



HARP, The People's Press is delighted to review *The Story of Lillian Burke* by Edward Langille, which was published in Canada in 2019 by [Boularderie Island Press](#).

*The Story of Lillian Burke* is a must-read for any arts-health practitioner or anyone with an interest in the history of occupational therapy (OT) and the burgeoning arts-in-medicine movement. Through the lens of this one remarkable woman, Edward Langille traces the history of these movements, which will serve as an important addition to the reading list/curriculum for professional accreditation in these fields, as well as in the therapies that focus on the arts, including music, visual arts, drama, and dance. His biography closes in on her prodigious talent as a designer and craftswoman

in the field of rug-hooking. But it also highlights her considerable skill as a pianist and dramaturge, which she brought to play at the New York Psychiatric Institute in the 1940s after joining the Department of Occupational Therapy and assuming responsibility for the Institute's new music therapy programme .

Adolph Meyer (1866-1950) is recognized as a founder of OT. Under his direction, the Institute was one of the first hospitals in the United States to advocate for "recreational therapy" to treat physical and mental illnesses. He was also at the forefront of changing the negative names of hospitals from insane asylums or lunatic hospitals to mental hospitals. This groundbreaking step to recognize patients as whole persons is reflected in the programs that Lillian created at the Institute when OT was in its infancy. Under her care, patients were not their illness, not their disability; she drew on their artistic talents, providing workshops in singing and piano, and in-house recitals of dance, pantomime and puppet shows.

In 1950, the Institute sent Lillian as a delegate to the inaugural meeting of the National Association for Music Therapy in New York. On her 71<sup>st</sup> birthday (Oct. 15, 1951), a few months before she died, Lillian oversaw a performance at the New York Psychiatric Institute, in which 14 patients, both male and female, were involved in all aspects of a Hallowe'en puppet show. The cooperative arts reigned as patients were responsible for its overall direction, writing the script, creating the puppets, constructing a stage, making costumes, painting the scenery, *and* playing the music accompaniment!

Langille's biography is a natural fit for HARP Press's readers, given its niche in the healing and creative arts. Drawing on his comprehensive research, we can make the case that Lillian Burke's life path followed a parallel trajectory to the emerging field of OT, as well as the modern art-medicine movement in Europe, North America, and elsewhere. For the purposes of this review, HARP suggests the following supplement to the copyright page of listed subjects associated with Lillian Burke's life and times (1879-1952) — textile designers, artisans, hooked rug industry, United States, Nova Scotia, Cape Breton Island.

- occupational therapy;
- art therapy; music therapy;
- art for health and health equity;
- art as a social determinant of health;
- mental health; public health; population health
- healthy communities;
- arts-based historical research

Martin Grosvenor Myers, MD, Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics, reinforces these subjects in his Foreword and his tribute to Lillian Burke. His grandmother, Elsie Bell Grosvenor (eldest daughter of Alexander Graham and Mabel Bell) first engaged “Burkie” in Washington in 1913 to provide home education for her children, especially nature- and arts-based pedagogy and experiential learning aligned with the Montessori method. Subsequently, she joined the extended Bell family at Beinn Bhreagh in Baddeck, where they gathered every summer. The “most illuminating part of Burkie’s story” for Martin Myers as a physician was *after* her work with the Chéticamp rug hookers, when she found her professional calling in occupational therapy at the New York State Psychiatric Institute (1942-1952), especially with returning war veterans. Lillian Burke was serving as an arts-health practitioner, making art with veterans suffering from PTSD (Post Traumatic Syndrome Disorder) before PTSD was named as a mental illness. This was the era when “shell shock” or “soldier’s heart” was the taken-for-granted sacrifice of soldiers at war.

OT was first recognized as a professional field of study in the United States in 1917 and in Canada in 1918. The earliest record of Lillian Burke using this term was in her letter of May 20, 1928 to Elsie Bell Grosvenor from Washington, DC. , where she lays out her pupil’s symptoms in some detail and recommends: “Occupational therapy is what she needs.” She also names her pupil, whose family is

known to Elsie, with full disclosure of her problems; this would not meet today's professional ethics and privacy standards.

