

THE ELEPHANT AND THE PRIMROSE: THE PRAT SISTERS IN NEW YORK

Gwendolyn Davies

In the autumn of 1897, Minnie Sophia Prat of Wolfville, Nova Scotia, travelled to New York to study bookbinding with Evelyn Hunter Nordhoff, America's first woman hand binder. Why Prat, a member of a prominent Wolfville family and a close friend of poets Bliss Carman and Charles G.D. Roberts, embarked on this endeavour has as much to do with her personal circumstances as with the spirit of the age. Engaged to Roberts's brother, Goodridge, in 1887, she descended into a period of aimless grief after both her fiancé and her father died of influenza in February, 1892. Family letters to Carman after Goodridge Roberts's death reveal its anxiety about Minnie ("Malyn"), who spent the spring months of 1892 with Goodridge's parents in Fredericton awaiting the erection of his headstone (Annie Prat to Bliss Carman). "I cannot stay long away from my darling," she wrote Carman on 28 March 1892; "If I cannot go to him yet – I must at least be near his resting place in the warm heart of the hills."

Yet somewhere in the next five years, Minnie Prat sufficiently recovered her yearning for life to move to New York to study with Nordhoff. The facilitator for this decision seems to have been Bliss Carman, who was both a first cousin to Minnie's fiancé and an adopted son and brother in the Prat household. Returning to the Annapolis Valley from his editing and writing positions in New York every autumn following Goodridge Roberts's death, Carman maintained a vigil over Minnie's welfare. In 1892 and 1894 he escorted her to Fredericton to visit her fiancé's family. When he arrived in Wolfville in June, 1897, for a brief holiday, he carried with him the arrangements for Minnie Prat to begin apprenticing with Nordhoff in September of that year (Miller, 167). In late August, Minnie Prat travelled from Saint John to Northampton, Massachusetts, with Carman's "Aunt Jean," was met in New York by Carman, and, with his assistance, found a comfortable room near Nordhoff's bindery. As the poet noted in a letter to his sister, Muriel Carman Ganong, on 29 October 1897, "Miss Nordhoff is very eager to see her apprentice. She is very good. And I am so glad for Malyn. It is a very exceptional opportunity" (Carman, 117).