

Martha Black and the First World War

Kathy Jones-Gates

Independent Historical Researcher

Abstract: The First World War is conventionally perceived as a masculine undertaking. While it is acknowledged that women served as nurses during the great conflict, the numerous ways in which women contributed to the war effort are not often recognized. The people of the Yukon committed themselves totally to the war effort, both through their fundraising efforts and volunteerism. Martha Black is the epitome of this effort. The wife of Commissioner George Black, she organized fundraising efforts and contributed her home and her service to the war effort. When George enlisted and took a company of 500 Yukon volunteers overseas to fight for the Allies, Martha fearlessly accompanied him to England. From the spring of 1917 to August 1919, she volunteered for the Canadian Red Cross, administered the Yukon Comfort Fund, and visited the wounded, sick, and homesick Yukon men. Serving as a Yukon ambassador, she lectured with great optimism, far and wide in Great Britain, about the Yukon, its history, and geography, using her own lantern slides for illustration. This article is part of a special collection of papers originally presented at a conference on “The North and the First World War,” held May 2016 in Whitehorse, Yukon.

“I AM GOING. The ship leaves in an hour. There may be danger, but— who cares? I can face anything with my loved ones at my side.”¹

And so, in January 1917, Yukon’s Martha Munger Black launched herself into one more adventure in her already adventure-filled life. Defying the stereotypes of women for that time period, she was a strong-willed and independent; very little stood in her way when Martha wanted something.

American-born Martha Munger-Purdy had come to the Klondike from Chicago in 1898. Both Martha, her brother George Munger Jr., and a cousin Harry Peachy, came north with a party that was bankrolled by her father, George Merrick Munger. The party was under the direction of George Munger’s representative, Captain Edward Spencer.² En route, Martha became aware that she was pregnant again but was determined to continue to the Klondike. She climbed the Chilkoot Pass and made her way to Dawson City by boat, arriving on 5 August 1898.

The party built a small log cabin on the hillside overlooking Klondike City, otherwise known as “Lousetown,” and she gave birth to her third son there on 31 January 1899. She casually announced the arrival of baby Lyman in a letter to her parents from Dawson, 10 February 1899.³ In early August, George Merrick Munger, Martha’s father, arrived to take Martha and the new baby back to his ranch in Kansas. They departed from Dawson on August 14.

Back in Kansas she lost no time presenting a lecture about the far northland to interested community members. Her first paper was titled “A Few Dawson Prices” and read before the Eureka Kansas Farmers Institute.⁴ This was Martha’s first venture into becoming a Dawson and Yukon tourism booster. Her second paper lauding the Klondike was read a few weeks later to the same august body. In December 1899, while living at Catalpa Knob, her father’s Kansas ranch, she published the first of her numerous small booklets that focused predominantly on Yukon themes. It is titled “Letters from Alaska and the Northwest” using extracts from letters she had sent home describing her Klondike journey the previous year.⁵

In July 1900, longing for her new-found northland, she returned to Dawson City with her eldest son Warren. She became a cook for a group of sixteen miners on her father’s mining claims on Gold Hill. Her parents, accompanied by her young sons Donald and Lyman, followed in 1901 bringing machinery to establish the first Yukon two-stamp quartz mill,

and a sawmill.⁶ Although her father owned the businesses, he established Martha as manager so that she might have income as a single mother raising her three young sons alone in the North.

Returning to Kansas in August 1903, Martha filed for divorce from her first husband, William Amon Purdy, in October 1903.⁷ He was now living in Hawaii and did not contest the divorce. The divorce became final in June 1904, with Martha having custody of her three sons. It left both of them free to marry once again. Will Purdy married Anita Christal on 26 July 1904 in San Francisco.⁸ One week later, in Dawson City, Martha married a young Dawson lawyer named George Black.

George Black was from New Brunswick. With a party of fellow New Brunswickers, he had come north in 1898 via the White Pass route. Along the way, the party learned that most of the Klondike goldfield mining claims were already staked. So they decided to try their luck along the Hootalinqua River. In August 1899 George and an older and more experienced partner, Sam Lough, staked the first discovery claim on a creek they named Livingstone.⁹ By October 1900 George decided that he'd prefer to return to his profession as a lawyer, so went to Dawson to establish his practice. The marriage between George and Martha took place on 1 August 1904 at Mill House near the Ogilvie Bridge, Dawson City.¹⁰

Martha became socially active and supported her husband's political ambitions. George was elected to territorial council three times, and finally appointed to the position of Yukon Commissioner after the federal Conservative election win in 1911. As chatelaine of Government House, Martha embraced the role of community leader and first lady of the Yukon.

