

Dr. Garson Romalis, Champion of Women's Rights

Project Objectives

The right of Canadian women to have access to safe, legal abortion remains highly contested, as it is in countries throughout the world. Dr. Henry Morgentaler is well known as the first gynaecologist to openly challenge the lack of equal access to this medical procedure, resulting in the landmark R. v. Morgentaler decision in 1988. Despite Morgentaler being a lightning rod for anti-choice agitation, it was another physician – B.C.'s Dr. Garson Romalis – who was the victim of the “most violent antiabortion crime in Canada.” Dr. Romalis (1937-2014) was a highly respected obstetrician and gynaecologist in Vancouver whose practice included providing abortions. While training in the southern United States, he found the maternity wards filled with women who suffered from septicaemia and other disorders due to botched or self-induced abortions, many of which were fatal. He therefore made the fateful and courageous decision to offer the five-minute procedure as part of his practice.

The Vancouver women's health clinic would be regularly picketed and its staff and patients followed and harassed. Dr. Romalis's home would be picketed as well. In November 1994, while eating his breakfast, he was shot through two large sliding glass doors by a shooter using a high-powered rifle. The shooter was never caught. Yet Dr. Romalis persisted, although he underwent a period of physical and emotional rehabilitation. Less than six years later, after leaving his clinic, he would endure a serious stab wound to his back. After the second attack, he returned to work, although he wore a bullet-proof vest and would be accompanied by a security contingent, whom he referred to as his 'drivers.' When he passed away in 2014, the mainstream press justifiably termed him a champion of women's reproductive rights. The anti-choice press had other names for him.

Yet there has not been an examination of Dr. Romalis's life and work beyond obituaries. The violence he endured in the so-called peaceable kingdom was only one small facet of the life of a beloved family man, a trusted physician, a philanthropist, and an observant man who served as president of his synagogue. I met Dr. Romalis a short time before his death and had planned to interview him.

While that did not come to pass, I have been granted access to some of his personal papers. His immediate family is very supportive of this project, and as they were the ones who were most directly impacted by the violence against him, it is their story as well. I plan to interview family members, friends, personal protection agents and co-workers, including the clinic's nurses who also courageously carried on their work amid harassment and violence. Dr. Romalis's daughter has shared his personal phonebook with me to facilitate contact. She also shared letters from former patients written after he was shot, family letters and photographs. She is eager to start the interview process, but as an educator, understands the necessity to obtain credentials from the Ethical Review process.

My primary objective is to produce a contextualized, analytical biography of a Canadian health care provider whose life work affected so many others. There have been a few significant studies done on the history of abortion in Canada. Angus McLaren was the foremost scholar for many

years, with the most relevant book being the study he wrote with Arlene Tigar McLaren about Canadian birth control and abortion policy from the 1880s. He was followed by Christabelle Sethna who has written about the late 20th century, and continues to produce important work with younger as well as international scholars on abortion tourism. A new generation of scholars, including Shannon Stettner and Katrina Ackerman, have focused upon the late 20th century pro-choice movement. Katrina was a former women's history student and research assistant of mine, went on to graduate studies and has taught women's health at the University of Saskatchewan. I plan to contextualize Dr. Romalis's story within the period after 1968, when the federal government's omnibus bill decriminalized abortion; *R. v. Morgentaler*, which confirmed that lack of equal access to abortion across Canada violates the constitutional right of autonomy of the person; and the last twenty-plus years, where access to legal and safe abortion remains uneven, limited and continually contested by anti-choice activities.

I also plan to investigate why Garson Romalis continued to offer women abortions even at the cost of his own personal safety and health. Was it constant family support, the strength of his own religious and/or social justice convictions, the backing of the nurses and other care-workers who shared the risks and rewards, or all of the above?

Outputs

I plan to write at least one article on Dr. Romalis's life and present it to one or more of the following conferences: Canadian Historical Association/ Canadian Committee on Women's History session at the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences; the Royal Society of Canada Celebration of Excellence annual meeting; the Berkshire Conference on Women's History; and/or the Western Association of Women's History. I plan to submit versions of the work to the Canadian Medical Association Journal and to the Bulletin of the History of Medicine, *Signs*, or another women's history journal.

