

# Clara Thomas

Founding Faculty Member at York University

Clara Thomas (nee McCandless) was born in 1919. Growing up in an era with few options for women, Clara faced many obstacles while striving for an education and success. Thomas had to be relentless in her pursuits, battling the sexism that existed in the workplace and in literature. Clara grew up in Strathroy and attended Strathroy Collegiate Institute from 1932 - 1937. She was in love with books and continued her education at the University of Western Ontario in Honours English, winning the Governor General's Gold Medal in 1941.

When Thomas attempted to pursue her Ph.D. following her graduation from Western's Master's program, she was sharply reprimanded by an administrator at the University of Toronto who shamed her for trying to carve out her own career. Married to Morley Thomas with two sons, it was seven years before Clara re-applied for her Ph.D. in English. She was granted acceptance in 1957 and was promptly hired by York University upon graduation. She questioned her starting salary as a professor of English and was told to not expect any more simply because she was a woman. "My department head showed me a memo written by the first president of York, stating that department heads should beware of hiring women," Clara reflected in her memoir.

Despite the barriers Clara faced, she became a well-known female figure at York University where she taught until 1984, and nationally as she has inspired women to pursue academics. Producing her thesis on Canadian female authors, Clara ignited a passion for Canadian literature among men and women alike. Over the course of her career, Thomas was elected to the prestigious academic Royal Society of Canada and granted honorary degrees from York, Trent and Brock universities. Clara passed away in 2013 in Strathroy yet her legacy of determination and perseverance remains, making her a HOMETOWN HERO. She is remembered through her publications and through the aptly named Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections at York University.



PHOTO: Clara Thomas in her office at York University, 1978. Courtesy of Morley Thomas.



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PHOTO: Clara Thomas (right) visits the Strathroy Middlesex Museum (now Museum Strathroy-Caradoc), 1974. Age Dispatch Collection, Museum Strathroy-Caradoc.