



Joy Coghill's story of  
**Dorothy**



People who knew and loved my mother in later life remember her as a compassionate, no-nonsense kind of woman who cooked marvelous dinners. Only I, as her only child, was privileged to know that beneath this gentle exterior, she was an adventure-loving pioneer with a tiger inside her.

Born in 1894, “within the sound of Bow Bells,” and therefore a true Londoner, Dorothy was the middle child of Thomas and Gertrude Pollard’s three girls. The three girls—Bessie, Dorothy, and Marjorie—were all in their early teens when Thomas died. His death must have been unexpected, for there was no special provision made for his family. Evidently, a friend of the family proposed marriage and protection to Gertrude, but according to legend, her daughters “kicked up such a fuss,” that she refused her suitor. As a consequence, the girls were forced to give up their private schooling and train for a profession.

Marjorie, the youngest, chose a secretarial career. Dorothy went to study nursing at the Children’s Hospital in Manchester. Bessie, although she was the oldest, was allowed to stay home with their mother because she was “the sickly one”; a decision for which her sisters never quite forgave her. However, in retrospect, their abrupt change in circumstances probably helped make the two younger Pollards independent, adventuring women, who, in time, would eventually both become Canadians.

By the time Dorothy was 18, she was a fully fledged nurse and in her first job at the London Hospital in London’s East End. Her arrival in London in 1912 coincided roughly with the famous suffragette Christable Pankhurst’s return from exile. Pankhurst spoke publicly and passionately about female emancipation, declaring that the voices of women’s suffrage, like St. Joan’s voice, “were of God!” This appealed to my mother, who often said that she had been to Pankhurst meetings. She would certainly relate to the “voices” reference, for didn’t she have a calling to care for the sick and the dying?

Pankhurst also famously declared that “the argument of the broken panes is the most valuable argument in modern politics.” As tempting as this radical notion may have seemed, “Doll” could not go smashing windows with bricks, as many women did that year, for if she did, she would lose her hard-won job. Instead, “the little lady with the laughing eyes” (as her patients called her), said her prayers, and developed a rebel political soul in private.

I like to think that it was at one of Pankhurst’s meetings that my mother met Ella Coghill, who was to become her lifelong best friend and future sister-in-law. Ella came from a large family in Shrewsbury on the border of Wales. Her favourite brother George had emigrated to Canada, where he was studying to become a Presbyterian minister.

In 1914, when war was declared, Doll and her friends were challenged but undaunted. Nurses were in great demand and, as exciting as this was, so too was the news that Ella’s beloved brother had joined the Canadian army and would be passing through London on his way to France. Already curious about George from Ella’s glowing descriptions of her brother, Doll restarched her apron and her nurse’s hat, studied her Bible, and held her breath. She was twenty when they met.

George never recovered from that initial meeting. Here was a girl of daring, of adventurous spirit, of compassion, and of religious and political fibre. Here was the perfect wife for a minister with a mission and passion for the Canadian prairie. And so, letter by love letter, over the course of the next seven years, as he battled in muddy trenches and returned to Toronto to complete his studies, George won her trust and her heart. But it was not until he had his degree and his first posting to Saskatchewan that, in May 1921, Dorothy set sail with her trousseau, her best friend Ella, and a full heart to marry the Reverend George Coghill.

Despite her eager anticipation to begin married life in Canada, Doll never quite got over the shock of her first impressions of the Dominion. Life on the frontier was so very different from life in London. The Record of Marriage form actually asked, "Can the bride read? Write?" When Ella saw this, she took special care with her handwriting just to show them!

How on earth did a woman of twenty-seven, from a sophisticated British background, survive the bitter weather, the Canadian prairie, the different lifestyle, the poverty, and the many adjustments to married life both physical and emotional? In Doll's favour, she had an adoring husband, her training, and her courage. She assisted her husband's scattered congregations in their births and in their deaths. She taught them the secrets and practicalities of midwifery, and health, and nursing. And in turn, they taught her the basic necessities of frontier life: the canning, the pickling, the preserving, the root cellar, and the secrets of the lemon pie, and the perfect sponge cake.