Timeline

Summer 2021 - Work on the Ethical Review application; identify primary sources and begin preliminary introductions for family members, friends and colleagues who would like to share their experiences with Dr. Romalis.

Fall 2021 (Time Grant Period) – Literature review; Begin interviews; scan and upload primary materials.

Spring 2022 – Continue interviews and uploading materials

Summer 2022 – Organize interview data and textual materials; Write article (s).

Professional Benefits to the Faculty Member

I have just completed a seven-year project, a biography of Frances Oldham Kelsey, which is being published by Oxford University Press. I had no plans to embark upon another biography, particularly on such a controversial subject, but for a historian specializing in Canadian women's health, this was a unique opportunity. Along with the importance of highlighting Dr. Romalis's life, I hope to present a cautionary tale for a younger female audience that their access to the full

range of health care options, including abortion and birth control, is not even now a permanently protected right, and that women's rights, like all human rights, must be continually safeguarded.

Benefits to Vancouver Island University

The immediate benefit will be the employment of upper-year History or Women's Studies students as research assistants. I plan to apply for an Explore Grant to hire at least one student to aid me with a literature review, organize the raw interview data and annotate secondary literature, and apply for a work-op student as well. In previous years, I have hired summer students through the work-op programme, who took a Directed Studies course with me and therefore combined the research with an intensive one-on-one pedagogical experience. In this case, an interested student could enroll in HIST 478: The History of Women's Health.

Over the last 30 years, women's studies and women's history have become a thriving feature of the VIU curriculum, even as they have faced financial and pedagogical challenges in other North American institutions. We have maintained a balance between cutting-edge theory and evidence-based scholarship, producing curriculum that engages our students while speaking to the realities of their career needs. Our relatively small History department offers gender-based courses from five professors, more than many other larger departments, and these courses attract both female and male students. We also house the leading international journal, *Gender and History*, which employs two work-op students every semester. I therefore will have a pool of first-class students from which to draw research assistants. Over the years, virtually all of my research assistants have gone on to post-graduate programmes in History, Women's Studies, Education, Archival and Museum Studies, and others. Their graduate supervisors have commented upon the excellent research skills they have developed at Vancouver Island University. Katrina Ackerman, as noted above, undertook post-graduate work in abortion access in Canada, and it is my great pleasure to consult her on this topic.

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Books

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Melissa Haussman. *Abortion Politics in North America*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2005.

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Consuming Modernity: Gendered Behaviour and Consumerism before the Baby Boom, co-edited by Dan Malleck (UBC Press, 2013), 304 pp.

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“The Historiography of Canadian Health Care: an update,” *Acadiensis* 26 (1997) 2

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“Alcohol as Medicine”; “Canadian Advertising Regulations”; “Dominion Alliance for the Total Suppression of the Liquor Traffic”; “Francis Stephens Spence”; “Homewood Retreat”; “Keeley Institutes”; “Leslie Enraught Keeley”; “Stephen Lett”

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“Justice through Strength and Courage: Television and North American Cold War Childhoods in the 1950s.” Hawaii University International Conference in Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, Honolulu, January 2020 (co-written by Katharine Rollwagen).

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“Dr Frances Oldham Kelsey & Thalidomide,” Hawaii University International Conference in Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, Honolulu, January 2018.

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“Letters to Dr Kelsey: Thalidomide and the Quest for Good Science in the Nuclear Age.” Alcohol, Tobacco & Drug Use History, Policy and Regulation Symposium, Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, November 2015.

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Chair/Commentator, Session on Second Wave Feminism, Western Association of Women Historians Conference, Sacramento, May 2015.

“Gender, Spirits and Beer: Representing Female and Male Bodies in Canadian Alcohol Ads, 1930s-1970s,” co-written by Greg Marquis. Canadian Society for the History of Medicine. Congress of Learned Societies, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, 2012.

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Invited Panelist, "Nursing History Scholarship: Editor's Forum," Canadian Association for the History of Nursing [CAHN], University of Toronto, 2008.

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"Teaching Alcohol & Drug History to Undergraduates Roundtable," Canadian Historical Association, Univ. of Toronto, 2002.

Invited Plenary Discussant, Hannah International Conference on the History of Mental Illness, University of Toronto and McMaster University, 2001.

