath of handsome men. When Mrs. Mallett laughs and talks, you know she's a theatre person, in the finest sense of the word: lively, bright, with no pretensions towards restrained elegance, and this despite the genteel setting of her Rosedale apartment with its subdued green living room, tasteful furniture, and stacks of polished reading, including *The New Yorker*, *Connoisseur*, *Saturday Night*, and *Opera Canada*. Jane Mallett (Vic 2T1) is the doyenne of Canadian theatre. She's been involved in more opening ventures than countable: the first trans-Canada network radio programme in 1930; the first dry-run rehearsal for Canadian television; the opening ceremonies of Canadian TV; the first play ever televised in Canada; and the first edition of "Spring Thaw", Toronto's long-running stage revue.

It was as Miss J.D. Keenleyside that she first tried acting at Victoria, and she remembers playing Helen of Troy, and Maria in *Twelfth Night*. She recalls that, asked to play the female lead in a production at Upper Canada College, during her last year at Victoria, she turned out to be the only woman in an all-male cast. "I can't remember the plot completely except that I played opposite my husband-to-be. That's how I met him. It was lovely." Frederick J. Mallett was head of the chemistry department at the boys' college for forty-five years, and they had been married for fifty-five years when he died in 1980. "I never would have stayed married to anybody else."

Of her time at Victoria Mrs. Mallett says, "I thought it was quite marvellous going to Vic then, but I've realized through the years how stupendous it really was. You don't realize at the time the great men, the great minds there. A lot of them I remember well."

Many of those great professors probably spent their Saturday evenings in a local theatre watching Mrs.

Mallett perform in the 1920s, when Toronto was an active theatre town. In those days she used the stage name Jane Aldworth and worked with stock and touring companies that prided themselves on presenting the latest Broadway stage productions.

She played stock with Vaughan Glaser at the Uptown and the Victoria, with George Keppie's company at the Empire, and performed in summer theatre for John Holden in Bala, Ontario. She played Strindberg at Margaret Eaton Hall, Shakespeare in the first Dominion Drama Festival, and began walk-ons at Hart House in the late 1920s.

She also got in on the ground floor of radio. As she once cracked, "I broke into radio the same year as Marconi." Her fame in those days came from doing as many as four or five different characters on the same show and led to the nick name "The Girl With a Thousand Voices." She even took a shot at American radio in the 1930s by appearing on the "Rudy Vallee Show" in New York, and "Believe It or Not."

Dedication to her husband and young son brought her back to Canada where, as Jane Mallett, she saw a flurry of work on radio in the 1930s and 1940s. World War II kept her twice as busy, doing volunteer work for the war effort, preparing her radio show (a New York script she rewrote, entitled "How to Be Charming"), and writing comedy for the troops for whom she performed at army camps and hospitals throughout Ontario. She never looked across the border again. "I think that after a while, I took pride in being a Canadian actor who could earn a living in her country."

"Spring Thaw," which played to packed houses for twenty years, featured Mrs. Mallett's talents throughout the 1950s until she formed a partnership—Jane Mallett Associates—to produce stage plays with Don Harron, Robert Christie, and John Hayes. In 1955, they produced "Fine Frenzy." The partnership eventually ended, but she kept going with a string of local revues, radio productions, television commercials and appearances, and films. One film draws particular notice—"Sweet Movie" (1973), which Mrs. Mallett says turned out, to her surprise, to be "pornographic." "Somebody said to me, 'What were you doing in a porno movie?' I said, 'What was my government doing in a porno movie?' The Canadian Film Development Corporation had put money into it." After filming in Canada was completed, which she found out comprised only the first ten minutes of the final product, the crew went on to film in France and Germany. "I had no idea. But apparently, it turned out to be a dreadful and boring movie."

One would guess that Mrs. Mallett's slim, slightly bent figure has seen perhaps eighty years of real-life drama, but she insists she's *still* 108 years old. (The last time she "revealed" her age was when she told a reporter in 1968 that she was the same age as the character she was playing—108!) She doesn't do much acting now, mainly due to her health, but she continues to see her many actor friends with whom she feels a great closeness. "There is more unity in our group than anywhere else in the world. If people could behave like actors do, who are too busy to fight, then there wouldn't be wars."

With season tickets to all the theatres in town, she is very excited by what's happening in Canadian theatre now. "I've been forever saying we'll never get anywhere until we get some playwrights. Now we're getting them little by little. And we're getting so many good actors. I'm so pleased, I'm so thrilled. We are no longer looking across the borders."

Her life is filled now running the Actors' Fund of Canada, a charity of which she's been president since 1957; spending time with her granddaughters; and doing some work on a book about herself, which a friend, another actor, will write. "Somebody said, 'You must get everything down. Are you writing this all down?' I said, 'No, because I'm too busy being interviewed.'"

Last updated: November 15, 2016

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Published on E.J. Pratt Library (<https://library.vicu.utoronto.ca>)

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