

Biographies

Cairine Wilson (1885-1962)

Politician, Senator



Senator Cairine R. Wilson.
(National Archives of Canada/C-008408)

Cairine Reay Mackay Wilson had the honour of being appointed Canada's first woman Senator. She was named to the position by her friend Prime Minister Mackenzie King four months after a ruling in the [Person's Case](#) determined that Canadian women were persons and therefore eligible to sit in the Senate. None of the [Famous Five](#) women who initiated the case were appointed to the Senate.

Born in Montreal, Cairine Mackay was raised in a Scots-Canadian family that was both wealthy and influential. While visiting Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier and his wife in Ottawa she attended a gala in the ballroom of Rideau Hall - where she met her future husband. In 1909 Cairine

married Liberal MP Norman Wilson and settled in Rockland, Ontario and eventually Ottawa.

After focusing on the raising of her eight children she decided to change the course of her life on getting some advice from her doctor: "My marriage brought great happiness, but deprived me of practically all outside companionship and for ten years I devoted myself so exclusively to the management of three houses and the care of my children that a blunt doctor finally brought me up with a start. Never had he seen a person deteriorate mentally as I had, he told me, and from an intelligent girl I had become a most uninteresting individual."

Cairine Wilson became active in a variety of organizations, including the Ottawa Women's Liberal Club. She was one of the founders of the organization and served as president for three years. On February 15, 1930 Cairine Wilson was somewhat shocked to be appointed Senator Wilson. She served in the Senate until her death in 1962, gaining recognition for her dedication to causes such as supporting refugees and the League of Nations. Cairine Wilson became the first female president of the League of Nations Society in Canada. In 1949 Senator Wilson became the first Canadian woman to be a delegate to the UN General Assembly.

Discover more

Online:

- [Cairine Reay Mackay Wilson - Celebrating Women's Achievements](#) Biography from the Library and Archives Canada.
- ["First Woman Senator: Cairine Reay Mackay Wilson"](#). An essay by student Carrie Lau from Markham, Ontario. Carrie's essay won prize in the 2005 contest *Who is YOUR Canadian Heroine?*, which was sponsored by heroines.ca and Dundurn Press. The essay is available online as a PDF document.

Films/Video/Television:

- Careers and Cradles. [National Film Board](#) production, 1947, 11 min. A documentary about the changing roles of Canadian women, including Cairine Wilson and Thérèse Casgrain.

Books:

- Kealey, Linda and Joan Sangster, ed. *Beyond the vote: Canadian Women and Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, c. 1989.
- Knowles, Valerie. [First person: A Biography of Cairine Wilson, Canada's First Woman Senator](#). Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1988.