Commentator, "Female Alcoholism and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome," Conference on Historical Perspectives on Alcohol and Drug Use in America, 1700-1997, College of Physicians and Surgeons, Philadelphia, 1997

Commentator, "Determining Dress in Toronto, Montreal and Winnipeg in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries," CHA, Brock University, St. Catharine's, 1996

"Freedom and Addiction: Gender Representation in North American Alcohol and Tobacco Advertising, 1920-1950," American Historical Association. Pacific Section. Maui, 1995

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"The Portrayal of Women and Men in Beverage and Tobacco Advertising." Lecture Series. Centre for Research in Women's Studies, Univ. of British Columbia, 1994

"Gender Differences in Drug/Alcohol Use and Misuse." Clinical Challenges in Substance Abuse: Third Interdisciplinary Conference for Health Care Professionals. Greensboro, NC, 1993

"Historical Perspectives on Women and Alcohol Abuse." Women's Committee of the Governor's Council on Drugs and Alcohol Abuse, State of North Carolina. Durham, NC, January 13, 1993

"Contemporary Issues in Women's Health: An International Perspective." Global Forum Series, Center for International Studies, Duke University, 1992

"The Female Alcoholic: A History." Alcohol and the Feminine Spirit: Women's Center Seminar, Duke University, 1992

"Oh, Lord, Pour a Cordial in her Wounded Heart: The Alcoholic Woman in Victorian and Edwardian Canada." Canadian Historical Association, Kingston, 1991

"The Alcoholic Woman in the Victorian Period." Center for Canadian Studies, Duke University, 1991

"The Homewood Retreat: Family Motivations for Commitment and the Dynamics of Social Redundancy." Historical Perspectives on Aging Workshop, University of Ottawa, 1991

"The Bitter Cup: The Alcoholic Woman in Victorian Canada." Hannah Chair Lecture Series on Gender and Medicine, University of Ottawa, 1991

"The Homewood Retreat 1880-1920." History Department Colloquium, University of Guelph, 1990

"Women and Alcohol, 1840-1920." Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science & Technology, University of Toronto, 1990

"Psychiatric Treatment of Alcoholism." Luna Society for the History of Medicine, Toronto, 1990

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"Adventures in Maritime Quackery: The Keeley Institute of Fredericton, NB." Canadian Society for the History of Medicine, Windsor, 1988

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"The History of Medicine." Social Science Council of New Brunswick, Fredericton, 1986

"The History of Drug Addiction in Canada." Nursing Association of New Brunswick, Fredericton, 1986

"Because there is Pain: The Discovery and Treatment of Alcoholism in Victorian Canada."
Canadian Society for the History of Medicine, Guelph, 1984

"The Aristocratic Vice: Drug Addiction and the Homewood Retreat." Canadian Society for the
History of Medicine, Vancouver, 1983

"The Treatment of Addiction in the 19th Century." 3rd Kingston Conference on the History of
Science, Technology and Medicine, 1983

"Psychiatrist and Patient: Dr Stephen Lett of the Homewood Retreat." History Department
Colloquium, Queen's University, 1983

"The London, Ontario Asylum for the Insane." 2nd Kingston Conference on the History of
Science, Technology and Medicine, 1981

Non-refereed Contributions:

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“Richard Maurice Bucke.” November 2019

“Sir William Osler.” August 2018

“Sir Sandford Fleming.” April 2018

“Justice through Strength and Courage: Television and North American Cold War Childhoods in
the 1950s” [co-author Katharine Rollwagen], Arts & Humanities Colloquium, Vancouver Island
University, Spring 2020.

“Dr. Frances Kelsey: Women’s Health Warrior,” Canadian Federation of University Women of
Parksville, Qualicum, British Columbia, February, 2018.

“Letters to Dr. Kelsey: Thalidomide and the Quest for Good Science in the Nuclear Age,” Arts &
Humanities Colloquium, Vancouver Island University, February 2017.

“Dr. Frances Kelsey: From Cobble Hill to the F.D.A.,” Retired Physicians Luncheon, April
2017.

“Bridging the Generation Gap: Changes & Challenges to Volunteerism,” Zonta 2016 District 8
Governors Seminar, September 23, 2016.

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Vancouver Island, November 24, 2014.

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Commentator, “20th Century Canadian Obesity,” CHA, UBC, June 2008.

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