



BOOK RELEASE

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Grace Helen Mowat and the Making of Cottage Craft Diana Rees with Ronald Rees

Grace Helen Mowat looked upon traditional rural crafts — knitting, weaving, and rug hooking — as cash crops for the straitened farm women of Charlotte County, New Brunswick. In 1911, unmarried and with limited means, she commissioned a handful of women to make rugs according to her designs, which were then sent to Montreal. The Arts and Crafts movement was in full swing, and the rugs sold quickly. Less known until now is that behind Cottage Craft is the story of an entrepreneurial woman of vision and remarkable resolve that entered the male-dominated business world during a time of financial recession and carved out an enduring livelihood for the economically challenged women in rural Atlantic Canada.

Supplied with wool gathered from Charlotte County farms, spun at a local mill, and dyed with colours that matched those of the landscape, handcraft workers were instructed to knit, weave, or embroider the scenes, forms, and activities they saw around them. Motifs or subjects that were from catalogues and magazines were discouraged. For women living restricted lives on small and sometimes isolated farms, Grace Helen Mowat provided not only much-needed ready money but, just as important, a means for self expression uncommon in the lives of most farm women.

From a shop in the front parlour of the family farmhouse, where blankets, mitts, sweaters, and rugs were sold to summer visitors to St. Andrews, the business moved into town, first to a large Loyalist house and then, after Grace Helen Mowat's retirement, to a converted lobster plant on the waterfront in Market Square. In the hands of the Ross family since the 1940s, the business inevitably has changed. The knitters today are as likely to be in Newfoundland as Charlotte County, but everything is still handmade, and the focus remains on Maritime motifs.

Today, knitting is a booming pastime, enjoying a resurgence of interest in popular culture, spawning books and a brisk online trade in wool and knitted goods — even trade fairs. In Canada, Cottage Craft has long held a strong reputation for its fine wool and the fine craftsmanship of the people who weave and knit its quality materials.

DIANA REES was born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. She was a graduate of the University of Saskatchewan and of the College of Librarianship of the University of Wales. Until mid-life, she was a teacher and a professional librarian. Her first love, however, was fabrics and design, and in 1983 she became the owner and operator of the Sea Captain's Loft in St. Andrews, a store that specialized in imported fabrics and woollens from Great Britain and Ireland. Adjacent was Cottage Craft, a business that, since its inception in 1913, has employed hundreds of knitters,

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weavers, and embroiderers from Charlotte County and, in recent years, from more distant places in central and eastern Canada. After her retirement in the late 1990s, Diana embarked on a biography of Grace Helen Mowat and a history of Cottage Craft. Diana died in 2007, leaving a manuscript to be completed by her husband Ronald Rees.

RONALD REES was born in Wales and from 1964 until 1985 taught historical geography at the University of Saskatchewan. After moving to St. Andrews, he became an adjunct professor at Mount Allison University. He completed Diana's work on the book following her death.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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