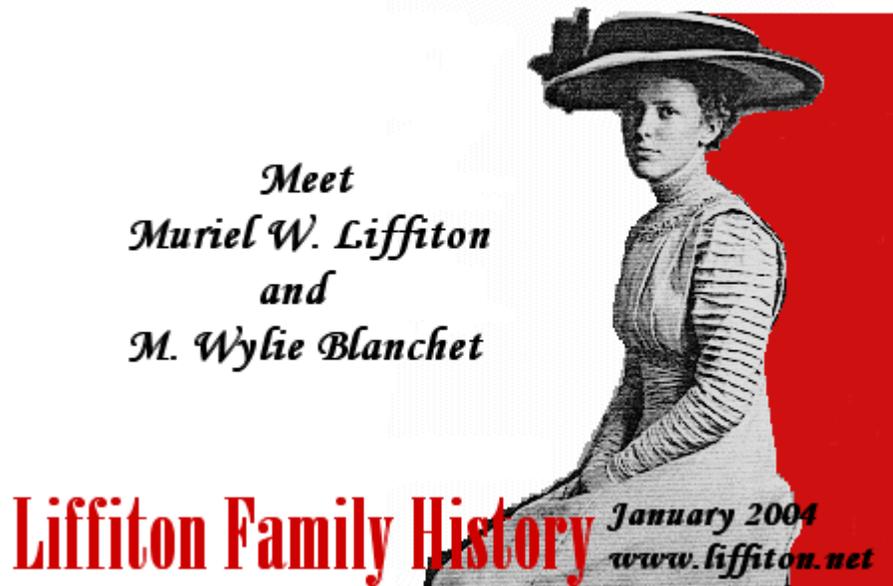


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Meet M. Wylie Blanchet and Muriel W. Liffiton

by Thomas Liffiton

The Writer, M. Wylie Blanchet

Consider this a mere introduction to Muriel Liffiton, a person to be known and enjoyed through her own writing and through the articles already written and filled with memories of friends and relations. While to many she is known only as M. Wylie Blanchet or as Muriel Blanchet, on May 2, 1891, in Montreal, Canada, she was born Muriel Wylie Liffiton. However, she wrote under her married name, having married Geoffrey Orme Blanchet in 1909. So it has been as M. Wylie Blanchet that she has earned a place in Canadian literature as the author of *The Curve of Time*, an unusual book of travel and adventure.

After being widowed at an early age in 1926, Muriel Blanchet raised her five children on Vancouver Island in Canada 's British Columbia. For several summers Muriel, her children, and the family dog set off in a twenty-five foot motor boat, the *Caprice*, to explore the waters between Vancouver Island and the rugged Canadian mainland. They were on their own, with Muriel as

captain, anchoring in secluded coves to tramp the wilderness, examining architecture and burial grounds in deserted native villages, and meeting the region's various human and animal inhabitants, a hermit, a whale, a cougar, bears. Muriel wrote about their journeys, and was successful in having articles published in magazines such as *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. In 1962, the year Muriel died, Blackwood & Sons of Edinburgh, Scotland published *The Curve of Time*, which described several summers of the family explorations. In 1968, Gray Publishing in Canada printed a second edition of *The Curve of Time*, and since then interest in the book has continued to grow. In 1982, Harbour Publishing printed *A Whale Named Henry*, a children's story Muriel wrote for her family in the 1930s.

Seal Press is the current publisher of *The Curve of Time*, and that edition contains a photograph of Muriel, a photograph of *The Caprice*, and a biographical sketch of the author. In 1999, *Contemporary Authors*, a reference book found in most libraries, included a biographical sketch of Muriel and summarized book reviews written about *The Curve of Time*. Both biographical pieces are sparse with details of Muriel's life, as is *The Curve of Time* itself. In her own book Muriel reveals her character and her personality as she braves a treacherous channel or is fearful for her children, but she declines to share the who, what, and whens of her life. She tells nothing of her parents, of her youth, and refers obliquely to her husband's death. Some of the reviews of Muriel's book remarked on the absence of specifics, the lack of names and dates, but Muriel was the writer, and she chose what to include and what to leave out. It is exactly her choice of words, along with her wise and competent tone, that naturally leaves the reader wanting to know more about Muriel the person. In that, *The Curve of Time* and *Contemporary Authors* disappoint, failing even to reveal that M. Wylie Blanchet was born Muriel Liffiton.