It is likely that George's aunt, Katherine Black, who was living temporarily in Dawson City, influenced and encouraged Martha to establish Yukon's first chapter of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) on 6 March 1913. Katherine had established the first IODE chapter in the British Empire in Fredericton, New Brunswick, on 15 January 1900.¹¹ Twenty-one older, married women attended the first meeting of the new Dr. George M. Dawson Chapter, and Martha became its first regent.¹² The timing was fortuitous. Three more chapters were established in Dawson and one in Whitehorse during the war years.

War was declared on 4 August 1914. In Dawson, the announcement was made in the theatre on 6 August with George Black reading out the official bulletin. "England is in a state of war with Germany."¹³ The first call for women's aid came quickly from the president of the national chapter of the IODE, when she wired Dawson City requesting their aid

in raising funds to equip a hospital ship to be presented to the admiralty in London. The first collection taken by the local chapters netted \$6,450 in just four days. In response to the displacement of the Belgian people during the German invasion in August and September of 1914, the people of the Yukon offered money and clothing.

By the end of 1914, “it is estimated that the Yukon had contributed at least twenty thousand dollars toward the various national funds. While nearly seventeen thousand dollars had gone through the regular channels, there were many instances of private contributions direct to the offices of the various funds.”¹⁴ The Yukon’s fundraising efforts continued unabated throughout the war. In many instances, Martha and her IODE compatriots met to sew, knit, bake, hold dance parties and balls, and with the Yukon fully supportive, more than \$150,000 was raised by war’s end.

Martha was able to persuade the Duchess of Connaught, wife of the Canadian governor general, to donate socks for a raffle. Martha reported that,

Her Royal Highness very kindly sent me six pairs last winter which she had made on her knitting machine. Three pairs were raffled for \$25, and three pairs were sold for the same sum, making \$50 in all. Then the winner of the raffle returned the three pairs to me. I gave them to the Chapter and they in turn raffled them for \$100. So you see we got \$150 for the Royal gift, and felt very pleased with the result.¹⁵

Martha could see that George was growing more restless as the months passed. She hurled herself into war work—Red Cross, IODE, and completing two St. John’s Ambulance first aid courses—to be ready for the time she knew was coming. In her diary, she wrote: “George has just come in and told me he has to enlist—that he cannot stand it any longer, seeing our men go away, while he sits in his office and we have the comfort of this beautiful home.”¹⁶

In the fall of 1915, the two of them visited Ottawa where George pleaded his case to be allowed to raise a Yukon contingent. Shortly thereafter, the Yukon’s member of parliament, Dr. Alfred Thompson, notified George Williams, acting commissioner, that the recruitment of a company of volunteers for the “front” would not begin until the spring of 1916.¹⁷ A *Dawson Daily News* editorial lauded George Black for his proposal to raise a company of 250 volunteers from the Yukon. It observed that “he never does things by half measure, and though not having any military experience, his years living in the north serve him well in a military adventure.”¹⁸ The editorial added that Mrs. Black would

be missed because of her “gracious and tireless and most efficient efforts on patriotic lines.”¹⁹

Yukon recruitment was well underway by the time George and Martha returned from a winter trip in 1916 to visit Martha’s parents and sister, who were now living in California. They arrived on the steamer *Casca* the morning of 8 June. George, dressed in his military uniform, was pale and weak, still recovering from surgery to remove his appendix. After speaking to the waiting crowd, he and Martha joined students and other dignitaries at the public school to honour the volunteers from the two Dawson schools, which included Martha’s youngest son Lyman Munger Purdy, age seventeen. When Lyman enlisted, he lied about his age, stating that he was eighteen years old. George and Martha both stood proudly behind him as they posed for a photograph on the steps of the school.

On 9 June 1916, at 9:00 in the evening, the steamer *Casca* pulled away from the Dawson dock and headed up the Yukon River for Whitehorse, carrying the first and largest contingent, 120 men, that had thus far left Dawson to go to the defence of the Empire. Young Lyman Munger Purdy was among those departing. These men would be sworn in formally when they reached Victoria.²⁰ George officially adopted Lyman that October, in Victoria, and the teenager went to war as Lyman Munger Black (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Martha Black, George Black, and son Lyman Munger Black. Yukon Archives, George Black fonds, 81/107 #108

At the 1916 Dominion Day celebrations in Dawson's Minto Park, George was still recovering from his appendix surgery so Martha stepped in to speak in his place, implying her intention to go overseas with her husband and son. She added: "The Great War is a woman's war as well as a man's war. When peace comes the articles of peace will affect the women quite as vitally as they will affect the men, so that while we, because of our very sex, are not called upon to bear arms in a physical sense, yet we are daily called upon to bear the brunt of many a battle."²¹

