

# Chapter IV

## Mary Grace Harris' Letters 1923

*Mary Grace Harris (1901-1930) was the eldest child of Newfoundlanders Mamie Jardine<sup>1</sup> and John Harris<sup>2</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup>Mamie Jardine Harris (c.1870-1906) was the daughter of William Jardine and Mary Kearney. Along with several Newfoundland girls, she attended Mount St. Vincent Academy in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Mamie was known for her musical ability and she performed frequently in musical events in St. John's, especially the many benefit concerts which followed the devastating St. John's fire of 1892. She was also a soloist at the Catholic Cathedral. See "Death of Mrs. Harris," *Evening Telegram* [St. John's, Nfld.] 13 Feb. 1906: 4 and "Death of Mrs. John Harris," *Daily News* [St. John's, Nfld.] 14 Feb. 1906: 4 and Amy Louise Peyton, *Nightingale of the North* (St. John's, Nfld: Jespersion Press, 1983) 63 and "Roman Catholic Notes," *Daily News* [St. John's, Nfld.] 30 Sept. 1895: 4 and "Grand Opening," *Daily News* [St. John's, Nfld.] 26 Sept. 1895: 4 and "Mount St. Vincent Academy," *Morning Herald* [Halifax, N.S.] 10 Nov. 1883.

<sup>2</sup>John Harris (c.1860-1915) was born in St. John's and attended St. Bonaventure's College. He became a prominent St. John's businessman (partner in Hearn and Company) and politician. He was an appointed, then an elected, member of the St. John's Municipal Council and a member, later president, of the Newfoundland Legislative Council. Among his many activities, he was one of the founders of the Catholic Cadet Corps, President of the Sealing Disasters Fund and Permanent Marine Disasters Fund, Governor of the Savings Bank and a member of the Academia Club. A close friend of Prime Minister E.P. Morris, John Harris was a warm and caring father who was much loved by his three daughters. See "Obituary" *Daily News* [St. John's, Nfld.] 3 Jan. 1916: 4 and Jack White, "Success Came Early to City Father," *Evening Telegram* [St. John's, Nfld.] 20 Jan. 1996: 4a and "Harris, John," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, 1967.

*Mamie and John were married in August 1900<sup>3</sup> and they lived at 42 Rennie's Mill Road in St. John's. They had three daughters: **Mary**, **Alice**<sup>4</sup> and **Marjorie**<sup>5</sup>.*

*Tragically, Mamie Harris died just a week after the birth of her third daughter and John was left to raise the girls with the help of his sister, Agnes Tobin. John Harris' death followed just nine years later.*



*John and Mamie Harris and two of their daughters, Mary (left) and Alice*

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<sup>3</sup>See "Another Wedding," *Daily News* [St. John's, Nfld.] 28 Aug. 1900: 1 and "A Quiet Wedding," *Evening Telegram* [St. John's, Nfld.] 27 Aug. 1900: 4.

<sup>4</sup>Alice Murphy (1903-1990) is recalled by a schoolmate as a bright, fun-loving girl. She married Dr. Joe Murphy (d. 1958) and lived in St. John's where the couple raised four children - Elizabeth, Brenda Carter, Moya Sharpe and Dennis. Alice is remembered as a very loving woman who welcomed her sister and mother-in-law into the family. Alice and Marjorie maintained a close relationship throughout their lives. See "Deaths," *Evening Telegram* [St. John's, Nfld.] 23 Oct. 1990: 8 and Sister Pauline Martin, personal interview, 10 Dec. 2001.

<sup>5</sup>Marjorie Harris (1906-1989) did not marry but lived with her sister Alice and family. Marjorie was the long time companion of Judge Robert Furlong. See "Deaths", *Evening Telegram* [St. John's, Nfld.] 12 Sept. 1989: 8.



