

Mazo de la Roche

How some historical sleuthing uncovered a famous author's Orillia connection

BY TRISH CROWE-GRANDE

WHEN IT comes to Canadian literary icons, Orillia is synonymous with Stephen Leacock, his summer home on Brewery Bay and his most well-known novel, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. However, there is another Canadian writer who achieved widespread literary fame and had an Orillia connection. That writer is Mazo de la Roche.

De la Roche was one of the most prolific writers of her day, penning 23 novels, more than 50 short stories and 13 plays from the 1920s to the 1950s. Her most popular creations were the Jalna series of novels, which sold about 10 million copies in 193 English-language editions and 92 foreign-language editions. The only other female writer of Mazo's time, living in Canada, who enjoyed comparable success was Lucy Maud Montgomery, author of the Anne of Green Gables series. The only male writer in Canada of comparable stature was Leacock himself.

Born in Newmarket, Ontario, on Jan. 15, 1871, Mazo "Maisie" Louise



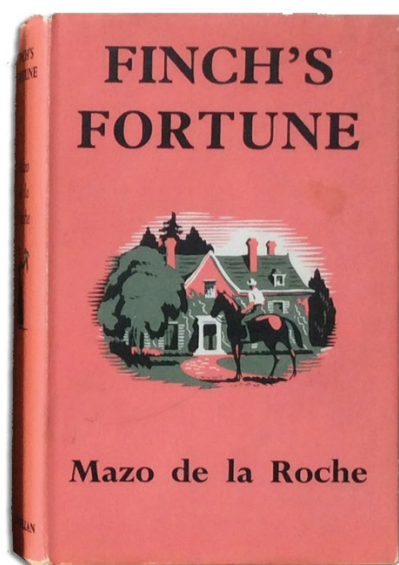
Mazo de la Roche: Enjoyed popularity on a par with Stephen Leacock.



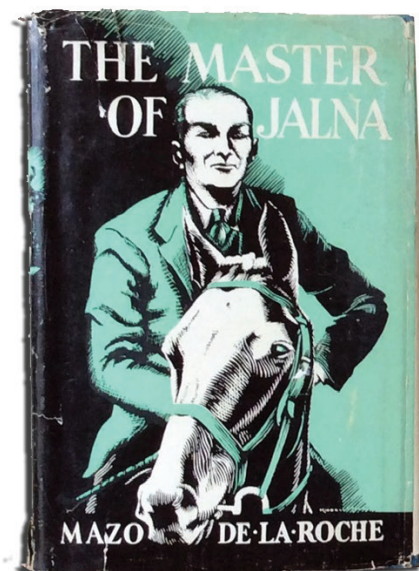
Roche was the only child of Alberta Louise Lundy and William R. Roche. The family moved frequently due to her mother's chronic health issues and her father's job as a travelling salesman. While she spent much of her life in the Toronto area, Mazo de la Roche — as she was known later in life to reflect her French ancestry — spent four years of her childhood in Orillia, a substantial amount of time for a child between the ages of 9 and

15. This connection, however, was not discovered until more than 40 years after her death.

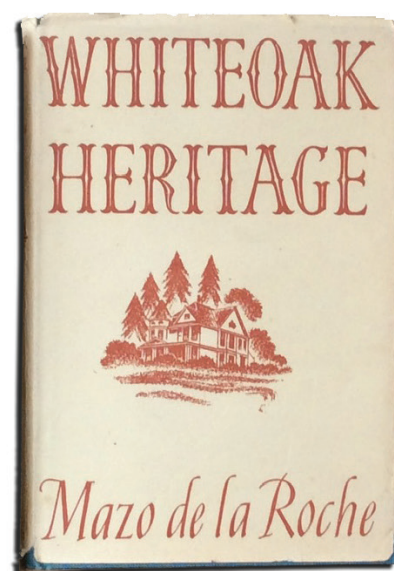
That's when Barrie writer Heather Kirk, who had extensively researched de la Roche's life, released her 2006 biography *Mazo de la Roche: Rich and Famous Writer*. Kirk was the first de la Roche biographer to document the author's Orillia connection through her research at the Simcoe County Archives, the Orillia Museum of Art & History (OMAH) and the Orillia Public Library. Two years later, as reported in *The Packet and Times*, Kirk came to Orillia as a guest of OMAH's History Committee to share her re-



1932



1933



1940

search on de la Roche and her family's Orillia connections.