For the who, what, whens of Muriel's life, the reader must go to "Capi Blanchet," an article written by Edith Iglauer and published by a local British Columbian magazine in 1979. Iglauer, an accomplished writer herself, interviewed Muriel's children and neighbors to get those personal, behind the scenes details of Muriel's life. "Capi" was republished in 1991, as part of an Iglauer collection, *The Strangers I have Met*, which remains in print today. In 1985, Rosemary A. Joy, a relation, privately published *The Genealogy of John Gray Goodall Snetsinger*, which includes information on Muriel and her parents. Muriel's mother, Carrie, was John Snetsinger's daughter, and Joy's work identifies exactly who was related to whom, and when they were born. She also has several photographs of Muriel's parents, siblings, and children. The third and last published work on Muriel is Ruby Andrew's article, "Sailing The Curve of Time," published in the 40th Anniversary edition of Beautiful *British Columbia* in 1999. Andrew interviewed Muriel's neighbor and publisher, providing some insight into the publication history of *The Curve of Time*. Of special interest are thirteen photographs of Muriel and family during *The Curve of Time* years. Unlike the jarring leap a fiction reader makes from imagination to seeing characters in a film, these photographs of the *Caprice*, of the Indian villages, and of Muriel and her children are the real thing.

A Short Biography of Muriel W. Liffiton

Muriel's parents were Charles Albert Liffiton (1849 - 1927) and Carrie Jane Snetsinger (1863 - 1917) of Montreal, Canada. After working as a clerk and a commercial traveler (traveling salesman), by 1879 Charles Liffiton was a partner in Bourgeau, Liffiton & Company, manufacturers and importers of coffees, spices, and mustard. Six years later in 1885, he was managing Acme Mills, coffees and spices wholesale, St. James Street, and he had married Carrie, the daughter of successful businessman and politician, John Snetsinger of Moulinette, Ontario, and owner of Acme Mills. Carrie Jane Snetsinger grew up in Moulinette, but was educated in Montreal, where Charles Liffiton was known as a yachtsman and a Winter sports athlete.

By the time Muriel was born on 2 May, 1891, her father was the owner of his own firm, C.A.

Liffiton & Company operating Acme Mills at the St. Gabriel Locks, Seigneurs Street, Montreal. Acme Mills by this time was "the sole agent in Canada for Macurquhart's of London, dealing in wholesale coffees and spices, Worcestershire sauce, Heinrichs' Refined Family Gelatin, Portland Cement, West Kent Co.'s White Horse Brand, London Portland Cement Co.'s Lighthouse Brand." Charles Liffiton evidently traveled worldwide to advance his business interests. His daughters reported after being away for a considerable time, he turned up at the house one morning and said he had just returned from Egypt.

Muriel was the third of five children born to Charles and Carrie Jane Liffiton. As two of the five children died in infancy, Marguerite Irving Liffiton in 1886, and Gray Goodall Liffiton in 1895, Muriel grew up the middle child between two sisters. Violet Nicholas Liffiton, her elder sister, was born 10 December, 1887. Doris Liffiton, her younger sister, was born 26 June, 1896. In 1886, however, the Charles Liffiton family lived at 13 Lincoln Avenue in Montreal, while between 1891 and 1899, they resided at 252 Bishop. By 1903 the family had moved to Lachine, a town just west of Montreal on the St. Lawrence River. In 1903 they resided on Dixie Street, but by 1906, they had moved next to the river at 620 St. Joseph Street.

Muriel and her sisters were tutored at home prior to attending a private girl's school, St. Paul's, outside of Montreal. Both Violet and Muriel earned reputations as scholars at St. Paul's, but it was Muriel who compiled a set of inscribed leather bound Shakespeare volumes, each volume a prize for the highest marks in a subject. Considered a tomboy in her younger years, Muriel also made a name for herself as a rower. However, an early photograph of Muriel taken by the well-known Notman Studios emphasizes her more feminine side. Her stylish hat and suit imply a comfortable economic status. That is echoed in letters written by her older sister Violet, who in 1911 traveled to Europe with her Aunt Edith (Snetsinger) on the luxurious, but fated steamship *Lusitania*. From London Violet wrote her mother of being introduced to a Russian general at the Continental Hotel, of buying expensive perfume, and of viewing in her hotel room dresses from a French fashion house. Younger sister Doris Liffiton attended school at Oxford and the University of Rome.

