

# A tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide

Melissa Martin

**H**istory, it is said, is always written by the victor.

That is, we look at the history of our world is through the fog of the cultural climate that was predominant at the time, and the history of Manitoba is written no differently.

While the General Strike of 1919 remains one of the defining events of Manitoba's past, it is generally seen through the eyes of a culture that was heavily patriarchal, and we rarely hear of the women behind the movement.

But local filmmaker Paula Kelly saw a different history. Through her lens, she captured the story of Helen Armstrong, the firebrand who led Manitoban women into the strike. Aptly titled *The Notorious Mrs. Armstrong*, Kelly's documentary captures the indefatigable labours of a woman who shaped the course of working rights for both genders in Manitoba, who was a crucial figure in the struggle for a minimum wage, and who was one of the central organis-

Documentary gives Manitoba's Helen Armstrong her due

**PREVIEW**

**THE NOTORIOUS MRS. ARMSTRONG THROUGH HER EYES, WTN**

ers of the General Strike, alongside her husband, George Armstrong. She was arrested, chastised, and labelled an agitator, but Armstrong's passion never flagged, as she kept starving striking women fed and motivated to accomplish their goals.

Through a remarkable collection of images and documents, starkly shot re-creations, and reflective interviews with Armstrong's descendants and other commentators, Kelly opens up a chapter of Manitoba's history that has been almost universally sidelined.

"There's certainly a general awareness that the history of women in labour

is difficult to retrieve," Kelly says. "That's because it's only very recently become the subject of academic discourse. I just hope it's not too late."

Presented in conjunction with the month-long Mayworks celebration that honours labour and the arts in Manitoba, the film will be aired as part of WTN's independent documentary series, *Through Her Eyes*. For Kelly, the challenge of looking through Armstrong's eyes was a painstaking procedure, unearthing pieces of a life few had acknowledged. Inspired after reading an account of Armstrong taking a group of working-class children to sing "Solidarity Forever" outside of Stony Mountain Penitentiary, where the leaders of the strike were being imprisoned, Kelly was motivated to discover more.

"As I came across recent historical writing, with emerging references to

the role women played in the labour movement, Helen Armstrong's name starts to

dominate. There was enough being written to intrigue me, but there were still large gaps in the story of her life. It took several years to fill in those gaps."

The reason Helen Armstrong remains such an overlooked figure in the history of Manitoba may come down to more than just gender. Armstrong was proudly, definitively a member of the working class.

"The history of everyday people is not the priority when we retell our stories," Kelly says sadly. "Helen was doing the work many people do, but the voice she gave these women is what made her remarkable. The effort required to do what she did required someone of great dynamism and charisma, and she surfaced as a very colourful figure."

*The Notorious Mrs. Armstrong* will air on WTN on Thursday, May 3, at 8 p.m.

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