Before she wrote the 2006 biography, Kirk had written three articles on de la Roche but had not once during her research seen any mention of the novelist's Orillia ties. Nor had Kirk encountered any references to Orillia in three biographies of de la Roche and in the novelist's own autobiography, *Ringling the Changes*. So, after Kirk's two books about de la Roche were published in 2006 and 2007, she met with OMAH volunteer Donald Jenkins to plug some gaps and pinpoint where de la Roche had actually lived. Kirk outlined her research in a 2008 article *Mazo in Orillia: A Long and Winding Detective Story for Literary Historians*.

Despite de la Roche's decision to remain mum on her Orillia ties, the burgeoning city must have left an impact on her. In 2018, Esmée Rees (de la Roche's adopted daughter) came to meet with OMAH Executive Director Ninette Gordy to donate a collection of her mother's original publications, including the Jalna series as well as a few other personal mementos. This donation has been documented and included in OMAH's archive.

In light of this donation, it's appropriate to review all the research done

to date by Kirk and Jenkins, as well as to revisit de la Roche's life, specifically her time in Orillia and how her world-famous Jalna series, about the fictional Whiteoak family who lived in southern Ontario between 1854 and 1954, might have subtly reflected her time in Orillia.

Kirk's research in various archives led her to census and tax records that verified that de la Roche's maternal grandparents, Daniel and Louise Lundy, had lived in Orillia for four years from 1888 to 1894 when de la Roche would have been between 9 and 15 years of age. After the Lundys eldest son Frank was killed in a workplace accident in Newmarket, the family moved to Orillia where Lundy was able to secure the general superintendent position of a new factory being built in the area — The Longford Manufacturing Co. — the Thompson brothers' wooden ware factory. The business, which manufactured pails, wooden ware and barrels, was known locally as the Pail Factory. It was located near the waterfront on Front Street at the bottom of Coldwater Road, as listed in the Orillia Industry Archives (1886-1901).

Reports unearthed from the Orillia Times (1890) by Jenkins regarding the Thomson brothers' factory shows

that, during Daniel Lundy's time as foreman, the factory flourished.

Concurrently, Lundy's son-in-law, William Roche, was moving in between jobs and living alone in Toronto. This triggered Kirk to question where de la Roche and her mom were living during this time. In the past, de la Roche had visited her maternal grandparents regularly as they were a welcoming couple and provided a comfortable place to live. In later years, the author reflected on this time warmly. So it was in 1888 that Alberta Lundy Roche and her daughter first moved up to Orillia, staying with the Lundys, who lived at 40 Coldwater Road (a copy of the Deed dated 1886 indicates Lot 3 north-east corner of Albert and Coldwater, with a duplex structure owned by the Ironsides). The Lundys provided young Mazo and her mother with the emotional and financial security they needed at this time.

Located in the OMAH research file is a copy from the Simcoe County Archives (entry #913 in the Orillia Public School records) which indicates on August 29, 1892, Mazo, age 13 years, and the daughter of William living on Coldwater Street, was registered to attend a private school. A photocopy of an Orillia Daily Times

article dated April 24, 1889, states that a Miss Lafferty opened a private school opposite the English Church School house on 14 Coldwater Road West, which now is the office of Jill Dunlop, the local MPP. In her autobiography, de la Roche stated she attended a “small private day school kept by a gentle and charming Irish woman,” who was believed to be Miss Lafferty.

Not only did young Mazo have the Lundy connection in Orillia, she also had a connection with the Clements. When reflecting on de la Roche’s life, her close relationship to Caroline Clement, her first cousin (once removed), must be noted. Caroline grew up with Mazo as she too lived with the Lundys during a turbulent childhood that saw her father James dealing with unsteady employment in Dakota Territory where the family lived. Caroline’s mother, Martha, was the younger sister of Mazo’s grandmother and, due to financial difficulty, had dropped off Caroline in Orillia prior to returning to her husband in the United States. The two young girls were raised as sisters by the Lundys, who provided a steadying influence.