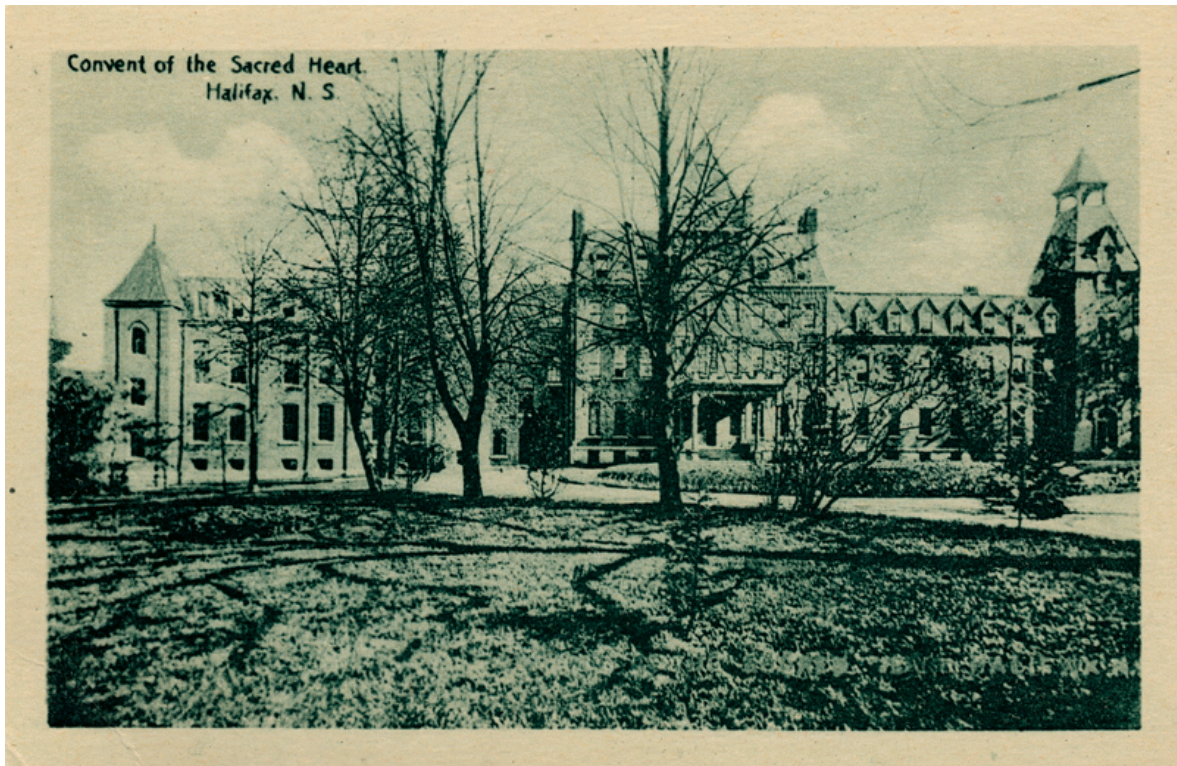
Alice, Marjorie and Mary Harris (c. 1922)

*The three sisters received much of their education from the nuns at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Halifax (now Sacred Heart School) where they attended school as boarders. For Mary, Alice and Marjorie, the school became another home, with the nuns at the Convent responsible for much of their upbringing. Mary was an excellent student and came to believe that she might have a vocation to the religious life. Following her graduation in 1922 she attempted to join the Religious of the Sacred Heart and entered the novitiate in New York State. Because of her poor*



health Mary managed only a very brief time at the novitiate before returning to Newfoundland.

Mary met Bill Browne at the home of her friend Betty McGrath<sup>6</sup> in St. John's and Bill and Mary soon decided to marry.



*Convent of the Sacred Heart, Halifax, N.S.*

Mary wrote these letters to Bill while she was visiting the Convent in Halifax. Mary had received the prestigious Prize of Excellence when she graduated which entitled her to return to the school to give the students a congé or holiday. During Mary's visit to the Convent, her sister Marjorie was still a student there, while Alice had completed her studies and returned to St. John's.

All Mary's letters have the initials *E de M* following her signature. This signifies that she was an "Enfant de Marie" - "Child of Mary", or member of the Sodality of the graduating class.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>See Chapter 1, footnote to Bill Browne's letter 20 Jan. 1919.

<sup>7</sup>See Karen Grandy and Rosanne LeBlanc, eds., *See She Stands - 150 Years of Sacred Heart Memories* (Lockport, N. S.: Community Books) 9.