On Thursday, 20 July 1916, the Dr. George M. Dawson chapter of the IODE held a fete celebrating Alexandra Rose Day in and on the grounds of Government House. It was at this event that the "Yukon Comfort Fund," another of Martha's brilliant ideas, was mentioned for the first time.²² She had suggested to the IODE chapters that some money should be placed in her hands to be used for the benefit of the Yukon men in the field and in hospital. It is estimated that well over \$2,000 was raised specifically for this purpose. In addition to special events like Alexandra Rose Day, and a reception attended by hundreds in early September, the commissioner's mansion was made available for meetings and special group events such as gatherings to sew or to knit socks.

Two months later an evening farewell reception was held at the Moose Hall for the departing George Black contingent. It began when Captain Black and the members of the company marched to the hall from the courthouse. Upon arriving, they lined up at the front in rows of twenty, and the ladies of the Dawson Chapter IODE presented each man with the Yukon crest in bronze, to be worn on their cap.

The George Black contingent, including George and Martha Black, departed on 9 October aboard the steamer *Casca*. Martha was the only female passenger. Despite several hours of continuous rainfall, a large crowd had turned out, including the Fraternal Order of Eagles (Dawson) Brass Band, and everyone sang patriotic songs and cheered them on their way.

On the trip upstream, Martha surprised the men on board by presenting each of them with a "Housewife," or sewing and repair kit, each one with the individual recruit's name stitched into it and painstakingly prepared for them by the IODE. They in turn had a surprise for her. After giving a speech of thanks on behalf of the men, Sergeant Major Tom Greenaway gave her a gold poke of nuggets, one from each member of the Martha Black Chapter.

The trip from Dawson to Victoria was made in seven days and seven hours; Martha assumed the role of purser for the dispersal of cigarettes

and other confections. The Martha Munger Black Chapter had also given her several yards of white linette to make an autographed quilt, which they intended to raffle off to raise funds for war work. The men helped her tear this fabric into four-inch squares, on which they signed their names. These were sent back to Dawson to be sewn into the quilt.

The quilt consisted of 508 squares, each with the name of a Yukoner who joined the colours (see Figure 2). The Martha Munger Black Chapter of the IODE worked for many months to assemble the quilt. When it was finished it went on display and a thousand raffle tickets were sold at twenty-five cents apiece. The quilt was large enough for a double bed, and in the centre were the names of Captain Black and other Yukon officers, and of Mrs. Black and other Yukon women in Red Cross or nursing work overseas. On 15 March 1917, three-year-old Mary Ross drew the winning ticket, number 173, which belonged to Mrs. Black. She was very proud of that quilt; many years later she gave it to Lyman as a wedding gift. Today it is in the collection of the MacBride Museum of Yukon History, in Whitehorse.

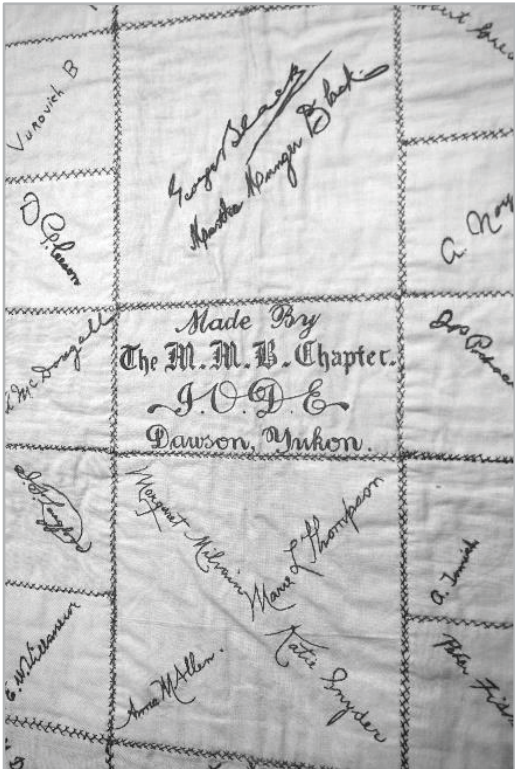


Figure 2. The Dawson IODE Quilt. MacBride Museum #72.1.39f. Photo Michael Gates, 2016

In Victoria, with George and Lyman away all day training at Willows Camp, and with no housework to keep her occupied, Martha was kept busy acting as unofficial godmother to the Yukon boys. She was also attending social functions, giving lectures, and taking more training in St. John's Ambulance work, First Aid, and Home Nursing. She went to lectures two and sometimes three evenings a week, and attended demonstration classes at the Jubilee Hospital.

