

# History finally recognizes Katherine Hughes

Feisty Edmonton Catholic accomplished much, but fit into no one's mould

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THE CATHOLIC REGISTER

**R**adicals have to fight their way into the history books. Ninety years after her death, Katherine Hughes is finally winning that battle.

Hughes wasn't the usual sort of radical. She began her life and career as a solid contributor from within Canada's Catholic establishment. She was one of the founders of the Catholic Women's League.

She paved the way for the Catholic Church Extension Society (now Catholic Missions in Canada) as a teacher on the Akwesasne Reserve, setting up the Canadian Indian Association in 1901 and organizing aid to newly-arrived Ukrainian immigrants in northern Alberta. She wrote biographies of two Canadian bishops.

In addition to her work within the Church, Hughes held down influential, important jobs as private secretary

Joachim's Parish Hall in Edmonton in 1912. But by the time the organization went national in 1920 she was viewed with alarm and suspicion for consorting with Irish revolutionary Éamon de Valera and writing a book that argued for Irish independence.

"If you want to set it up in pluses and minuses, you would say this is a woman whose life started with the telltale signs of success only to then throw it all away," Ó Siadhail told *The Catholic Register*.

#### FOUND MEANING IN LIFE

"But there's another reading of the story — that this is a woman who found meaning in her life. The only person who could judge whether the price she paid for that was too high was Katherine Hughes herself. But essentially, she found new meaning in her life."

Hailing from a middle class, Prince Edward Island family of Irish Catholics, Hughes had begun her life as a conventional Canadian imperialist. Her first book was a biography of her uncle, Halifax Archbishop Cornelius O'Brien.

"O'Brien was a member of the Imperial Federation League. He was an out-and-out imperialist and saw that Canada's place was within the empire



Edmonton Catholic journalist Katherine Hughes is the subject of a new biography by Irish Studies professor Padraig Ó Siadhail, *Katherine Hughes: A Life and a Journey*.



In addition to her work within the Church, Hughes held down influential, important jobs as private secretary to Alberta Premier Arthur Sifton and then the first archivist for the province. She was one of the founders of the Canadian Women's Press Club, on the scene even before such famous names as feminist activist Nellie McClung and Anne of Green Gables author Lucy Maud Montgomery.

As a writer she had plays produced on the stage and books reviewed in *The New York Times*.

Despite her remarkable career, Hughes has mostly been forgotten over the last century. A new biography by Padraig Ó Siadhail, an Irish studies scholar at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, gathers a decade of research into 377 pages to repair our faulty memory. *Katherine Hughes: A Life and*

*'Some people won't like her. Some people will see her as a troublemaker.'*

Padraig Ó Siadhail | author

*a Journey* came out in December from Penumbra Press.

As a pioneering woman journalist for the *Edmonton Bulletin* and a social activist on behalf of immigrant women and native families, Hughes might have been celebrated by feminist scholars, except that she opposed women getting the vote.

Hughes might have been remembered in Canadian Church history. She established the first branch of the Catholic Women's League in St.

perial Federation League. He was an out-and-out imperialist and saw that Canada's place was within the empire, as was Ireland's, though people had to be treated fairly within that," said University of St. Michael's College historian Mark McGowan.

Living in London, England, from 1913 to 1917, working for the Government of Alberta's Office of the Agent General, which recruited immigrants for the frontier, Hughes abandoned her imperialist roots and discovered her Irishness, according to Ó Siadhail.

"Once she gets involved in the Irish stuff, there is a bit of a downplaying of her involvement in Catholic projects," Ó Siadhail said.

#### IRISH FIREBRAND

Hughes's reputation as an Irish firebrand even tarnished the reputation of her sister, Lauretta Kneil. Kneil came out of the CWL's 1920 founding national convention as the national organizing secretary, responsible for growing the movement and establishing branches from coast to coast.

"There was a storm of objection against this lady (Kneil) being engaged on so important a work while her sister, Miss Hughes, was sowing the seeds of sedition throughout the Dominion," a New York priest told the *Irish World* newspaper after Hughes died.

Ó Siadhail argues that Hughes has been ignored by Church historians and historians of Irish immigration in Canada because of her Irish nationalist, anti-imperialist politics in the last decade of her life. That part of her story doesn't fit with the usual pattern of Irish immigrants assimilating into the pro-empire anglophone majority, he said.

Hughes was ignored by feminist

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scholars and historians of the women's movement because her anti-suffragette opinions put her at odds with the story of women's struggle to gain the vote.

#### DOESN'T FIT

"The templates that they (feminist scholars) have are for white, English-speaking, Anglo-Saxon Protestants on one side and on the other side French-speaking, Catholic women in Quebec. Somebody like Katherine Hughes doesn't fit into either group," Ó Siadhail said.

Most Canadian Irish in the early years of the 20th century were not ardent nationalists. The *Canadian Freeman* newspaper out of Kingston, Ont., characterized the Irish republican movement as "cranks and socialists and maniacs," Ó Siadhail said. The *Catholic Register* under editor Father Alfred Burke was staunchly imperialist. Irish Canadians volunteered in great numbers to fight for the British cause in the First World War.

But Hughes hasn't been written out of Irish-Canadian history simply because she doesn't fit an assimilationist view, said McGowan.

#### EASTER UPRISING

In fact, there was a lot of variety in how Irish Canadians viewed an independent Ireland, especially after the brutal suppression which followed the Easter 1916 uprising. The same *Canadian Freeman*, which had been so dismissive of Irish nationalism before the war, published Hughes's book *Ireland* in 1917.

Though Hughes may have been an outlier in Irish Canadian politics, McGowan is happy to see her finally given a

full treatment in Ó Siadhail's new book.

"She is exceptional, but that having been said she represents part of a minority," McGowan said. "If I want to remember Katherine Hughes, I want to remember her as perhaps one of the pre-eminent female journalists of her time."

Ó Siadhail is aware of how exceptional Hughes was.

"Certainly Hughes was a way, way out ahead of most Irish Canadians," he said. "It's clear that that made figures within the Catholic establishment, the anglophone Catholic establishment in Canada, very uneasy."

#### OPENED THE DOOR

As a Catholic activist and organizer, Hughes opened the way for an outpouring of lay involvement in the Canadian Church in the 1920s and '30s that included the Antigonish Movement, the Prairie co-operative movement, Catholic Action and the *jeunesse* movements among students and workers in Quebec.

Hughes remained single all her life. She moved around a great deal. There are no diaries and no great body of letters in which she explains herself. It may be she's been left out of history because she's not an easy subject to research and document.

Even though he spent years researching his new book, Ó Siadhail is aware there can be no easy explanation of Hughes or of her contributions to Canada, Ireland or the Church.

"Some people won't like her," Ó Siadhail predicts. "Some people will see her as a troublemaker."