Muriel's life probably changed considerably when at eighteen she married Geoffrey Orme Blanchet on 30 May, 1909. Blanchet, a banker and the brother of a classmate was twenty-three and described as very bright yet high strung. After residing in Sherbrooke where Blanchet was a bank manager, they moved to Toronto where he was in charge of foreign exchange at the Bank of Commerce headquarters. Their own family began with the birth of Elizabeth on 1 March, 1913. Frances was born on 21 July, 1914; Joan on 14 May, 1916; Peter on 5 March, 1919; and David on 22 May, 1924.

For health reasons Geoffrey Blanchet took early retirement, though family speculation has it that his poor health was linked to financial failings at the bank. Nevertheless, in 1922 Geoffrey and his family traveled west to Vancouver Island where they moved into an abandoned cottage on Curteis Point near Sidney. It was the "Little House" described in *The Curve of Time*. Although Muriel did have an uncle (Henry Arthur Liffiton) living in nearby Victoria, B.C., the reason Geoffrey and Muriel decided specifically to go to Vancouver is unknown. Her younger sister Doris taught school in Vancouver for about five years after taking vows with the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Soon after the Blanchet family arrived in Vancouver, they purchased the *Caprice* for \$600.00. The price was a good one as the one year old craft had recently been re-floated after a period of being submerged. Five years later, Geoffrey took the boat out camping and never returned. His campsite was located and the boat found, but he was presumed dead. Following Geoffrey's disappearance, Muriel raised and educated her children at home and wrote articles for magazines. In summer the family would rent out their house, and schooling for the children would continue with trips on the *Caprice*. As they sailed the coastal waters between Vancouver Island and the British Columbia mainland, they followed the logbooks and voyages of Captain Vancouver one of the first European visitors to that area. They saw wild animals, rich plant life, and explored deserted Indian villages, and then returned home to read in an encyclopedia about what they had seen.

Muriel raised her children, wrote, and traveled. In 1945, her son David built his mother a new

bungalow overlooking the sea. When David was later hospitalized with polio, Muriel cared for his daughter while her mother Janet was working. In 1961, about seven hundred copies of *The Curve of Time* were printed, and Muriel was given a copy for herself and one for each of her children. On September 9 of that year, Muriel died while sitting at her typewriter working on a second book.

Elizabeth Houghton Blanchet (1913-1995), who was known as Betty, studied nursing prior to becoming a successful romance novelist under a pseudonym in England. She was married twice, first to J. Gilzean and later to J. Parry. Frances Irving Blanchet (1914 -1996) graduated from Vancouver General Hospital as a nurse and practiced that profession for thirty years. She married Ron King, a cattleman in Golden, British Columbia, and they raised their daughter Judith on a ranch beside the Columbia River. Daughter Joan Campbell Blanchet (1916 – unknown) studied art in Vancouver and New York City. After a marriage and a divorce she took up residence in the Queen Charlotte Islands 600 km north of Vancouver Island. Edith Iglauer relates a story about Joan buying an Indian dugout canoe for five dollars to paddle home from Vancouver. The journey took her five days total, and included a nine hour stint of constant paddling at night. Peter Hunton Blanchet (1919 - 1997), known as Tate, became a geological engineer and with his wife Eileen Grose raised a family of thirteen children. John David Hilary Blanchet (1924 - 1981) became an architect and with his wife Janet Patterson raised a daughter, Julia.

All photographs were provided courtesy of Rosemary Joy.

1. Index page of Liffiton Family History at www.liffiton.net for January 2004 based on photograph of Muriel Liffiton circa 1907. This photograph is reported to be by Notman and Sons.
2. Photograph of Geoffrey Orme Blanchet and Muriel Liffiton. They were married on May 30, 1909.
3. Photograph of Muriel Blanchet and her children about 1924.



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Special thanks go to Joan Blanchet, Mardy Winans Elliott, Edith Iglauer, Rosemary Joy, and Judy Reid for providing direction, additional information, photographs and articles.

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