

Did the Montreal Ladies Archery Club really exist?

by Gabriel Martin

Gabriel Martin has a master's in French studies with a specialisation in linguistics (University of Sherbrooke, 2020). His research interests centre on Quebecois French lexicon, toponymy and sociolinguistic depictions of gender. He is a co-author of Femmes et toponymie (Women and toponymy) (Éditions du Fleurdelysé, 2019) and is currently finalising the Petit dictionnaire des grandes Québécoises (The little dictionary of notable Quebecois women), a collection with a popularising mission due to be published in 2021.

The cover of a recent children's book titled *Nos héroïnes* (Our heroines), written by Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette and beautifully illustrated by Mathilde Cinq-Mars, features an illustration of female archers in late-Victorian-style clothing. The back-cover copy opens with this punchy paragraph:

The first sports club for women in Quebec was the Montreal Ladies Archery Club. The women met secretly in a field of wildflowers on St. Catherine Street. The year was 1858. No one remembers them today. That's generally what happens with women's history.¹

The book's creators are evidently following in the footsteps of the numerous historians who have made major efforts over the last fifty-plus years to depict women more equitably in their work. The appeal of their book will no doubt be obvious to educators eager to offer children diverse representations of women capable of instilling a sprinkling of feminism in minds of all ages. However, from a historical-critical perspective, what it inspires above all is a question: Did the Montreal Ladies Archery Club really exist? A review of the information available in secondary literature combined with an examination of primary sources will give us our answer.

Although it was purportedly founded in the mid-nineteenth century, there are no published references to the Montreal Ladies Archery Club until more than a century later. What seems to be its first mention appears in the first edition of *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, published in 1985. The *Encyclopedia* lists it in passing as an example of the increasing emancipation of women in the Canadian sports world during the 1850s:

The 1850's witnessed a change in attitude towards women engaging in sport that was also aided by changes in sporting attire. Female participation in fox hunting, the Ladies' Prince of Wales Snowshoe Club (1861), the Montreal Ladies Archery Club (1858), rowing regattas, figure skating championships and foot races at social picnics was evidence of growing emancipation.²

In the decades following the *Encyclopedia's* publication, from the 1990s to the present day, numerous works have made mention of the Montreal Ladies Archery Club with a founding date of 1858. Sources ranging from specialist monographs³ to a history journal article⁴ and a master's thesis⁵ have all relayed the same limited set of information, often citing influential work by M. Ann Hall, a pioneer in historical research on women's sports. Yet an examination of her writing reveals that she only mentions the archery club

in passing, indicating that the rather far-fetched elaborations sometimes made with reference to her work cannot be attributed to her. Hall offers the following:

One of the earliest known sport clubs for women was the Montreal Ladies Archery Club, formed in 1858. It had its own practice ground on St. Catherine Street and held regular meetings and annual prize competitions.⁶

But what is the basis of her assertions here, and are they accurate?

Titbits in Montreal newspapers from 1858 provide a breadcrumb trail of information. A recurring advertisement in the *Montreal Herald and Daily Commercial Gazette* reminds readers that members of the Montreal Archery Club – note the absence of ‘Ladies’ in the name – meet every Wednesday on a practice ground located on East St. Catherine Street.⁷ The advertisement is signed by William Henry Brehaut, a member of Montreal’s Anglophone middle class who worked as a lawyer and clerk of the peace.⁸ The archery club’s rulebook, preserved in the collection of the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions, reveals that Brehaut led the group under the title of master archer, assisted by a mixed-gender team of twelve managers.⁹ The club’s membership was therefore mixed rather than exclusively female, though this doesn’t preclude it from being one of the first sports clubs in the country to accept women.

In light of this important clarification, how are we to interpret the participation of the women in an archery club in 1858? Did their membership represent a brazen defiance of social norms requiring bravery and rebellious zeal? Were they hoping to bring an end to patriarchal hegemony? Such a perspective on their part would certainly be surprising, and projecting our contemporary worldview onto them can surely only result in an anachronistic framing. It’s more likely that in taking part in a high-precision activity such as archery, the women of this elite club were encouraged by prevailing Victorian-era ideas to participate in genteel and graceful pursuits, preferably in the company of men from polite society. The possibility that their involvement conferred significant social prestige would also explain why the composer Henry Prince dedicated a piano piece (*The Arrow Flight Galop*) to them in 1859.

In summary, the Montreal club’s female archers certainly did exist, but their membership entailed power sharing with their male counterparts. These privileged women thus marked the beginnings of a long process of Canadian women gaining autonomy in and through sport. Their entitlement to recognition as significant figures in the country’s historical memory therefore remains in-tact, without the need for a single shred of mythologization.¹⁰

[Caption: Title page of a piece of music dedicated to the female archers of the Montreal Archery Club (Henry Prince, *The Arrow Flight Galop*, Boston, Oliver Ditson & Co., 1859).]

Notes

¹ ‘Le premier club sportif féminin au Québec est le Club des archères de Montréal. Les femmes se réunissent secrètement dans un champ de fleurs sauvages, rue Sainte-Catherine. C’est en 1858. Plus personne ne s’en souvient. C’est souvent ce qui arrive avec l’histoire des femmes.’ Anaïs Barbeau-

Lavalette and Mathilde Cinq-Mars, *Nos héroïnes* (Montreal: Éditions Marchand de feuilles, 2018), back-cover copy. See also pp. 32–33.

² Peter L. Lindsay, 'Canadian Sports History', in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, Pat-Z (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1985), p. 1745. In September 2020, the quoted passage still appears verbatim in the online version of the article, last updated in 2016 (<https://www.encyclopediecanadienne.com/en/article/sports-history>).

³ Barbara Schrodt, 'History of Sport in Canada', in *Foundations of Canadian Physical Education, Recreation, and Sports Studies*, 2nd ed. (Madison: Brown & Benchmark, 1995), p. 65; M. Ann Hall, *The Girl and the Game: A History of Women's Sport in Canada* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 7; Don Morrow and Kevin B. Wamsley, *Sport in Canada: A History* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 157.

⁴ Gilles Janson, '1810-1895: L'Entrée des femmes dans l'arène sportive', *Cap-aux-Diamants*, no. 113 (Spring 2013): 12.

⁵ Catherine Côté Cyr, *Des activités physiques et sportives pratiquées par les femmes au Québec: Témoignages et collections (1880-1974)* (master's thesis, Université Laval, 2014), p. 75.

⁶ M. Ann Hall, *The Girl and the Game: A History of Women's Sport in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), p. 14.

⁷ The advertisement, dated 6 August 1858, was published multiple times over several months. See, by way of example, W[illiam] H[enry] Brehaut, 'Montreal Archery Club [August 6, 1858]', *Montreal Herald and Daily Commercial Gazette*, 25 November 1858, p. 3.

⁸ Pierre-Georges Roy, 'La famille Brehaut', *Bulletin des recherches historiques* 45, no. 5 (May 1939): 149–150.

⁹ Anon., *Rules of the Montreal Archery Club, Adopted 15th May, 1858 with Instructions on Archery* (Montreal: J. Starke & Co. 1859) [ICMH no. 62457].

¹⁰ In the context of recognizing women's historical contributions to the region's heritage, it seems fitting to pay homage to the female archers of Montreal within the toponymy of Quebec. See Sarah Beaudoin and Gabriel Martin, *Femmes et toponymie: De l'occultation à la parité* (Sherbrooke: Éditions du Fleurdelysé, 2019), *Historielles* 1, pp. 84–85.