



**375 RUE DESCHAMBAULT**  
**GABRIELLE ROY HOUSE**

Historical Buildings Committee

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### 375 RUE DESCHAMBAULT – GABRIELLE ROY HOUSE

In this rambling frame house in the east quarter of old St. Boniface, author Gabrielle Roy was born and raised. From her prairie roots, Roy has become one of Canada's most prominent authors whose several books have been translated and read in all corners of the globe. Her writings span the country, but as often as not, Roy's settings and characters are the people and places she knew while growing up in Manitoba.

Gabrielle was one of nine surviving children born to Méлина and Léon Roy. Her father was born to a farming family in Québec, and he came out to homestead near St. Alphonse in 1881.<sup>1</sup> In 1886, he married Méлина Landry, whose own family had also been pioneers to the west, while eventually all members of the two families moved to establish farms in the prairies. Léon Roy shared a vision of the west with the far-seeing Sir John A. Macdonald, but in his methods, he was a Laurier Liberal. To develop the country, people were needed, and concessions were essential to this higher ideal. In 1905, Roy was appointed an immigration agent to the federal government, which required him to move his family into the city.

St. Boniface was a logical location for the Roy's for here they would find a small-town atmosphere of French-Canadian culture adjacent to the city, with its services and shops. They purchased a lot in the least developed section of old St. Boniface, where Deschambault was still in the country, surrounded by prairie and thickets leading down to the nearby stream.<sup>2</sup> The house was much dreamed of beforehand, the pet project of Leon who chose carefully the model of the home and its materials.<sup>3</sup> Two local contractors were engaged and construction started in early spring of 1905. Too late, Madame Roy thought of something missing: a service staircase and clothes closet for the bedrooms. Nonetheless, the family moved into their new home 22 August, with the cost of construction, \$3,500, already paid off.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marie-Anna A. Roy, *Le Miroir du Passé* (Montreal: Québec-Amérique, 1979), p.12.

<sup>2</sup> Gabrielle Roy, *Street of Riches* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, Toronto, 1957), pp. 1 & 8.

<sup>3</sup> Marie-Anna A. Roy, *Le Pain de Chez Nous* (Montréal: Les Editions du Levrier, 1954), p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> *Loc. cit.*

The Roys were proud of their new house with a third story. From the writings of Gabrielle and her sister Marie-Anna, a reasonable description of the interior of the house can be pieced together.<sup>5</sup> It was two storeys of wood frame, with a third storey containing an attic for storage. The main floor contained the centre of family life - a large comfortable kitchen. As well, there was a living room with an upright piano and furniture modestly covered to compliment the patterned wallpaper. Here too was Léon Roy's study which featured a large portrait of Sir Wilfred Laurier. Ascending the carved staircase, there were five bedrooms and a bathroom while the attic, lit with three dormer windows, provided a play space for the children among the stored boxes and old furniture. The basement held a pantry for the summer preserves and at one time, Léon grew mushrooms there to supplement his income.

The exterior layout of the house was a cross gable with the front projection having a hipped roof. Across the entire front and most of one side was a sweeping veranda, supported by white columns which Gabrielle considered to give "a certain air of grandness"<sup>6</sup> to the large house. This veranda was the principal social spot of the parents, children and friends in the summer months, where a row of straight-backed and rocking chairs gave everyone a seat. Recovering from a serious illness, 7-year old Gabrielle spent an entire summer lying in a hammock attached to two columns on this porch.

The yard was the object of an ambitious landscaping job. Along with elms and flowering shrubs, the Roys planted three apple trees, and Madame Roy kept a small garden of fragrant stocks and other bright flowers.

The fenced yard, however, was only a part of the children's playground. While the house was near to Des Meurons with its trolley line on the west side, in all other directions was open space, the Seine River and even tilled fields. Naturally the area did build up substantially over the years, and the CNR line was certainly an intrusion, but the Roy children grew up oriented to the open spaces of their neighbourhood.

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<sup>5</sup> Roy, *Le Miroir du Passé*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> Roy, *Street of Riches*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

Life provided a steady rhythm for this bustling household. Those children of school age attended L'Académie Saint-Joseph, not far from their home, where the sisters taught the lessons in French. The great spread in ages of the family meant that not all the children lived together at once. Joseph, the eldest boy, left the nest early, became a settler and later earned his living as a wheat buyer. Anna and Adèle had been married after completing their education. One child had died, and there remained at home Clémence, Bernadette, Rodolphe, Germain and Agnès (who died tragically at the age of four). Gabrielle, the youngest, was born in 1909 when her mother was 42 and her father aged 60 years.<sup>7</sup>

The Roy family was relatively well-off and Léon worked hard at his job of settling newcomers to the prairie west. Although they had no servants, the house was paid for and the children well fed and nicely clothed. All this came to an abrupt halt in 1913, when, two years after the Laurier government was voted out of office, Léon Roy lost his job to a Conservative appointment. At the age of 64, and with six months to go before being eligible for a retirement pension, Roy was dealt a massive financial blow. The effect upon him was tragic and he became withdrawn and bitter. His wife was left to cope the best way she could, with a good deal of worry and few luxuries. "We were the genteel poor," Gabrielle admitted. "Poverty is perhaps hardest for middle-class people who fight through it to keep up a certain rank."<sup>8</sup>