***Sister Isobel Page, R.S.C.J., Halifax, N.S., provided considerable assistance to me with this section and I am greatly appreciative of her help. Sister Page's short biography of Mary Harris' friend Margaret Lahey (later Sister Margaret Lahey, R.S.C.J.) may be located at Margaret Lahey's footnote or in the Appendix which follows this section. Not only does Sister Page's work provide insight into Sister Lahey's life, but it also sheds considerable light on life at the Convent of the Sacred Heart.***

Convent of the Sacred Heart  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
October 2, 1923

Dearest Bill,

It was so good to see you at the wharf on Saturday (though only at a distance) that I must thank you for coming before proceeding any further. This morning, to my great delight my telegram arrived, and it assured me that you were thinking of me, as I am of you continually.

The passage up was not by any means rough but nevertheless I was ill most of the time - not actively, but squeamish. The first night we were almost swamped because the porthole was open and the water came in wholesale. I went to dinner the first night and enjoyed it, but at breakfast the next morning I was forced to make a hasty exit before the meal was half over. Betty was a wonderful sailor all the time, and she was most attentive to my wants.

I did not see our friend Mr. Merchie (doubtful spelling) from the time he reached the boat until we landed in Halifax (thanks the Lord!).

Yesterday when we arrived it was a most miserable day. I don't think I've ever seen such rain anywhere. However that did not prevent Marge from coming to meet me. Betty came out to the Convent with me, on the nuns' invitation, and we had dinner together. Reverend Mother wanted her to stay overnight but she had already promised to go to Mrs. Martin's. My welcome here was wonderful and Betty said my procession to my room was like an obstacle race. On the way to it I met ten nuns who embraced me warmly and welcomed me so cordially. In my room was a little card with "Welcome Home" on it, also a big vase of flowers.

Yesterday I did not have a single minute free for writing and as it is this letter has had no less than four interruptions.

Congratulations on your victory in the Prohibition case. I'm so glad to hear of it, because I was wondering how it would get on.

This is a most glorious day here, warm and sunshiny. I've been up since a quarter to seven and I went to the Station to see Betty off.

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This afternoon I am going out with Helen O'Connor<sup>8</sup> and this morning I spent listening to Mother Barette playing the organ for an hour, then singing for her, then I was talking to Margaret Lahey<sup>9</sup> for a long time. Mother Turgeon, the new Mistress General, is simply sweet and she has been just as nice to me as if I had known her always. So you see the return is coming up to my highest expectations.

I must tell you about Aunt Agnes. I informed her about half an hour before leaving the house that twenty dollars was not enough for me to spend in Halifax so she fussed and fumed for a long time and finally relented a little and gave me twenty more. So I had to be satisfied with that.

What have you been doing with yourself since I left? I'm longing to have a letter from you to hear all about your adventures. I've told you all I've done so you shall have to do likewise eh?

Marge is so glad to have me that she is just at my beck and call. I went downstairs yesterday for half an hour or so, and when I came back I found my valise unpacked and everything in its place.

I think I shall have to bid you goodbye for the present, but I shall write again the day after tomorrow.

Much much love

From

Mary

Convent of the Sacred Heart  
Spring Garden Road  
Halifax  
October 4, 1923

Dearest Bill,

By rights I should wait to hear from you before writing again, but patience is not my

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<sup>8</sup>Helen Augusta O'Connor Hudson-Allen (c.1904-1993) was born in Halifax. Helen's parents were Mr. and Mrs. J. E. O'Connor; she had a brother, Eric, and a sister, Juanita, who also attended the Convent of the Sacred Heart. Helen graduated from Dalhousie with a B.A. in 1926. She was a long time member of a Halifax poetry society. Unfortunately, later in life, her strong interest in animal welfare led to considerable tension with Halifax neighbours who none-too-affectionately referred to her as the "pigeon lady" for her constant feeding of the birds. Helen died in England near her daughter, Juanita Broughton. See "Deaths," *Plymouth Evening Herald* [Plymouth, England] 26 May 1993 and "Obituaries," *Chronicle Herald* [Halifax, N. S.] 25 May 1993: c3 and Nancy Faulkner, Dalhousie University Alumni Records, e-mail to the author, 8 Feb. 2002.