In early January 1917 Martha departed for Eastern Canada a few days before the Yukon Company left Willows Camp for Halifax. Stopping in Ottawa en route, Martha petitioned everybody she could think of for permission to go to England with George. It all boiled down to receiving approval from General Bigger, Officer Commanding Transportation at Halifax, Nova Scotia. So she hurried to Halifax and saw the general, but Bigger was evasive: "But Mrs. Black, you wouldn't want to be the only woman on board a ship with two thousand men, would you?" Martha responded with her usual quick wit: "General Bigger, I walked over the Chilkoot Pass with thousands of men and not one wanted to elope with me." "Well, we'll see, we'll see!" was the only satisfaction she got.

General Bigger later took George aside and said: "Your wife tells me you want her to go to England with you. I have held back permission until I found out from you personally if you really want her. Some husbands prefer their wives to stay at home."²³ After meeting with General Bigger, George returned with the good news that she could go, so Martha was finally on her way—although George had to dig into his own pocket for the \$55 for her passage to England aboard the S.S. *Canada*. She was the only woman among the 1,500 troops. One month later, the Canadian government prohibited women and children from going overseas to join their men-folk.

They departed Halifax on 24 January. But it was not a pleasure cruise. It was an eight-day voyage and, according to the ship's captain, "the stormiest trip he had experienced on the North Atlantic in five years. The vessel tumbled about like a cockle shell for several days."²⁴ "I kept to my berth during the rough weather," she said, "sitting up only to make two pneumonia jackets."²⁵ Martha acted as a nurse, assisting the doctors on board. The adjoining stateroom to the Blacks' was set up as a sick bay where Martha could treat patients.

Upon arrival in Liverpool, England on 7 February, George and the Yukon contingent went directly to their training camp and Martha to London where she eventually secured a three-room apartment. She quickly volunteered with the Canadian Red Cross Society—Prisoners of

War Department—from ten until five every day, and as much later as one cared to work, as their work was never finished. Martha later said that she never worked as hard in her life as during her overseas years. She was also quick to quip that “it was better to wear out than rust out.”²⁶

After three months of arduous volunteer work in the prisoners of war department, the routine became disorganized by loss of Canadian mails, delays of prisoners of war letters, government regulations cutting the amount of food parcels in half, and an epidemic of measles (which meant double shifts). The strain was hard on her and during this period she fell ill with rheumatic fever and later with appendicitis.

She filled in her “spare” hours by doing YMCA canteen work, attending meetings and investigations of the Women’s Battersea Pension Board and sewing for the Red Cross. She was also busy administering the Yukon Comfort Fund and visiting wounded Yukoners in hospital. In-between that busy activity, she was giving lectures, writing letters to family and friends, and to two Yukon papers, the *Dawson Daily News* and the *Whitehorse Star*. She tried magazine writing, but when words escaped her, she set to work darning socks instead!

Martha and George, when he was able to come to London, took in all the sights of the bustling city. They attended Sunday service at Westminster Abbey. They visited the Tower of London, the Abbey, St. Paul’s Cathedral, and they even fed the penguin at the zoo.²⁷ Another Sunday she and George went out to Hampton Court, making the trip out on the Underground, reaching there about eleven o’clock and spending a beautiful day wandering about the grounds. In less than a month she had seen more of London than many of its residents might have seen in a lifetime.

But when she and George visited the House of Commons, he, being in khaki, was given a preferential seat, while she was whisked away to the ladies’ viewing area. She termed it a “cell” in which, from behind an iron grating, she was able to view the proceedings. “It’s rather curious,” she said, “how in Dawson you have to protect the women from the men; while over here they seem to find it necessary to protect the men from the women!”²⁸

However, being the wife of a prominent political figure opened the doors to many social opportunities that might not have been available to others. Martha viewed two Lord Mayor’s parades during her time in England; the first in 1917, from the “inside looking out” and the second in 1918 from the “outside looking in.” In 1917, the incoming Lord Mayor, Sir Charles Hanson, a former Canadian businessman, sent them tickets

to witness the parade from the balcony of the London Mayor's residence, Mansion House. The following year, Martha enjoyed the parade, which she watched from the street, as much as she had the first. She viewed the parade from the seat of a carter's horse-drawn wagon. This procession, which came at the end of the war, was a more joyous affair.²⁹

Martha's press pass also enabled her to hear Prime Minister Lloyd George deliver a speech in the House of Commons in April 1919. This time, she was not hidden behind a set of bars. On another occasion, she was a guest at Number 10 Downing Street, the residence of the prime minister. In April 1917 she attended a memorial service in Westminster Abbey in honour of the United States entering the war on the side of Britain.