Her mind is alright and so is her body, but they don't coordinate.  
She holds her hands stiff and she looks as though she's in a trance.

Edward Langille provides a stellar model for conducting arts-based historical research as he tenaciously pursues every trail that might yield yet another clue. He is ever on the lookout for yet another rug to match Lillian Burke's hand-painted sketches of the rugs from the 1930s. In July 2011, Edward found 125 of her sketches in an antique shop in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia and so began his research journey into Lillian Burke's life and her contributions to Cape Breton Home Industries during the Depression years—the hungry '30s. Not one of the actual Chéticamp rugs that Lillian designed for the New York market has been identified, but we get the strong impression that Langille is still looking. Terms such as “sleuth” and “detective” that he himself and others use to describe his persistent method fall well short of recognizing his accomplishments as a historian and researcher. His four pages of acknowledgements (pp. 267-270) are a formidable testimony to the breadth and scope of his inquiry, which took him from his home base at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, to family, professional, and government archives, as well as interviews throughout North America and beyond, as he followed Lillian's peripatetic sponsors from among the Bell-Grosvenor-Fairchild families .

*Bricolage* — using any and every material at hand — is the hallmark of the arts-health practitioner as well as a recognized arts-based research methodology. Lillian proved to be an outstanding *bricoleur* when she joined the program of “reconstruction aides” in France created by Army Surgeon General Gorgas in 1918. This was the first instance in her career path linking her directly to OT as a professional field. She was stationed initially at the American Expeditionary Forces base hospital in Rimaucourt (then in the grip of Spanish influenza), and from August 1919 to the spring of 1922 at the Forces base in Koblenz, Germany. Throughout her time there, in the company of other reconstruction

aides, she combed the town markets in the Rhineland-Palatinate area for materials the soldiers could use to make art — yarn, canvas, leather, beads, timber, wire, tools. Langille speculates that Lillian learned the craft of ornamental metal work in Koblenz alongside her patients, as they fashioned the abundance of brass shell casings into “trench art.” In 1921, she was promoted to head reconstruction aide at Koblenz Base Hospital. The aides were required to wear a uniform aligned with military standards of discipline, but it could also be seen as a semiotic marker along the path of professionalizing this occupation. In particular, their regimental street clothes included a below-the-knee length heather grey woolen cape set off by a bronze caduceus and gilt RA monogram.

It was some 20 years later and in the context of her design work with the rug hookers of Chéticamp, that the link between art and health reached public consciousness. Reporter Carolyn Cox in the April 1938 issue of *Canadian Homes and Gardens* wrote that Lillian Burke’s “primary interest was handicrafts in relation to people, what such work did to them and for them, the spiritual effects of releasing hidden artistry.” Langille aligns Lillian’s philosophy to the Arts and Crafts movement, which linked the notions of a good design and a good society. This anticipates the uniting of the arts with healthy communities and population health.

Lillian, along with the Bell sisters Elsie and Marian, revived Cape Breton Home Industries, and in 1928 negotiated its branch status with the Canadian Handicrafts Guild through Alice Peck, past-president of the Guild and Convenor of the Extension Committee. Langille draws on Alice Peck’s diary as an important resource for piecing together Lillian’s reputation in the worlds of both art and public health. Peck’s articulation of the philosophy of the Handicrafts Guild has much in common with mission statements of the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health ([www.nccdh.ca](http://www.nccdh.ca)): “they should devote every energy to reviving and making profitable all such crafts as could be carried on in cottage or castle. ... The country would become happier, healthier, and wealthier, and hundreds of homes would be lifted into a different sphere through the contacts that would result.” Income security

and social support networks are social determinants of health that arts and crafts can go a long way to revive.

Social inclusion is foundational to health equity, and plays out in the cooperative arts in Lillian Burke's life work. Anselme Chiasson's 1985 history of the rug hookers of Chéticamp identifies a number of disabled women who were house-bound and cared for by their families, including two sisters with polio, for whom Lillian provided work making hooked rugs. Reporter Corolyn Cox paints a vivid picture of a healthy community in her 1938 article for *Canadian Homes and Gardens*:

Men and women both work long and hard. But considerable merriment arises over the rug hooking, which occupies long hours with six, eight, a dozen women chattering over their hooks. For individuals and village alike, life is richer for the added interest and the welcome cash brought in by this home industry.