Mazo and Caroline embarked on a lifelong friendship in 1886. In 1889, Caroline’s parents and brother eventually moved to Orillia from the United States and Caroline joined her family to live a few blocks from the Lundys. With James Clement’s experience as a carpenter, Grandpa Lundy got him a job at the Pail Factory.

During the summers, the family made one-day excursions by ferry from Orillia to Strawberry Island in Lake Simcoe where Mazo and her cousin would enjoy making their own adventures. During the rest of the year, Mazo and Caroline attended the little private school run by a Miss Cecile Lafferty, later Mrs. Gertrude Dryer, wife of Orillia’s chief of police. In the fall and spring, the girls would take long walks and played the usual childhood games like hide-and-seek. In the winters they joined their friends to skate on the lake. During this time, Mazo started to develop an



A colour sketch of a woman horse-jumping signed by de la Roche.

interest in acting and writing based on her joy of imagining. Together with Caroline, she would write and act out plays for their family and started a newspaper, each copy written out and sold to family members for two cents a copy. It was the beginning of Mazo’s writing career with Caroline close by her side.

Mazo de la Roche and her mother lived with the Lundys from 1888 (while her father was living alone in Toronto) to 1890 (when she and her parents moved briefly to Galt) and from 1892 to 1894, when at the time the Lundys moved from Orillia back to Toronto. Over those four years, de la Roche’s father would show up periodically in between multiple sales jobs.

Donald Jenkins, a retired lawyer in 2008 and an OMAH volunteer at the time, had independently spent many hours searching for documents relating to de la Roche’s Orillia years. The social column of *The Orillia Times* of April 5, 1894, stated that “Mr. W.R. Roche, of this town, commercial traveller for a Montreal clothing firm, went to Winnipeg on Saturday

last.” Two weeks later, an article titled *High School Report*, in the *Orillia Times* of April 19, 1894, pinpoints “M. Roche” as being in “Form C” of the “Orillia High School”. In what is believed to be an average standing: (a number which was based on the weekly examinations for three months ending March 25) an “51%” average makes it appear that de la Roche was barely scraping by.

Heather Kirk acknowledges Jenkins in her article *Mazo in Orillia: A Long and Winding Detective Story for Literary Historians*, for his sourcing and interpretation of 19th-century tax records to determine the modern addresses of where de la Roche and her extended family, the Lundys and the Clements, lived. It appears that after time spent at the Coldwater residence, the Lundys lived at today’s 29 Albert Street and then moved to today’s 82 Albert Street North, which now houses apartments. Both these houses are large, two-storey red-brick houses that could easily accommodate an extended family and well away from the lakeshore where the Pail Factory was located. Caroline’s family, the

Clements, lived for three years at today's 153 Laclie Street and then for two years at today's 52 Front Street South. The Front Street address was adjacent to the Carmichael Carriage Works. These are somewhat smaller two-storey redbrick homes but located relatively close to Lake Couchiching and the Pail Factory. Both the Lundys and Clements rented their accommodation rather than owning. In research files at OMAH, deed copies indicate the Clements' landlady on Laclie Street was Miss Isabella Gilchrist while the Lundys' landlord at 29 Albert was William Ironside, another Orillia carriage maker.

In another Kirk article, *Caroline Clement: The Hidden Life of Mazo de la Roche's Collaborator*, she estimates that between 1888 and 1890, young Mazo and Caroline along with their families would spend summer holidays on Strawberry Island in Lake Simcoe. Until the First World War, the tiny island was a popular summer destination for Orillians because they could take a brief ferry ride there for a single-day excursion. Upon discovering a cave, the girls loved to play Robinson Crusoe and Friday. The big boat that young Caroline and Mazo and their family took to Strawberry Island was probably owned by William Thompson of the Pail Factory. The steamboat Geneva often took picnickers from the Thompson brothers' factory on such excursions on Lake Simcoe. Donald Jenkins during his research located a tinted photo of the impressive, double-decker Geneva at the dock in Barrie.