She visited Buckingham Palace on more than one occasion. One time was for the investiture of her son with the Military Cross, while she looked on with pride. On another occasion, she was invited to attend a garden party given by the King and Queen to some 10,000 "war workers" at Buckingham Palace. The proceedings were delightfully informal, and everyone was impressed by the way in which their majesties moved about among the guests. Martha even got to chat briefly with King George V.

A third visit to Buckingham Palace came about through meeting the Queen's first dresser who, discovering that Martha was interested in everything she saw in London, asked if she would like to go through the palace. Through the Klondike's very own Colonel Joe Boyle, who was in great favour with the royal family, Martha obtained permission to do so. She was shown the Queen's boudoir, her breakfast room, and her private sitting rooms, while the master of the household had given permission for her to see the state apartments. It was a wonderful treat. Martha was eloquent in detailing at length the richness of the palace in a letter to her father: "Keep this letter," she wrote, "it will help to refresh my memory later on, when I try to recall what I saw this afternoon."³⁰

Through their acquaintance with Joe Boyle, Martha and George were, on a number of occasions, to meet Queen Marie of Romania. The first encounter occurred at a March 1919 reception at the Ritz Hotel at the invitation of Lady Perley, the wife of the Canadian high commissioner to London. It was the first distinctly Canadian event of social interest since the armistice. Because Boyle had become a close personal friend of the Romanian Queen, Martha, George, and their son, Lyman, were singled out for introduction.

While she delighted at the opportunity to mix with the upper crust of society, Martha was a lady with a very egalitarian nature. The day after that affair at the Ritz, she went to see her "Battersea Babies" — as she called

a fatherless family of boys and girls she had adopted for “the duration,” and took them a hamper of food and clothing. “It would be an antidote,” she said, “against any social elevation one might be tempted to feel after chatting with a queen.”³¹ The mother, Mrs. Gibbens, was Martha’s char-lady. Martha often provided her with a basket of food and clothes for the children. When Martha departed England she secured a better paying position for Mrs. Gibbens and the children at the home of one of her wealthy friends.

Being in London during wartime, Martha indirectly experienced the consequences of war: “Of course, we read and hear much of the food supply, and are told just how much we should or should not eat. Personally, even the rations are quite more than enough for me.”³² As time went on, the prices on many commodities inflated significantly. Food was rationed: Martha described using her entire week’s ration tickets to buy one fairly large chicken. “The first evening the chicken was baked with stuffing and gravy; the second evening the chicken was served cold; the third evening the same bird, or what was left of it was served ‘picked up’ on toast.”³³

Nothing brought the war closer to home than the air raids. It was a fearful and nerve-wracking sensation to know that sudden death was lurking in the heavens above. Martha later claimed she had endured sixteen of them, although in earlier publications she reported either twelve or fourteen raids. During these raids, the anti-aircraft guns went on firing for hours. The buildings trembled with the explosions, which broke windows but seldom destroyed the structures. The streets were pitted with craters. Fire engines sped up and down, with sirens wailing. The London searchlights, huge phantom fingers piercing the darkened sky, resembled, she thought, the Yukon’s northern lights without colour, and made her yearn for her northern home. What, she wondered, must it be like for their men in France, where the shelling never ceased?³⁴

Despite the Arctic winters she had endured, never had she suffered more from the cold than in London. In fact one Yukon soldier had told her that the only place he could find warmth was visiting the snake house at the London Zoo!³⁵ While there was always hot water for a bath, the houses were not often fitted out with central heating. “Tiny grates, holding a thimbleful of coal were expected to take the chill off the room. A Yukon stove was warmer and used half as much fuel,” she observed. Preparing for bed was a real ceremony. First she took a “Red Hot” bath, then put on a long-sleeved, high-necked flannel nightgown and bed socks, and crawled into a bed warmed by two hot-water bottles.”³⁶

One of Martha's duties was to visit convalescent hospitals to comfort the men who had been injured and maimed.

Men of the amputation club know well all that being visited while lying in hospital means, but one wonders do they understand, or can they ever understand the actual feeling of panic that falls upon many a hospital visitor. ... I dread the days when the call comes for me to visit friends or acquaintances in those hospitals. One feels so keenly the utter impossibility of saying or doing anything that can really reach down to the heart of the men who have given so freely of their all."³⁷

On one such hospital visit Martha was misdirected to the location of a hospital that was only a thirty-minute bus ride away. She finally arrived at the hospital doors wet and bedraggled from so much walking in the rain, carrying a heavy plant in a pot for one soldier.