As a young child, Gabrielle noticed no difference from the prosperous years before. She was an alert, sensitive and curious child, given to playing along in the attic and watching St. Boniface grow from the dormer windows. Clever in school, Gabrielle went on to take her teacher training in Winnipeg and got a teaching position in L'École Provencher. Her sister Anna became a writer of local significance while Bernadette became a nun. Their father died in 1927, the year Gabrielle was at normal school. Gabrielle showed an early talent for writing but was discouraged from this by her mother, who steered her toward the steady and respectable profession of a teacher.

Gabrielle was able to vent her creativity in a dynamic amateur theatre group that was formed in St.

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<sup>7</sup> Joan Hind-Smith Three Voices (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co. Ltd., 1975), p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Ibid., p. 68.

Boniface, Le Cercle Molière. This group in the 1930s was under the direction of Monsieur and Madame Arthur Boutal who were important figures in the cultural life of the French on the prairies. Twice, the plays Gabrielle was in were taken by Le Cercle Molière to the Dominion Drama Festival, and twice they won the Bessborough Trophy, the top award for French language productions. Roy's performances were given critical acclaim<sup>9</sup> and she made a wrenching decision to leave her home and job to study theatre. During the depression, this seemed to be an act of madness but it was the essential break of a creative young woman with stifling circumstances.

Roy went to England but quickly found drama too taxing in a non-creative capacity, and she determined that she would rather write than interpret what others had written. She travelled in France and there published articles in a well-known Parisian weekly.<sup>10</sup> With a European war clearly on the horizon, Roy sailed for Canada in early spring 1939.

Mélina Roy, having sold the old house on Rue Deschambault, was relieved to hear of her youngest daughter's return but Gabrielle had other plans. She settled in Montréal and launched a tentative career as a free-lance writer. Her articles landed her a good job with an agricultural journal, allowing her to travel the country and learn about Canada. She lived beside the poorest area of Montréal, in St. Henri, where her evening walks led her to see that aspect of Québec urban life. From 1941 to 1943, she wrote her most famous novel Bonheur d'Occasion (The Tin Flute), which tells the story of a poor family in St. Henri who are saved from financial doom by the gross inhumanity of World War II.

The Tin Flute was an immediate success, smashing as it did the outdated view of the Québec pastoral idyll. The book was dedicated to Mélina Roy, but she died before it was published in 1945. Its English translation of 1947 made it the choice of the Literary Guild of America, with a printing

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<sup>9</sup> La Liberté wrote on 26 February 1936: "Mme. Houde et Mlle. Gabrielle Roy, dans les premiers rôles, ont joué avec un naturel et une sobriété qui consacrent définitivement leurs talents d'interprètes intelligentes, toujours sensibles et extrêmement appliquées." Chapeau Bas (Les Editions du Blé pour la Société historique de Saint-Boniface, 1980), p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Hind-Smith, op.cit., p. 80.

of 750,000,<sup>11</sup> and the film rights were sold to Universal Pictures in Hollywood.<sup>12</sup> The book was awarded the Governor General's Award for fiction and the Prix Fémina in France. Fame had found Gabrielle Roy.

In 1947, she married and moved overseas with her husband and it was here that she wrote La Petite Poule d'Eau (Where Nests the Water Hen) in 1950. It was based on her experiences teaching school in an isolated site in northern Manitoba, and also received critical acclaim. Alexandre Chenevert followed in 1954, and Rue Deschambault in 1957. It is this latter novel, translated to Street of Riches, which tells of her life in St. Boniface and her family's comfortable home. This book also won the Governor-General's Award and in 1967, Roy was appointed to the Order of Canada.

Roy lives in Québec now, writing and publishing works that achieve literary success, but fall short of the commercial success of her first novel. She has been called Québec's great lady of letters, but her work is best summed up by the following statement: "She is perhaps the only one of our writers to have mastered the narrative of ordinary life."<sup>13</sup> MacLean's called her "unquestionably the most widely read French-Canadian writer in English Canada."<sup>14</sup> Roy's work has also been linked to the Quiet Revolution in Québec but she describes herself as apolitical, not a separatist but one who feels the need for a distinct French culture in Canada.<sup>15</sup>

Gabrielle Roy is 72 this year. She remembers Rue Deschambault, and the great house "where at the city end of the street I was in Canada and at the other end I was in God's world."<sup>16</sup> Her home was sold in 1936 to Céléste and Fred St. Germain, although there is a reference to Mélina Roy living there until her death in 1943. The few remaining members of the Roy family are spread out, with grandchildren carrying on the name in St. Boniface. Among the memorable contributions that St.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Dickason, "Gabrielle Roy's Own Story Recalled by Sister Here," Winnipeg Tribune, 1 March 1947.

