

Bilingual Women of History discussed at the Morrin Centre

SHIRLEY NADEAU
SHIRLEY@QCTONLINE.COM

A fascinating panel discussion about Bilingual Women of History was held in College Hall at the Morrin Centre last Saturday afternoon. Writer Ann M. Little of Colorado State University, researcher and teacher Lorraine O'Donnell of Concordia University, and historian Alex Tremblay Lamarche discussed their work, moderated by historical and literary writer Britta

Gundersen-Bryden.

Ann M. Little, who specializes in the history of women, gender and sexuality, is the author of *The Many Captivities of Esther Wheelwright*. Her presentation focused on the life of this amazing woman, who was born in 1696 into a strict Puritan family in Maine and who, after being taken captive at the age of seven by Wabanaki Indians and French-Canadian raiders, was transported to Quebec City and eventually became

an Ursuline choir nun. Her mother tongue was English, and as a child she learned the Wabanaki language and French. Wheelwright was elected Mother Superior of the Ursuline Order one year after the British Conquest. She ensured the order's survival and even prosperity under anti-Catholic imperial rule, and is their only foreign-born Mother Superior.

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Photo by Shirley Nadeau

Ann M. Little, Alex Tremblay Lamarche, Lorraine O'Donnell and Britta Gundersen-Bryden were the guest speakers at the first of two panel discussions on Quebec's Bilingual Women.



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Alex Tremblay Lamarche spoke about women as the architects of social networks between the elite Anglophones and Francophones in Quebec City from 1760 to the early 20th century. Many of the wives and daughters of the British officers were well-educated in French, and were able to establish friendly relations with wealthy local

French-Canadians. Some of the charming British officers even dared to marry some of the local French girls (a Catholic girl marrying a Protestant!). These women were the guardians of their language and culture for their children. A group of French- and English-speaking women founded the Quebec Ladies' Morning Musical Club in 1891. This club became the modern-day Club Musical de Québec.

Last, but not least, Lor-

raine O'Donnell gave a presentation about the life of multilingual social activist Lea Roback. She was born to Jewish parents in Montreal, but the family moved to Beauport, near Quebec City, when she was only six months old. At home she spoke Yiddish, English and French and was raised in a very open culture of reading, learning and communicating. In 1919, she went to work at the British American Dyeworks factory

in Verdun (Montreal), where the harsh working conditions had a profound effect on her. Roback studied French and taught English in Grenoble in 1925, and returned to New York City where she briefly worked as a sales clerk before she went to Berlin to study German and became a member of the Communist Party. She returned to Montreal before World War II and became an organizer of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. In

1937, she led 5,000 women on strike for better wages and working conditions. This was one of the first and most noteworthy union struggles to improve working conditions for women in Canada.

Following a question and answer period, the four speakers mingled with members of the audience over a glass of wine.

A temporary exhibit featuring the lives of many of the women discussed may be visited at the Morrin Centre

during regular hours.

On May 18, at 7 p.m. there will be a discussion on Bilingualism and Diplomacy with guest speakers Allisor Arellas-Vogel, U.S. Consul General in Quebec City and Margaret F. Delisle, a prominent figure in Quebec politics; hosted by Rachelle Solomon. Contact the Morrin Centre at 418 694-9147 or visit morrin.org/women-femmes to reserve a seat.