

McGill Women's Initiations, 1910 & 1919

by Robert H. Michel

Elsewhere in this issue, the article "Adversity Vanquished" describes the initiations which second year (sophomore) male students inflicted on the first year men of 1918. Such initiations for men were long-standing, rowdy and familiar to both students and the Montreal public. Less well known were the rowdy but private initiations of women students. Women were admitted to McGill (in Arts) in 1884 and in 1899 Royal Victoria College (R.V.C.) opened, offering a sumptuous residence to women boarders. Having their own building and communal life while increasingly sharing classes and activities with male students may have spurred the women to impose initiation rituals of their own. Student publications give us detailed glimpses of two such initiations.

1910

The *McGill Martlet*, the predecessor of the *McGill Daily*, described an R.V.C. initiation of October 1910 (such reports were always pompously jocular): "I suppose the event looked forward to by the freshies with most anxiety at the beginning of their course is the initiation. It is enveloped in a fearful mystery which is regarded with a mixture of eagerness and awe." The "freshies" [first year students] were summoned to R.V.C. on a Saturday morning; the sophomores greeted them with war cries and marched them to a basement room marked "Immigration Office."

Each freshie was obliged to "do a stunt"; and the agonies those poor children were put through in the way of singing and dancing — usually the marks of rejoicing — are more than I would care to describe. The astonishing part is that they did not seem properly impressed

but made sundry highly impertinent remarks regarding their noble wardens [Moderate rebelliousness was tolerated in both male and female initiations].

The freshies were blindfolded and sent jolting on a "truck" from a room representing their old lives to one symbolizing their new college life. Still blindfolded, they heard:

the most fearful groans, cries, howls and other infernal sounds... proceeding from the unknown regions around. To the midst of these terrors they were soon led. At the entrance to a dark cavern they were asked their names and character, and when these had been duly given they were given a red tape and charged to follow it. Up and down, round and round, did those unfortunate freshies wander, greeted every now and then by some fresh ordeal. In one place they passed under a wet towel; in another they were gently "wiped" with a basket-ball, while their tormentor sternly demanded whether they did their duty subscribing to "The Martlet," and removing the plates of their elders and betters. By no means the least of their sufferings was the constant wailing kept up around them, and the continual sound of falling water, into which they were always expecting to stumble.

At last the end of the maze was reached, and after another catechism regarding their performance of their [d]uty, they were led to Her Majesty. In the semi-darkness of the throne-room each freshie knelt humbly before Sophomore President and promised to love, honour and obey the worshipful Sophomores.

They were then graciously permitted to kiss the hem of her garment, and Her Majesty presented each with a bib in the form of a white banner on which was printed "Freshie" in green letters.

The tortures were now at an end and the freshies were led to the common room, where a feast was provided which made them forget the woes through which they had passed. Each Freshie was presented with a green and white certificate declaring her now "admitted to the great and glorious Land of College." The ceremony closed with three cheers for the Sophomores and the singing of the little cradle-song: -

"We are, we are, we are the freshie kids,
We do, we do, we do what nursie bids,
With a bottle, and a spoon, and sterilized
milk,
Rah! Rah! Rah!"¹

1919

Because of the Spanish Influenza, McGill was closed from early October 1918, reopening 18 Nov. 1918. The men's initiations, described by Trott, took place right after this date. The *McGill Daily* during October and November 1918 carried no story on R.V.C. initiations and perhaps none took place. There was, however, an R.V.C. initiation reported in the *Daily* on 3 November 1919:

At the appointed hour, the Freshies, suitably attired, and decorated with green ribbons, took their places. The Sophs, masked and clad in white, as the emblem of their perfection, stood solemnly around while their victims answered to the roll-call. One by one, the Freshies were called out, "bogged," and tied, then the fun started. First, to the accompaniment of wails and moans,

each verdant one was required to roll a basketball down the corridor with her head. This done, she was ordered to exert her lungs to the utmost extent by giving the Freshie yell:

"Maw, Maw, Maw!
Paw, Paw, Paw!
Rah! Rah! Rah!
Milk!

Next, in preparation for her fate, she obligingly shook hands with Death. But the Sophs were merciful, and noting the pallor of their victims, they decided to end the Freshies' sufferings. So, in a dark, mysterious corner, filled with the wails of the departing souls, a rope was placed around the victim's neck, and she was told to jump. Some, diffident as ever about going first, held back. Mercilessly, however, the Soph. pushed, and — the faint heart sank into a bottomless abyss. The Sophomores had decided that for some members of Class '23 even this was not enough, so they were commanded to walk the plank. Then, thoughtful as ever, their Captors realized after so much exertion, the Freshies stood in dire need of refreshment. Accordingly, ample portions of worms and fishes' eyes were forced into the mouths of the hungry ones [presumably the food merely resembled this]. Next the Freshies were led down; the atmosphere became warmer; wailing voices, begging for mercy rent the air; and one by one, each victim was branded with a hot coal [perhaps ice, which has the same initial effect on terrorized minds!]. For those who survived this ordeal, grapes were provided, which could be obtained by pushing one's face through a few inches of flour. As worms, fishes' eyes and

flour were not considered a sufficient improvement to the beauty of the verdant ones, their faces were stamped with the words, "Cheeky Freshie," in bright green. [and so on...]²

Unlike the men's, the women's initiations were hidden inside the Royal Victoria College building, reflecting perhaps, the restrictions of the time on female behaviour. There were no male witnesses, no fighting, no parading outdoors or invading of restaurants. The women's initiations of 1910 and 1919 were similar: the baby-yells of the freshies, roll calls, forced stunts, scary noises, symbolic dress, humiliations and kowtowing to the second years, and meals used either as reconciliation or ordeal. Basketballs serve as torments in both initiations: R.V.H. students regularly played basketball, invented in 1891 by McGill graduate James Naismith. The 1919 initiation with its threat of hanging and walking the plank sounded more daunting than that of 1910. Perhaps the *Daily* embellished its account

for fun — and presumably the worms, fish eyes and brandings were simulated or invented by the reporter! While the *Daily's* reports of the 1918 initiations for men are confirmed independently by Trott's memoir, the *Martlet* and *Daily* stories about the R.V. C. initiations lack such confirmation. Facetious though they were, however, the main gist probably was fairly reliable. Women's initiations, ca. 1900–1920, are not mentioned in Margaret Gillett's history of R.V.C. in *We Walked Very Warily* (1981) or in E.A. Collard's collection of reminiscences, *The McGill You Knew* (1975). Perhaps some R.V.C. student wrote something about initiations which may yet turn up in an attic, an archive or on the internet.

ENDNOTES

¹ *McGill Martlet*, vol.III, no.3, 20 Oct. 1910, 29-30 (unsigned). It is not clear if the initiations included day students who did not live in R.V.C. Most of the coverage of the two initiations is quoted here.

² *McGill Daily*, 3 Nov. 1919, 1,3 (unsigned).