Finally I was in the reception room, and looking at the clock saw that my journey had taken me just under FOUR hours. Then came the ordeal of going into the big ward. Gladly would I have taken the trip over again if that could have been escaped, but no, it must be faced. The ward was not a large one as I have since learned, only sixteen beds; some of the patients lying still and helpless in their suffering; others wheeling themselves about in hospital chairs; others sitting at tables playing cards or writing or reading, and others again in front of an open fire.³⁸

But the visits were not always so pleasant. On another occasion, she visited an English soldier "who had lost both legs and an arm, and had been blinded in battle. This was a result of major operations undertaken without the use of an anesthetic in a prison hospital."³⁹ Imagine the dread this must have fostered when thinking of her own son and husband facing the same fate in the battlefields!

A delegation of Yukon soldiers from the Yukon Company asked Martha if they could call her "Mother." She happily consented. Since she was the only Dawson woman they knew in London, the soldier boys came to her when on leave and made her accommodations their own home away from home. It helped her emotionally as she often did not know what was happening to her husband and son in France.

The Yukon soldiers shared family photos, lamented the absence of letters from home, and also asked her advice. Martha received many letters from her soldier “boys” that were “written before they went over the top, or after they had come through hell fire.” She claimed that “they were not literary masterpieces nor historical records but boyish letters of life in the trenches, letters through which ran a marvellous sportsmanship and a sublime acceptance of being a player in that game of death. I saved them all.”⁴⁰ Unfortunately, those letters no longer exist.

In addition to visits made by George to see her in London, she also made a number of visits to see him and their Yukon comrades at Witley Camp, south of London, where they trained and waited impatiently to ship out to France. Of these visits she said little, but the words of others reveal her can-do attitude. On her visit of 10 July 1917, Dawsonite Harold Butler wrote:

Last week we marched to Aldershot, to the ranges where all the big machine targets are. We enjoyed a pleasant surprise when Mrs. Black arrived on the ranges, and, when through shooting, Mrs. Black, like a real machine gun No. 1, sat herself down behind the gun and let go, and made a very high score.⁴¹

Another Yukoner, John Chambers, also described this scene, depicted in Figure 3:

Well, she sat down to the gun, laid it on the target, tapped it into correct position, and first burst, down goes all the ranging plates; second, taps the gun onto the target and blazes away 75 times and puts 64 on the bull. I never saw anything like it for a beginner. She seemed to be right at home.⁴²

Later in the year Martha returned to Witley Camp, along with the wives of men married while in England, to attend a Christmas dinner with 150 men. Turkey, goose, and all the trimmings were served. The Christmas dinner was considered a great success—the mess room was most profusely and elaborately decorated with holly, mistletoe, and other greens gathered by fatigue parties sent out for the purpose.

One of Martha’s tasks while in England was to administer the Yukon Comfort Fund—money that had been raised by the ladies of the IODE to aid the Yukon men while overseas. “Before Christmas,” she once wrote,



Figure 3. Martha Black at Witley Camp, 1917. Yukon Archives, George Black fonds, 81/107 #53

I did what I could to see that Yukoners in France, or here in hospital, were remembered by the Yukon Comfort Fund, but I am quite aware that many must have been overlooked as it was impossible for me to get all addresses. However, I did the best I could. All men ... who had come from the Boyle-Yukon battery or from the Yukon Company ... were remembered with ten francs and cigarettes. Besides that, I sent to the officers either cigarettes, pipes or cigarette holders, also a number of books and magazines to individuals, marking in each book: "From Yukon Comfort Fund; please read and pass on. Christmas 1918."⁴³

In cases of men separated from the brigades she sent cigarettes; and in some cases an "accepted cheque" where she could be approximately sure of addresses. "In many cases, the gifts were very welcome and most gratefully received."⁴⁴ The Yukon men received toiletries, cash or cheque, tobacco, and such sundries as candy, a homemade cake, indelible pencils, and writing paper. And socks! Oh how the Yukon men appreciated the socks the women sent from home—dry feet helped prevent trench foot, which was common among soldiers standing around in the water of the trenches for days at a time.

