**Ancient History with Miss Collip**

**by Gabrielle (Prior) MacDonald (1962)**

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| A sunny June morning in class in our familiar Forest Ave. school, 1960. It was the class in which we habitually drew Miss Collip into long stories about the Romans and even more, about her beloved Greeks. She considered the Athenians to be members of “a nobler culture ...” In those busy seasons of the early sixties we debated the appeal of Pat Boone over Elvis, (or not) while the Beatles had not yet quite arrived. We also discovered that our small serious Latin teacher could be drawn into ‘wasting’ class time while filling our silly heads with all kinds of exciting stories about classical heroes, philosophers, and dramatists. We were a little mortified to discover later that she knew very well we were ‘leading her on’ - into the details and drama of Greek and Roman history, which most of us actually enjoyed in the end, even the boys in the back of the room. What a nice person she was. Not “attractive” as we conventionally think about these things, but someone who managed to overcome her own shyness and was gentle with nervous students ... the hesitant, the not-so-bright, the ones who probably felt that ‘dead’ languages should remain so and spare the rest of us. Ditto for classical history. But despite patches of awkwardness we valued her genuine concern for her students and her enthusiasm for her subject.  That June someone must have been planning a combination prank-cum-class present for Miss C., - or Rita, as she was sometimes affectionately called – though not to her face. I think in Gr. 11 at that time of year we were already getting vibes that growing up and moving on were coming all too soon. Maybe we needed to express whatever feelings of fun, gratitude, and prank-style boldness we could muster before June shut its honeyed doors on us once again. Still, to this day I don’t know where our great gesture originated – although I have a few suspicions (Warren ??).  On that morning, about half way through class, there was an unusual bustle at the classroom door and in came a seemingly unescorted, unidentified, large cardboard box. Heavens. What was this? In class? Some people must have known, because Miss C. was graciously escorted down an aisle between the desks and presented with the box. By this time distinctive small mews were also coming out of it. Small furry ears were seen very shortly after. Out, out, coming OUT, they announced. Well, what I should have said earlier is that Miss Collip was a devoted cat person – and most of her students and staff friends knew it (see bio for her in the ‘Dedication’ to the Log,‘63 edition). She lived in a little white house on Mohawk Ave., about half a block from the school, and it was absolutely FULL of cats. Still, despite her passion for kittens, we had no way of knowing how Miss C. would react to this nervy breech of classroom decorum, even if it was June, and even if the kittens were mewing in a way that said in their opinion it should definitely be lunchtime.  As it happened, all went well. Not conventional history class stuff, but colourful. Miss C. was smiling, fussing a bit, but clearly she was delighted. She prepared to make two exits. The first was a rapid straight-arrow trip down the hall to the office (we could hear her heels). She’d tell the office staff that she had an unexpected task which would require one further short absence \_ a simple box delivery. The Battle of Marathon could wait. Flanked by the big shady maples alongside the school, her second trip was hasty but happy - after apologies to us (to us!) and thanks, and promises to return, off she trotted, out of the school and along Forest Ave. A quick right turn sent her pattering down Mohawk - bound for home with a box full of kittens.  I don’t know who was more surprised that morning, Miss Collip or her Greek and Roman history crew of maybe 15. What I remember now is the fun, even happiness that the surprise gift brought to all of us - to those in the room who recognized that we really had broken through that classic line of schoolroom separation – the slight, uneasy distance which separates students even from a teacher they like. Adults are not kids, after all, and these adults still assigned our essays, and set and marked our tests. But we had created, however briefly, what we’d now call a window. A window of connection. And we zoomed through it with enthusiasm. As for Miss Collip, certainly she was thrilled, or if she wasn’t, she had fooled us once again. But I like to think it was real affection and excitement we saw as we lingered in the classroom, picturing Miss C. as she made her way south with her newly extended family. It was reported that she did come back to school that afternoon ... conscientious as always. How did she get them all fed and comfortable so quickly, I wondered. But Miss Collip had been looking after cats, large, small, and of many backgrounds, for a long time. They were in good hands.  