The seasons came and went. It was 1925 by the time Doll and George looked at one another in wonder and realized that a baby would be there for the spring. What joy! And that is what they decided to call her...Joy.

It was a hard birth and a lonely one. Somehow we got stopped in Findlater on the way to the doctor. My dad took off on the horse to get help, and Mother had to call on her inner tiger to help get us through the difficult hours. But eventually, a tiny battered redheaded girl was born. But there could be no more children.

Only two years later, my father began to have trouble with his mobility and coordination. The Canadian doctors said he should leave the prairie climate and gave him ten years to live. We went "home" but, this time, to Scotland near my Auntie Ella in Irvine. Perhaps my mother suspected that what my Dad had was Multiple Sclerosis, but she managed to persuade Dr. Green in Glasgow to say it was "shell shock" from the war. This meant that we would be supported by his pensions from the Canadian Army and the United Church of Canada. And whatever happened, George would not go in hospital; Dorothy would be able to stay home and nurse him.

A little more than ten years later, during the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, my Dad died. All the students in my school had been evacuated to Troon to be safe from the anticipated bombings of the River Clyde. (Troon, it's worth noting here, was between the airfield at Prestwick and the ammunition dump at Irvine... very safe indeed!) Our hosts treated us to an "orphan Annie" existence, where our rations went to the man in the house, and everything that was wrong was the fault of the evacuees. But we became used to it and, to tell the truth, I found the whole thing an adventure. But one morning, everyone who had been nasty and abusive toward me was suddenly very, very kind. It was frightening, and I knew that some terrible thing had happened. I was put on the train and sent home to Glasgow where my Auntie Ella met me and cried over me, then my mother hugged me, and cried over me some more. No one actually said, "Your father has died," so it took me a very long time to accept his death.

A few days later, as my father's coffin was lowered into Scottish ground on a rainy November afternoon, I heard my mother say, "Goodbye Darling." It was the first time I had heard the word, and it remains in a special place in my vocabulary...not to be touched by the affectations of the theatre.

Following my father's death, my mother decided that we must be together, and that she must return to where she and her husband had been most fulfilled, and most happy. She refused to stay in Scotland where a widow had to face the fact that her life was over when her husband died. So she decided we would go and live with her sister Marjorie in Vancouver. It was a practical decision as well, for my fathers'

pensions came from Canada and the blockade might cut us off. So, in July 1940 we “set sail” for Canada on the Duchess of Athol, one of the last large ships to sail in convoy and get through the German blockade.

As it happened the “sterling area” closed behind us as we crossed the Atlantic, and we travelled across Canada and got settled into our new life with only £14 between us, never to see my father’s savings until the war was long over. Fortunately, soon after we joined Aunt Marjorie in Vancouver, my mother got a job as a nurse and our lives together began.

Over the next eight or so years, we enjoyed life together. She supported me (and my friends) through a BA at UBC, and we corresponded daily when I did a Masters in Fine Art Degree in Chicago. I think she found the people who were my friends and colleagues fascinating, and she welcomed them into her home and fed them generous meals. She supported my career choice, but never wholeheartedly, never quite forgiving the theatre for the time the UBC Player’s Club borrowed two of her plants, and returned them to her much later, and quite dead.

I feel my mother’s life and her talents for caring for others, were ultimately fulfilled when I married in 1955, and had my first two children—Debra Dorothy and Gordon Alexander—in the three years that followed. (Her third grandchild, David Michael was born ten years later in 1967).

Just as she would have wanted, she died in her sleep, and was found on January 26, 1977. As I was sorting through her apartment, I found a letter written to me and hidden in the freezer. In a final act of consideration, she offered advice to me and her grandchildren children, gave a few final instructions about her will, and gave us the kindest reassurance one could ever ask for: “I’ve enjoyed my life, and I think I have had everything. Mom.”