<sup>13</sup> "A Passionate Heritage at Home in Quebec," Toronto Globe and Mail, 8 October 1977, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> "Summer Doldrums," MacLean's, 20 September 1976, p. 66.

<sup>15</sup> David Cobb, "I have, I think, a grateful heart," The Canadian in the Winnipeg Tribune, 1 May 1976, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Loc. cit.

Boniface has made to Canada, Gabrielle Roy must surely be at the top of the list.

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Plate 1 – 375 Rue Deschambault in c.1910. The child standing on the veranda may be Gabrielle Roy (Société Historique de Saint Boniface.)

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Plate 2 – Méлина Roy and her older children. The little one in this case seems to be Agnes, the child that died (Société Historique de Saint Boniface.)

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Plate 3 – Monsieur and Madame Roy and the children in the house when Gabrielle was born, 1911  
(Société Historique de Saint Boniface.)

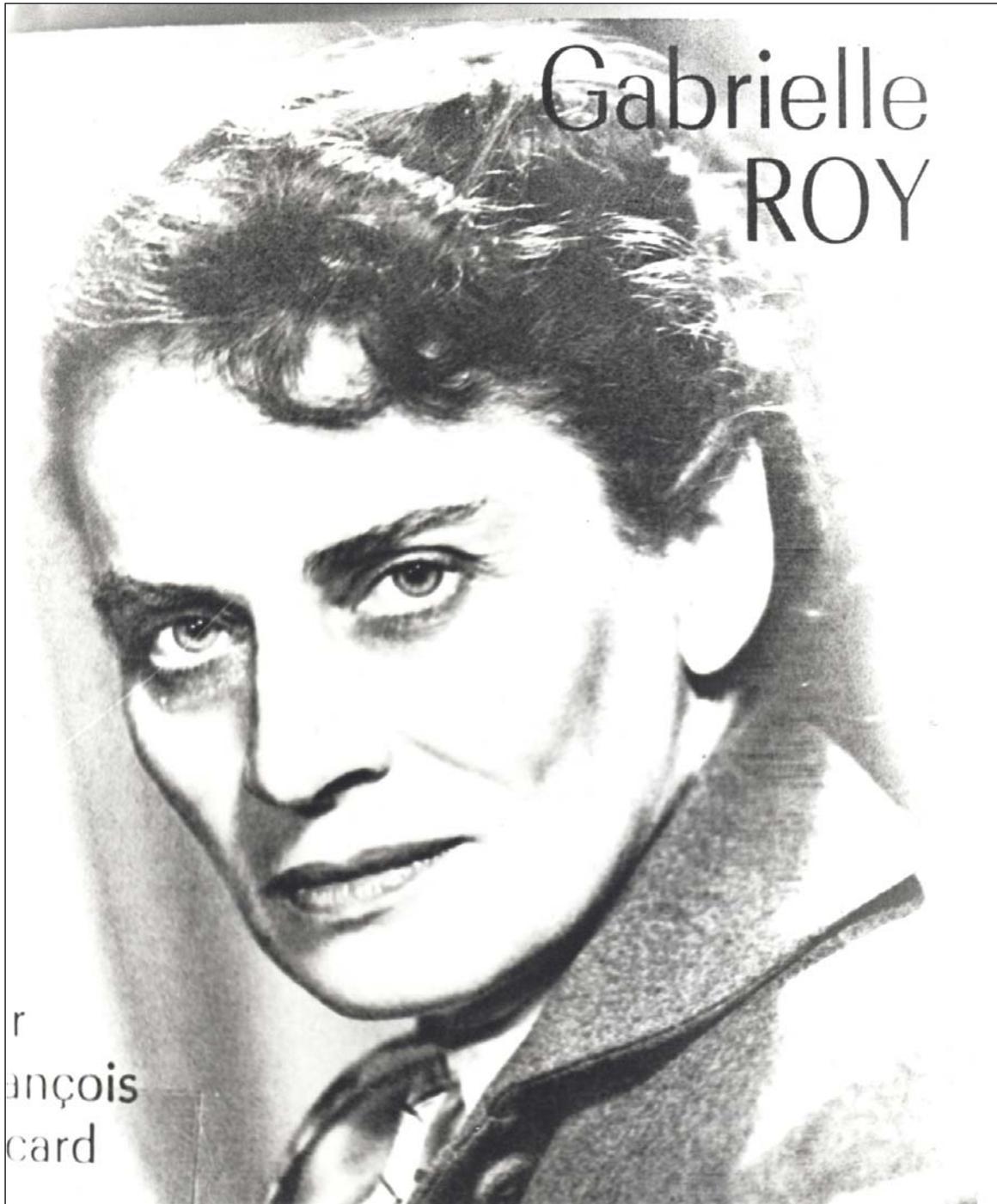


Plate 4 – Gabrielle Roy (Société Historique de Saint Boniface.)