And indeed we were in good hands. Earlier that same year Miss Collip had asked about five of us who seemed to like languages if we’d like the opportunity to study Greek. It would be taught outside our regular school curriculum but was still recognized by the board. It only needed a teacher willing to put in the time and a few eager takers. I suspect that Miss C was not paid for these early morning extra classes, although she may have been, and I don’t think we were charged for our blue textbooks. We were excited by the opportunity and most of the five of us remained faithful to our 8:15 am classes for a full three years. Among other things Greek would give us an extra two ‘papers’ or credits for our Gr. 13 graduation exams. But more than that it gave us an avenue into that serenely cerebral civilization (though with its fair share of wars and intrigues) which would stay with us through university and beyond. Needless to say we did not forget Miss C’s generosity or dedication either. And on the theme of that same generosity, I’ve noticed with gratitude to the Alumni Committee who restored to us the Student Newspapers of the 40s that Miss Collip was fostering and teaching good students after hours as far back as 1944. If you check the “High-light” for Oct. 1944 (we don’t have to pay the 10 cents luckily), p. 2 will give you a partial column on graduating student Jean Rose, 1944 scholarship winner in Latin and Greek. She too was taught ‘after school’ by Miss Collip ... and enthusiastic recognition is given to both of them by the student journalist.  For those who wonder if this brief tale which started with its spinster teacher and her little white cottage and her cats is just a bit too much like a fairy tale ... well, I agree it is. Like a happy fairy tale with a happy ending ... all those years ago. At this point I can’t quite tell from googling the Port Credit streets whether the white house is still there or if it’s been gobbled up and displaced by modern townhouses. Not a fairy tale fate. But my 11A classmates who chose Ancient History that year will, I’m sure, remember June ... the box of kittens at least was no fantasy. There is something special about memory and anecdotes and sharing stories. Pranks too have a lasting appeal, it seems. And memory surely is the reason why those of us who still live within driving distance of the schools – the Forest Ave. - Mineola cluster of three – still cruise by from time to time, watching for familiar landmarks and wary of gaps in the old neighbourhood pattern. It’s comforting to find that the physical locales of our memories are not totally erased.  And so – a memory or two and a tribute, Miss C. Thank you.  P.S. Finally, a backward glance at a different kind of history. Not everybody knew that Miss Collip was the sister of the gifted biochemist, J. Bertram Collip. Rita’s brother, always known as Bert, was the crucial third person in the team of four who discovered and refined insulin: Banting, Best, Collip and Macleod, in Toronto, 1921-22. A bit like his sister, Bert was shy if tenacious, and his work has only been fully recognized recently, although Macleod chose to share the proceeds of the 1923 Nobel Prize with Collip, as Banting did with Best. There were rumours of Miss Collip’s distinguished brother even among us fifties/sixties students. Now, with so much material available online, it is easier to trace these family ties – but still something of a challenge. I did find a fascinating photo of the young J. B. Collip and family in his first car: Bert sits in the driver’s seat, while his father, plus Rita, still a young girl, plus aunt Minnie Vance are squashed into the back seat. Riding majestically in the front passenger seat, however, untroubled by others and with a most imposing hat, is the mother, Mahala [Mae for short] Vance Collip. Note that everyone (see photo, below) in the car but one is looking at the camera. But it’s clear that Mae is not about to be distracted by rude intrusions from the street. Eyes front, she occupies the place of honour. I wonder if Rita ever got to ride in the front seat.  Biography: Rita E. Collip was born and went to school in Belleville, Ontario. She did her BA at Trinity College in the University of Toronto, followed by OCE. Later she completed her M.A. at Trinity College, in 1945. She taught in Kenora, Ontario, then at Essex H.S. She came to Port Credit in 1941, mid WWII, and is quoted as saying she liked her students, or most of them, and had no desire to teach anywhere else. She retired in 1963. After retiring she told me she was doing some part-time teaching in a private school where she expected both staff and students would value her skills in classical languages and history.  Online sources record that Miss Rita Collip died in 1971, having given more than four decades of exceptional teaching to her students.  *Requiesce sapiens magistra et honorata.*  The Collip family, Belleville, ca. 1912  The Collip family, Belleville, ca. 1912 |