

MARY ANN SHADD CARY: A WRITER WHO SHAPED HISTORY

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In Canadian history, there is little mention of the influential writers of Afro-Caribbean ancestry who have significantly contributed to shaping our country's diverse heritage and identity. Even sparser in discussion are Black Canadian women who have challenged how we perceive gender, fiction and race. Mary Ann Shadd Cary was one of these women, for she broke down insurmountable barriers for female writers of colour in North America. For young, black female writers, Shadd and other great writers are role models as pioneers in the craft, brave women who wielded their pens like swords; they cut through the throes of discrimination and oppression with defiance and boldness in their written works.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary was born in Delaware in 1853 to abolitionist parents and was educated by Quakers in Pennsylvania. Although she was born an American, her contributions to Canadian society led to her recognition as a Person of National Historical Significance in Canada in 1994. Her journey to Canada began in 1850 when the *Fugitive Slave Act* was passed in the United States, requiring officials and citizens of all states to capture slaves and return them to their masters. Seeking refuge and freedom from what many abolitionists nicknamed the "Bloodhound Law," Shadd and her family fled to Canada.

But Mary Ann Shadd Cary did not let blatant racism quench her thirst for change and equality. Her dedication to the Black community in Canada led her to establish *The Provincial Freeman* in 1853. The publication of the newspaper was not only difficult for a Black person at the time, but particularly for a Black woman. Shadd persuaded Samuel Ringgold Ward—a prominent male abolitionist—to edit her publication out of fear of the impact it would have on her readership if it was discovered that she was the true founder. By March 1853, the *Freeman* was publishing weekly out of Toronto, making Shadd the first Black woman in North America to establish and edit a newspaper, as well as one of the earliest newspaperwomen in Canadian history. Shadd dedicated the pages of her newspaper to reports, articles, and columns on self-reliance and the integration of Blacks into Canadian society, and actively championed women's rights. The newspaper was recognized as a platform for Black Canadians to debate abolitionist strategies. The publication of the *Freeman* was an incredible achievement; it provided a forum for Black Canadians to discuss self-education and equality, and recorded a history of some of the oldest Black communities in Canada.

By 1860, Shadd ceased publication of the newspaper, but her remarkable contributions continued in both American and Canadian history. She went on to become a Recruiting Officer for the Union Army and the second Black woman in American history to receive a Law degree. In 1880, she established the Colored Women's Progressive Franchise—a united group of Black suffragists. She joined the National Woman's Suffrage Association and alongside other suffragists, testified before the Judiciary Committee—and subsequently became the first Black woman to cast a vote in a national election.

Faced with insuperable challenges as a Black woman, Mary Ann Shadd Cary committed her career and her life to demolishing barriers. As a feminist, abolitionist, writer, educator, and lawyer, she improved the lives of countless people. And as a trailblazer in her craft, Shadd conveyed her experiences as a Black woman with passion, grace, and fearlessness. Inexorably, she continues to empower the Black community in Canada, for she demonstrated through her achievements that race and gender cannot define an individual. Shadd dreamt of a Canada devoid of racial divide. She pursued this through her writing—empowering the Black community about social justice, and relentlessly fighting for women's rights.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary's contributions to Canada sparked my interest in writing as a young child, and learning about her enabled me to dream with courage. I was inspired to write too, and in the sixth grade I wrote my first novel, and I haven't stopped since. I continue to write because I am inspired by women like Mary Ann Shadd Cary to believe in the power of words—which can change lives.

In the midst of racial and gender discrimination, Black women continue to approach life with vivacity. They refuse to remain silent in the most oppressive conditions, and their words have ignited social, political, and economic change. Black History is a mosaic of tragedy, faith, and excellence, but most importantly, Black Canadians have left an imprint on Canadian history that cannot be ignored.

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