While she was stationed in London, she was frequently invited to give lectures, often illustrated with the glass lantern slides she brought with

her, about her home at the farthest reaches of the Empire. She travelled by train far and wide throughout Britain, giving hundreds of talks—the reported number seemed to grow over the years, after she returned home from the war. In her personal scrapbook from the war, the number cited was “over 200”; by the time she published her autobiography in 1938 that number, like the proverbial fisherman’s tale, had grown to 400! Similarly, the size of the groups she spoke to varied from one report to another (from 50 to 700 in one account, and from 200 to 800 in another). Whatever the number of talks, whatever the size of the audience, it is clear from the historical record that she spoke far and wide, and to audiences from all strata of society.

She spoke to munitions workers and convalescing soldiers. She spoke for the Red Cross, the Royal Geographical Society, and the United Empire Circle. She was once asked to make the Empire Day talk at the Lyceum using about forty or fifty of her Yukon slides. Another time, she addressed The United Wards’ Club of the City of London, the first women ever to have done so. She spoke to church groups and once toured Wales for three weeks for the YMCA, staying in the homes of families wherever she went. Of her Welsh tour, she later commented:

My most strenuous lecture trip was one lasting three weeks under the auspices of the Y.M.C.A., in South Wales, where the barren rugged Cambrians reminded me of the hills of home which flank the Yukon and Klondyke Rivers. It meant catching trains at all hours to all places, carrying heavy “boxes” of slides and clothes, blocks on end in all kinds of weather, and all kinds of accommodation, from the humblest to the highest, as my “hospitality” was provided.⁴⁵

She spoke, once, twice, even three times in one day, though she confessed that three times was too much for her. After returning from her trip to Wales, she was sick for several days as a result of the strain of the undertaking.

The content of her lectures varied, depending upon the occasion or the audience being addressed. Martha’s Lectures included topics such as: The Yukon: the Goldfield of Canada; A Trip to Klondyke; Canada; War Work near the Arctic Circle; A Talk on the States; The Romance of Canada’s Goldfields; and Work in the Yukon Diocese.

She must have been something of a curiosity—coming to London from the far reaches of the colonies. But she spoke eloquently and with pride of her northern home, and her wit was razor sharp. She was once

asked to give a talk at Church House in London on the “Missionaries of Yukon,” on behalf of Bishop Stringer. She was introduced to the audience in a very off-hand manner.

“My Lord Chairman, my lords, ladies, and gentlemen, if this be the way you usually treat women who are invited to address you I do not wonder suffragettes go around with axes over here.” The Bishop half arose, began to speak, but I continued, “My Lord, several times in London I have had to listen to you without interrupting when I should have very much liked to do so. Now please listen to me without interruption.” The audience of some five hundred applauded. I then expounded the theory of my basis of married life (harmony in religion, politics, and country), and continued: ‘And so, because I married an Anglican, I am one. But had I married a Fiji Islander I would probably be eating missionary now instead of talking missionary.’”⁴⁶

Although not one sound recording of her lectures is known to have survived, and the memories of her words at these lectures have long since faded into the distant past, we do have a detailed description of one of her talks. She began by quoting a stanza from Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “Our Lady of the Snows.” Of his description of Canada in 1897, Martha said that “no better description of Canadian sentiment or of Canada’s love for the mother country has ever been written than these words.”⁴⁷ She told her listeners of the great bounty of her adopted homeland. She described streams teeming with fish, abundant forests, and bounteous crops from one end of the country to the other. She spoke of the rich mineral resources and the endless herds of cattle.⁴⁸ And she spoke to the beauty of her adopted Yukon home:

Let not the traveler remain away to scoff because we are in the arctic regions, but let him come to be conquered alike by the magnificence of our scenery, the vastness of our golden territory, the charm of her floral offerings, the paradise she affords sportsmen, and the rest from the conventionalities of the world.⁴⁹

Then she spoke of her experiences during the Klondike Gold Rush—of the hardships endured, the challenges she faced, and the dangers overcome. She described the Chilkoot Trail and the journey by boat across numerous lakes and down the Yukon River for hundreds of

miles, facing the treacherous waters of Miles Canyon and the Five Finger Rapids. She described the rough and tumble gold rush town that had grown into a modern city with all of the conveniences of civilization, and of the systematic gold dredging of ground permanently frozen by the northern climate. She spoke of the Mounted Police, and the tragedy of the lost patrol to Fort McPherson. She also described how, when war was declared, the citizens of her tiny domain rallied to the Empire in numbers far out of proportion to its size.⁵⁰

Affirmation of her work as a naturalist and as a speaker came not long after her arrival in England. On the evening of 18 June 1917, Martha was elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. She was chosen, in part, for her many Yukon-themed lectures across Canada and the United States, but mainly for her work with the wildflowers of the Yukon and the Rocky Mountains.⁵¹

