

**Margaret Sibella Brown**  
**A Nova Scotian Bryologist**

Born: March 2, 1866

Died: Nov. 15, 1961

Field: Botany, specializing in bryophytes

Margaret Sibella Brown achieved an international reputation for her work on the taxonomy and ecology of bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) at a time when women in science were relatively rare. Her foray activities extended well beyond Nova Scotia, and the region, as she developed her expertise working with other internationally recognized botanists. The impact of her work in Nova Scotia is notable given that she identified, preserved and catalogued an extensive collections of these poorly known plants. Her collections are now housed at the E.C. Smith Herbarium at Acadia University as well as other herbaria in NS and NB, as well as other important repositories in Canada, England and the United States.

Brown received an honorary MA from Acadia University in 1950, when she was 84 years old.

### **Biography**

Margaret Sibella Brown, born on March 2, 1866 to Richard and Barbara Brown of Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia, shared her arrival into this world with sister Elizabeth. The twins were the eldest to three other siblings, Anne, Richard, and Lillian. Their father, Richard, was the general manager of Cape Breton's Sydney Coal Mines and the first elected mayor of Sydney Mines. Margaret was educated at the Anglican School for Girls in Halifax and the Anglo-German Institute finishing school in Stuttgart, Germany (1883-84), Margaret continued her studies in London, receiving tutelage in French and china painting. She returned to Nova Scotia in 1885, and attended the Victoria School of Art and Design where she later served as directorate on the board and became an instrumental member of the education committee. In 1934, Margaret received an honorary diploma from the institution, recognizing her efforts to secure funds for the new campus, the *Nova Scotia College of Art and Design*.

Margaret was elected president of The Halifax Floral Society of Nova Scotia and at the time of her death at the age of 95 she was the oldest living member of the *Nova Scotian Institute of Science*. She was also a member of the Sullivant Moss Society, currently known as the American Bryological and Lichenological Society.

## Career

Margaret's bryological career began under unusual circumstances during World War I while in the position of honorary secretary of the Halifax Branch of the Canadian Red Cross Society. Dr. Robert Thomson of the University of Toronto asked Margaret to organize the Nova Scotia contribution to the collection of Sphagnum moss for use in the production of field dressings and ambulance mattress stuffing. This experience rekindled a previous interest in botany. At the end of the war she was able to pursue her interest in Bryology. Her mentors were Dr. Nathaniel L. Britton and his wife, bryologist Elizabeth G. Britton, founders of the New York Botanical Gardens. As Mrs. Britton's assistant, Margaret traveled with them on various expeditions, including one to Puerto Rico and Trinidad in 1922. Margaret scoured Nova Scotia for specimens and also collected samples elsewhere in Canada including the Bruce Peninsula, Ontario and the Selkirk Mountains in British Columbia. She also undertook scientific expeditions to Spain, the French Riviera, and Jamaica where she often wintered.

Margaret corresponded and exchanged moss collections with many eminent bryologists across the globe.

In 1932, Miss Brown published her first paper in *The Bryologist*, in which she described a new species of moss, *Entosthodon neoscoticus* M.S. Brown, collected from rocks at Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia. Her most comprehensive work is the "Liverworts and Mosses of Nova Scotia" in which she documents 127 hepatics and 367 mosses for the province (*Proceedings of The Nova Scotian Institute of Science*, 1936, Vol. 19, pt. 2, pp.161-198). Six more publications followed in *The Bryologist*. One article was entitled, "The Mosses from Syria" and is based on material collected there by W.B. Evans.

In 1950, encouraged by her student John Erskine, Margaret donated her bryophyte collection to Acadia University. In recognition of the significance of her gift, on May 16th of that same year, Acadia conferred an Honorary MA upon Margaret, who was in her 84th year. Never having sought a college degree, she resolutely declined Acadia's offer of an honorary PhD, accepting the MA instead. John Erskine wrote of Margaret's influence on the botanical community of Nova Scotia in *An Introduction to the Moss Flora of Nova Scotia* (1968) stating, "During the next twenty five years [ca. 1922-1951] Miss Margaret S. Brown carried on the work [the study of Nova Scotia mosses], spending her summers in many parts of the province, and anyone who has learned anything about mosses in this quarter-century owes much to her knowledge and kindness."

### **Collections**

The Margaret S. Brown collection at the E.C. Smith Herbarium at Acadia University consists of 1779 mosses, 858 hepatics and 53 lichens. Margaret's specimens are also deposited at the *British Museum, Kew Gardens, New York Botanical Gardens, Dalhousie University* (flowers and grasses), the *New Brunswick Museum*, the *Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History* and the *Devonian Botanical Garden* at the University of Alberta.

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