

History Moment for March 2018

Since International Women's Day is on March 8, a group of historians in the United States have named March to be "Writing Women into History" Month. Part of that writing women into history has been to tell the stories of ordinary women's lives, lives that have been frequently untold. So this month's story is about a relatively ordinary woman Clara Emily Rothwell Anderson – playwright, novelist, Presbyterian minister's spouse.

Clara Rothwell was born in 1871 in Listowel, Ontario. Her mother, Sarah, died when Clara was 9 years old. Her widowed father, a school principal, raised the family of 5 children. Clara had a beautiful voice and studied at the Toronto Conservatory, becoming a soloist at the Trinity Methodist Church. In 1899 she married a Presbyterian minister, the Reverend Peter William Anderson (1870-1936), with whom she had three children. More than a decade into her role as minister's wife Clara discovered her own creativity through the writing of more than a dozen light-hearted plays that were produced as fund-raising events for the Ladies' Aid Societies and Young People's Societies of her husband's Presbyterian congregations. Her first play, AN OLD TIME LADIES' AID BUSINESS MEETING AT MOHAWK CROSSROADS (1912) was written in two days. Fearing conservative citizens of Shelburne, Ontario, might object to stage costumes, her amateur actors performed the piece in their street clothes.

Rothwell Anderson's actors are primarily women, women play lead roles, the stories are told from women's perspectives, but the audiences were made up of both women and men. She gave many of her characters revealing names: Miss Wise (a school teacher); Gideon Longface (a pessimistic farmer); Mrs. Crisp ("very angry in appearance; hat crooked and wielding an umbrella"); Mrs. Goodsense; Mrs. Meek; Miss Harpe ("a loud-voice, cantankerous woman, dressed severely plain and very prim.")

The plays frequently explored the themes of rural change, inter-generational tensions, and the changing role of women, doing so in humorous ways. Church appears in the plays both in frequent references to clergy and to things related to the life of congregations. In the play THE YOUNG COUNTRY SCHOOLM'AM, Ma Sneckleby says, "The best dishes is only used when the Minister comes to tea, as I can hard endure to see him using them, fearin' he will break them, which if he did, I would never set foot in his church again—good-meanin' man, though he be." Later in the same play, Gideon says "So you're the new schoolm'am, as is to lead the crookit feet of our children along the slippery paths as leads to learnin'."

Recognizing that the actors performing her plays had little or no acting background, Rothwell Anderson offered instructions to actors and suggestions about how to advertise the plays and sell tickets. Included in her advice:

- Be very careful, and go slowly when choosing your characters. The success of your play depends upon it.
- Speak distinctly, and very LOUD and SLOWLY.
- Enthuse over the play; talk it up where ever you go; sell your own tickets.
- Under no condition cheapen your entertainment by sending children out to sell tickets.
- Those taking part must fill in the spaces with quiet natural acting while they are not speaking themselves. Make no noise or action to draw attention from speakers.
- Do not delay long between acts.
- Do not speak during laughter, and if there is noise repeat the part.

Clara Rothwell Anderson's plays were well-received, being performed in churches from coast to coast. She died in 1958 and is buried in an Ottawa cemetery.

Peter Bush, Moderator
143rd (2017) General Assembly
The Presbyterian Church in Canada