

WISE Celebrates Canadian Queen of the Hurricanes

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Author Crystal Sissons treated WISE to a ride through the life of Canadian aeronautical engineer Elsie MacGill on Nov. 13 at the University of Ottawa.

Sissons, who works at the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, spent the last ten years researching and writing her new book *Queen of the Hurricanes: The Fearless Elsie MacGill*.

Elsie was a woman who wore many hats. “Our activities in STEM are just part of the story, not the whole story,” noted WISE president Ariadni Athanassiadis.

Born in 1905, Elsie was an aeronautical engineer and a wartime celebrity for mass-producing Hawker Hurricane planes to fight in the Battle of Britain. She was also a feminist, who fought for equal rights and economic independence for women.

Her feminist influences came from her suffragette mother and grandmother. Elsie’s mother was also the first female judge in B.C., showing Elsie that she could have any job she wanted. Elsie chose electrical engineering, and became the first woman to graduate from that program at the University of Toronto.

Elsie’s first job was at a car factory in Michigan. When the factory switched to making airplanes, she realized that she would need more training to keep up with this rapidly changing technology.

Elsie dived into aerospace engineering at the University of Michigan. After contracting polio she continued to publish and design aircraft while recovering the use of her legs. Once she had recovered Elsie continued her studies at MIT.

By the time World War II broke out, Elsie was one of Canada’s top aeronautical engineers. She was well-placed to design and run a factory that mass produced airplanes in Fort William, now Thunder Bay, ON. After the war ended she worked as a private aeronautics consultant.

During her studies and early career Elsie didn’t have time to notice sexism. When she became more famous she started to notice it. She objected to the term “woman engineer”, and didn’t like how journalists focused on her childhood and battle with polio, things they would never write about her male colleagues.

In spite of some discrimination, she had very positive relationships with her male colleagues. “She knew men and women could work together to do incredible things,” said Sissons.

Elsie became an advocate for putting more women in positions of power, and contributed to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada in 1967. When a sub-discipline of female engineering was proposed by a university professor who claimed that real engineering was too hard for them, Elsie was a vocal opponent. She also advocated for abortion at a time when it was illegal. “She said it was a private matter between a woman and her doctor” said Sissons.

Elsie died in 1980, but her memory lives on in the Northern Lights Award and in the Elsie MacGill Foundation, made up of both engineers and feminists.

Elsie's story is not unique. Many other women throughout history have worked in STEM, but we don't know about them because they didn't keep detailed personal records. Sissons encouraged women in STEM today to think about what they will leave behind for future historians.

"There are many silences, but there are a lot of stories out there," said Sissons. "I know there's a lot of hunger for these stories."

Amelia Buchanan is a journalism student at Algonquin College with a bachelor's degree in Biology from the University of Ottawa. She is interested in communicating science to non-scientists. She blogs about urban wildlife at <http://labbenchtopyarkbench.wordpress.com/> .