The cooperative arts consistently underpin other influences on the health of a community such as education, food security, income security and social support networks. In 1952, Marian Bell Fairchild explained that the industry was largely centered in Chéticamp because the French women were much more interested in hooking the big rugs together than were the Scotch (sic) women of Baddeck. Could it also be that the cooperative arts were embedded in the Acadian culture? The Art of Rug Hooking, in the 1927 issue of *MacLean's Magazine*, gives an account of an interview with Madame Doucet that suggests competition for sales of small rugs was the central motivation for the individual Scotch (sic) women. They come to the sale of rugs to "learn our colour combinations and get ideas for designs. One design we sent out came back to us in eight different colors and combinations from as many as eight different women."

Lillian Burke's relationship with the Mi'kmaq presents an ambiguous picture of social inclusion/exclusion. In the same article in *Maclean's Magazine*, Mrs. MacDermott, a Gaelic woman, reported on the shift from vegetable dyes, stating "Even the Indians around here use aniline dyes now." The "even" suggests surprise that Micmac artisans would have the sophistication to take on the latest technology in dying rugs. In 1936, Lillian wrote a letter to Wilfred Bovey, President of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild,

in response to his query on native handicrafts, in which she distances herself from any involvement. Instead, she suggests that native handicrafts would fit with the work of the StFX Extension Department, as part of the efforts of the Antigonish Movement to introduce cooperatives and adult education study groups to economically oppressed communities. Lillian prefaced her comments by reporting that the Micmac Indians are a “very low class of people, inbred, unhealthy (there is much tuberculosis) and generally not very picturesque or interesting.” This leads into her “however” statement that “they make baskets and we all buy them. They are splint variety, sometimes gaily coloured.”

What she did *not* say is telling; with her discriminating eye for design and the quality of workmanship, which she exercised on the Acadian and Scottish rug hookers, why did she not remark on the complex and varied designs, shapes and colours of these exquisite Micmaw baskets? Almost as an afterthought, she asks Wilfred Bovey, “Is there anything I can do to help in this matter?” Notably, she wrote this letter in the very year that the Chéticamp rug-hookers were petitioning to Lillian Burke for higher wages, spurred on by Alexandre Boudreau, agricultural representative and champion of the ideals of the Antigonish Movement. Lillian did not know whether StFX was holding study clubs with the Native artisans pertaining to rugs and craft work, but she surely knew that Acadian nationalist Alexandre Boudreau was conducting night classes and discussion groups with the rug hookers, encouraging them to break free of her control, eliminate the economic middleman, and keep the profits at home.

“A healthy community knows its history” is the signature claim of HARP, The People’s Press. Edward Langille’s arts-based historical research that re-members Lillian Burke’s contributions to creating healthy communities through art, places him firmly as an arts-health practitioner and researcher—bricoleur par excellence. He draws on an eclectic array of sources to systematically refute the false claims and suppositions in historians’ representations of Lillian Burke as an unscrupulous opportunist, exploiting the people of Chéticamp and Cape Breton for her own personal gain. He presents a wealth of

detailed counter-evidence. The small stories of Lillian's kindness and generosity, along with details of her struggles to make ends meet, stipple Langille's writing. Lillian's own words eloquently describe her motivation: "the development of the people themselves, the men and women whose fingers can interpret the beauty that is hidden in their souls."

#### Follow-up

Morphic resonance abounds: the week after completing this review, the Twitter feed for 400 years of Twitter posted a photo of the first Montessori School in North America in Baddeck in the loft of Beinn Breagh on July 18, 1912. The caption also states that this first school was established by Alexander Graham Bell and Mabel Bell for their grandchildren. It does not mention that Lillian Burke was engaged by the Bell family to teach the arts using the Montessori method.

<https://twitter.com/400years1/status/1151864798738624513>



The Montessori Classroom in the warehouse loft at Beinn Breagh - 1912