# Historica Canada Education Portal

## Kit Blake Coleman

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Kit Blake Coleman biography from *The Canadians* series. Coleman's twenty-five year career helped carve a new niche for women in journalism.

### Aims

The life and career of Kit Coleman will provide students with a starting point to learn about a variety of themes and topics. In several research and writing activities, students will learn about the historic events that Coleman reported on, the history of women and work, and the field of journalism.

### Background

Kit Blake Coleman (Kathleen Ferguson) was born in Ireland in 1856. After travelling to London with her Uncle, Kathleen went to finishing school in Belgium and was rushed into an arranged wedding at the age of twenty. She lost her first child to illness and, following an unhappy marriage, she lost her husband to a fall. Kathleen moved to London for a short time before moving to Toronto where she met her second husband, Edward

Watkins. The couple and their two children moved to Winnipeg and decided to separate months later, leaving Kathleen to live with her daughter. Impulsively, Kathleen sent two stories into the *Daily Mail,* and to her surprise they were published in the Saturday night paper. Although men were the predominant journalists of the time, Kathleen (working under the ambiguous pen name ‘Kit’), soon became the editor of her own page, called "Women’s Kingdom." She wrote about the experiences of women around the world, and provided a sympathetic voice for women seeking advice.

In 1892 Kit travelled to London where she wrote the "Disappearing London of Charles Dickens," as well as four articles on Jack the Ripper. In 1893 Kit’s father died and in 1895 *The Mail and Empire* decided they no longer needed a travelling journalist. After writing Prime Minister Laurier, Kit regained her position, and accompanied Laurier to meet Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace, after which she wrote the bestseller, *To London for the Jubilee.* In the same year, Kit met Dr. Theobald Coleman, who she later married.

During the Spanish Civil War in 1898, Kit could not cover the story since the United States did not want to accredit a woman journalist. Despite the discrimination, Kit went to Washington anyway, and met with the American Secretary of War who granted her a pass.

Her husband received a commission with a mining company, causing them to move to Copper Cliff Ontario. Here Kit wrote about the first case of smallpox, and urged the city be quarantined. They later moved to Hamilton, where Kit was given several high profile stories, yet she was still unable to cover Parliamentary proceedings because she was female. She was not allowed to join male press organizations at the time, so she started her own press club with female colleagues. In 1911 she quit *The*

*Mail and Empire* after they refused to give her a $5/week pay raise. She began her own freelance column and became the first syndicated columnist in Canada. In May 1916 she caught what she thought was a cold, and died 2 days later from pneumonia.

**Activities**

**Time Allowance:** 1 - 4 hours

**Procedures:**

After viewing the video on the life and times of Kit Coleman and completing the worksheet, you may wish to explore her career in journalism and her impact on Canada and Canadian women in more detail. Her advice columns, news reports, and the example she set as a career-oriented woman helped women understand their experiences and advanced the cause of women's rights. The following lessons will help your students gain a greater understanding of Kit Coleman.

***1. "Our Letter Club"***

In her early career, Kit Coleman started an advice column called "Our Letter Club." Men and women throughout Canada would write to Kit asking advice about love, family, and household problems. This activity will familiarize students with Kit's early life, as well as provide an understanding of newspaper columns, and writing letters.

- Provide students with a recent copy of an advice column from a local newspaper; go over the details of the letters (and responses)

with the class; discuss the features of the column as well as the type of questions asked

- After looking at examples from present day letters, have students brainstorm in groups what type of problems Canadians living in the early 1900's might have
- Discuss with students how columns in the early 1900's would be different than today. Have students make a list of ten questions someone in the 1900's might have for Kit's column
- After students have brainstormed potential problems, have them work in pairs to write two letters to Kit asking for advice. (The letters can vary in length depending on time allotment)
- When students are finished writing their letters they will pass them to other pairs. The students will read the letters given to them, and answer the letters giving advice as Kit would have
- When they have finished writing their responses, students should share the letters (and responses) with the class

***2. "On the scene with Kit Blake Coleman: A report from the front***

During her career Kit Coleman dealt with many dangerous and exciting stories, including the Spanish Civil War, an outbreak of smallpox, and Jack the Ripper. This activity will provide insight into Kit's life as a journalist, and provide background on events of the early 1900's.

- Using details from the video, discuss with the class the dangers Kit faced during her career and the difficulties she faced as a woman journalist
- Ask students what it would be like for Kit while she reported the above stories; include details such as weather, surroundings, interviews with local people, travel, clothing, etc.

- Place students into three groups, with each group representing one of Kit's major stories (Spanish Civil War, Smallpox outbreak, and Jack the Ripper)
- Show students a clip from the television news on a major story. Ask them what details the reporter outlines (Who, What, Where, Why, When, How)
- Explain to students that they will be preparing a news report for the class on their topic. They may perform it live, or videotape it and show it to the class
- Allow time for students to research their topics. After they have researched their topics, allow time for students to plan their reports. Explain they should try to have the report appear as if they are in the early 1900's (as Kit was), and to use appropriate language, apparel, setting, etc.

***3. "A Newspaper Woman's Life"***

This activity is identical to the above activity, except instead of a visual report, students should do a written report. To make this change, teachers should outline how to write a news article. Students should be given time to research their topic, as well as time to write their newspaper.

***4. "A New Frontier: Kit's role in the women's movement"***

"Women who were in the journalistic profession at the time, and there were very few of them in Canada, were considered lowly, almost degenerate." Women during Kit Coleman's time held few offices in the public sphere. This activity will help students understand women's gradual transition from the home to the workforce.

- Have students discuss the various jobs Kit held during her life. Ask students what jobs women would typically have held during the early 1900's
- Discuss the status of women in today's society, and question whether men and women are 'equal' today. Use statistics from the UN on the status of women
- Have students brainstorm how Kit's role helped break down barriers for women in her society
- Have students research various female journalists throughout history, choosing one prominent female journalist per decade, and make a list of stories that would have been covered by their respective journalists. When they have their list completed, have students put them all on chart paper. Different groups will have different journalists
- Discuss the difficulties women in every decade would have faced, and how Kit's role might have shaped their experiences

***5. Mind Map***

Similar to the above research, students will see how Kit Coleman served to open the door for women journalists, and helped kick-start the women's movement.

- Have students read through their textbook, indicating any event or individual that helped advance the women's movement
- When the students are finished, give them a sheet of chart paper, and have them work in groups. On the chart paper, have students write 'Kit Coleman' in the center of the paper, and use the information they have gathered to create a mindmap on Kit's experiences, showing how her influences led to greater

opportunities for women
- Every event/individual on the mindmap should have a brief description as well as a picture of the event
- When finished, have the students share their mindmaps with the class, and post them in the class for the duration of the unit

***6. Time Line***

This activity can be done in conjunction with the above activity, or instead of the above activity.

- Discuss with students what famous historic females they know about. Have them make a list of famous females in their notebooks.
- After they have made their list, ask students what makes them 'famous,' and how they have helped shape Canada.
- Have students conduct research on the Internet or in the library to make a larger list of famous Canadian women. Have students use chart paper to make a timeline of the events of famous Canadians.
- Each individual on their timeline should have a brief description and a picture. When students are finished, have them share their timelines with the class.

**Resources**

Kit Blake Coleman Worksheet (see PDF below)

Kathleen Coleman - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Ferguson, Ted. *Kit Coleman, Queen of Hearts.* Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1978.

An Irish Woman's Kingdom

Rules of Brainstorming

Jack the Ripper