In August 1918 Martha received the alarming news that George had been wounded during the Battle of Amiens. This must have upset her, having seen so many terribly wounded and disfigured by the ravages of war, but George reassured her that it was "Nothing dangerous, just a slam on one side from a chunk of shrapnel and a Hun machine gun bullet through the leg—damnably annoying."⁵² George was evacuated to London on 12 August, and admitted to Royal Free Hospital then later to Canadian Convalescent Officers Hospital at Matlock Bath, Derbyshire, from which he was discharged 13 September. He was then sent back to Depot and rejoined his men on Christmas Day 1918. By then the war was over, and his unit was now occupying the German city of Bonn. Alone at Christmas, Martha joined friends in Brighton, Sussex.

George and his men returned to England in March 1919. Martha joined them at Seaford, where they were stationed, for the presenting of the regimental colours. She accompanied Lady Perley by car from London on 3 April to attend the ceremony. Martha would have been proud that Lyman was given the honour of being one of the standard-bearers. The regimental colours were commissioned by Martha with \$100 provided by the three chapters of the IODE in Dawson City and one in Whitehorse. Martha even sewed a few stitches into the banner herself.⁵³

These colours were brought back to Dawson in August 1922 by Governor General Lord Byng. They were placed in the Administration Building on display in the joint council chambers and court room.⁵⁴ On 15 August 1948, they were formally turned over for permanent display to St. Paul's Anglican Church. George Black was part of the Colour Party that received the colours from Commissioner J.E. Gibben. Martha Black was

also in attendance. The colours were conveyed to the church where they remain on display today.⁵⁵

Martha and George's time in England was quickly coming to an end. George was held back from returning to Canada with his men, to attend to legal matters related to demobilization riots in Kinmel Park, Wales. He departed for Canada on the SS *Caronia* on 25 June 1919. At the time, Martha was in France where she had been sent by the London-based Overseas Club and Patriotic League, to view military cemeteries and visit war-devastated villages to investigate restoration and reconstruction. The American Red Cross asked her to report on rumours that American graves were not being treated respectfully. Martha was able to report favourably on the condition of the cemeteries that she visited.⁵⁶ "I had a perfectly wonderful trip and saw a great deal of the devastated regions; I was three days between Lens-Arras-Vimy, and at the time Peace was signed [June 28, 1919] was wandering over the Vimy Ridge between that town, or the place where it was, and Arras."⁵⁷

Finally, in the middle of August, Martha set sail for Canada aboard the SS *Melita*, arriving in Québec City on 21 August. Her war was over. After visiting family in Chicago, Denver, and Los Angeles, where her father died in late October, she returned to Canada and to George and Martha's new home in Vancouver in early December.

Martha did not return to the Yukon until 1922. George ran in the December 1921 federal election and won the seat as member of parliament for the Yukon. He was re-elected five more times until he retired nearly thirty years later. Due to George's ill health, Martha ran in his place in the 1935 election and won, making her only the second woman elected to the Canadian Parliament—and the first American-born woman to do so.

Her patriotism for her adopted country was never in question, and the time she gave of herself for the war effort is remarkable in its scope and depth. In her narratives, both in her autobiography, as well as in the vast number of articles, interviews, and letters that have survived, she reveals herself to have a remarkable sense of humour and a love of pomp and circumstance, yet with a touch of the common folk as well.

Both at home and overseas, Martha proved herself to be a strong community leader for the cause, and for that she has been acknowledged. In 1946 she was recognized with the OBE, the Order of the British Empire. Due to health issues, she received her OBE in 1949. Among her many other honours: in 1993 she was recognized when a Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada plaque was unveiled in her honour beside the Commissioner's Residence in Dawson City.

Her enthusiasm and vigour in promoting and explaining the Yukon everywhere she went, qualify her as the greatest champion of the beauty, bounty, and promise of the Yukon's beautiful northland. Martha Black embodied the spirit she had in common with many others who have shared her adopted home: a spirit of identity with the North, and a sense of independence and self-confidence bred of travelling the hills, streams, and valleys of the northern wilderness.

"The Chilkoot Pass, on the Trail of '98 attracted an amazing variety of people from all corners of the world. Among them there was not a stouter heart, a more welcome new Canadian, than this outstanding lady of the frontier, Martha Louise Munger Black."⁵⁸

Author

Kathy Jones-Gates has been a museum director, journalist, and community newspaper editor; she is an avid and very independent Yukon historical researcher, currently focusing on the biography of George Black, with many new details about his wife Martha Black.

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