For Mazo de la Roche, the Orillia years of her childhood seem to have been relatively happy, despite her mother's chronic illness and her father's wanderings. For her, Orillia represented the beginning of her sisterhood with Caroline Clement and the welcoming, secure home of her beloved grandparents, Daniel and Louise Lundy. It also represented the academic and social challenges of a private grammar school and co-educational public high school. Kirk feels Orillia may have provided a potential model of a family that could have



Mazo de la Roche her life-long friend Caroline Clement in the 1930s.

influenced the creation of the fictional wealthy Whiteoaks of Jalna – with the Lundys and Clements themselves, including their time in Orillia, providing the principal sources. But Donald Jenkins suggested that the wealthy Thompsons, who owned the 10,000-acre Dalton Ranch 20 miles outside Orillia and ran a successful business that included production of wooden pails made of white oak – may have inspired de la Roche.

Though it was never made clear

by Mazo de la Roche who the true inspirations for her successful Jalna series were, her legacy to the Canadian literary scene is evident in the praise and recognition she received during her life. OMAH is grateful for Esmée Rees's kind donation of first publications of not only the Jalna novels but also some of her mother's other work. Upon recent perusal of these books, various correspondence has been found that documents the far reach de la Roche's novels had. In a 1935

copy of her novel *Finch's Fortune* is a type-written letter from the London legal firm Curtis Brown Ltd., advising the author the novel had been published in Finland (Jalnan Perinto). Enclosed in a 1934 publication of her book *Beside a Norman Tower* is a letter dated November 15, 1955, from F.A. UpJohn of the publishing house The MacMillan Company of Canada Limited requesting Mazo and Caroline's presence at a reception to meet with booksellers at The King Edward Hotel in Toronto.

On a personal note, in the 1942 edition of her novel *The Two Saplings* is written in pencil the signature of Mr. Wakeford Roche. Inside a 1939 edition of *The Sacred Bullock and Other Stories of Animals*, a folded handwritten note and map, written in pencil and unsigned, was located. It could very well be the handwriting of Mazo de la Roche. At this time, Mazo and Caroline were living in England and the note indicates that the map with names such as River Wye, Hay and Hereford was made by a Dr. Brett Young when they lunched together and it was for a scene for some characters in the novel.

In a 1957 edition of Mazo's autobiography, *Ring in the Changes*, handwritten in pen, is the dedication: "Esmée, with dearest love, mommy. And for David too." Who David might be is unclear, but folded inside this book was a photocopy of a black and white photo, of two women – Mazo and Caroline, along with an unidentified man – with the note, "Hi Esmée, thanks for looking into this for us. Call me if you recognize the man in the photo. Thank you, Audrey."

Also in OMAH's collection are some personal items such as a cigarette box circa 1930 of polished, gold-coloured material with a push-type lock and engraved in an angle "M de la R" on the bottom with bits of tobacco still inside. Also donated was a silver-plated candle holder in three individual pieces marked M & W #@3550, circa 1890, around the time Mazo lived with the Lunds in Orillia. It appears that Mazo



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Undated photo of Mazo de la Roche with a canine companion.
Below: Pencil sketch by de la Roche of an old man, possibly her father.



enjoyed drawing as sketches done by Mazo de la Roche, though not dated, were included in Esmée's donation to OMAH. There is a lovely colour sketch of a woman horse-jumping that has been signed by the author as well as a pencil sketch of a handsome bearded gentleman – perhaps Mazo's father?

A few months after Mazo de la Roche passed away, Caroline Clement made arrangements with the Sander-son Monument Company of Orillia to provide the distinctive granite cross

that marks de la Roche's grave in the cemetery of St. George's Anglican Church in Georgina, next door to Sibbald Point Provincial Park on the south shore of Lake Simcoe, near Sutton. In the 1920s, it was a popular place for Mazo, her mother and Caroline to vacation in the summer. Years later, Caroline Clement was buried next to her long-time companion.

It is interesting to note that near where de la Roche and Clement were laid to rest, Stephen Leacock is also buried – two celebrated Canadian literary icons with strong Orillia connections.

RESOURCES:

Kirk, Heather. *Caroline Clement: The Hidden Life of Mazo de la Roche's Collaborator*. Spring 2005

Kirk, Heather. *Mazo de la Roche: Rich and Famous Writer*. Copyright ©2006

Kirk, Heather. *Mazo in Orillia: A Long and Winding Detective Story for Literary Historians*. Fall 2008

Orillia Museum of Art & History: Contributors to Ms. Kirk's Research Jean Sarjeant (2003) and Donald Jenkins (2008)