<sup>9</sup>Margaret Mary Lahey - [see pages 14-23](#)

predominant virtue. I'm hoping to get a letter today, but maybe I won't after all my expectations.

It is simply lovely here, in every way, the weather included. Yesterday I did not go out to the city because one of the girls came out to see me and stayed all day. We talked and talked until we were about hoarse.

You know the stockings of mine with the brown and fawn blocks? Well, I wore them yesterday and the nuns almost expired when they saw them, as they thought them most peculiar.

This afternoon I am going out and I am going to Birks, so the next time I write I shall tell you about the rings and whether I like them or not. And then ...?

How are you and what have you been doing with yourself? I think of you a lot and I'm longing to get your first letter. No, it won't be the first either. I had a note from you once before and c'est tout. It was just a business note though.

Have you seen Mrs. Sullivan<sup>10</sup> lately? She felt very bad about Betty's departure so I hear. Remember me to her won't you?

It's almost lunch time now so I shall have to call a halt, but I simply couldn't let the day go by without even a few lines to you.

Much much love dearest

From

Mary

Convent of the Sacred Heart  
Halifax  
October 9, 1923

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<sup>10</sup>Selina (Browne) Sullivan (c.1846-1932) was Bill's aunt, with whom he had a close relationship. Selina Browne was from Presque, Newfoundland and became the first student of St. Clare's Boarding School when it opened in St. John's in 1861. Selina and her husband Patrick Sullivan had two sons: Michael who had represented the District of Placentia and St. Mary's in the Newfoundland House of Assembly and Thomas who had been the Magistrate at Presque. Selina also had a daughter, Laura McDonald, later of Montreal. From Bill Browne's recollections his Aunt Selina was a very interesting woman who had a wide variety of interests including politics, for which she had considerable understanding, and mining - although she held grants on two or three mines, she was unable to realize her plan to mine them. At the time of Selina's death there was a search in progress for her pilot grandson, Arthur Sullivan, missing and later presumed dead as the result of an accident while flying from St. Anthony, Newfoundland. Selina lived on Bonaventure Avenue in St. John's, near Betty's McGrath's home. See Sister M. Williamina Hogan, *Pathways of Mercy in Newfoundland* (St. John's, Nfld.: Harry Cuff Publications Limited, 1986) 51-53 and Browne, *Eighty-Four Years* 105-107 and "Death of Grandmother of Missing Aviator," *Evening Telegram* [St. John's, Nfld.] 9 June 1932: 4 and "No Tidings Missing Plane and Occupants," *Evening Telegram* [St. John's, Nfld.] 7 June 1932: 4.

Dearest Bill,

You really don't deserve a letter because already I've written twice and I've not had one line from you. However I am writing just a short note this morning to show that there is no ill feeling!

A few days ago I went to Birks and looked at the rings and I was very well satisfied with them. The particular one I wanted they had not got in stock, so they have sent to Montreal for it. It will be here in about a week's time, so now I'm waiting to get the money (\$250.00) so that I can have the ring safe and sound in my own hands.

Yesterday morning I was out shopping and I met Mollie St. John. She told me she had seen you at the boat and that you had sent me "your best." Thank you very much.

I'm living on a very reduced income just now. I've got ten dollars to last me two weeks, and I don't dare ask Aunt Agnes for any more. If I do she'll give me such a hot reception when I come home that it won't be pleasant. My! She makes me mad she's so stingy. I don't know how I'm going to manage, but there's no use worrying about it or bothering you with my pecuniary difficulties.

I've bought a new coat and new hat which I'm sure you will like. I won't describe them to you, but I'll let them be a surprise. Saturday Marge and I were out all day together. We had lunch in the city and then we went to a show called Alias Nora O'Brien. There wasn't much to it but it was quite amusing. This afternoon I'm going to see Booth Tarkington's Seventeen with Margaret Lahey and on Sunday I'm going over to Dartmouth to spend a few days with her.

I haven't heard from Betty yet so I have not been able to write her since I don't know her address.

I think of you by night and by day and wonder what you are doing. I got a sweet little book of Marjorie Pickthall's poems (the author of *Duna*<sup>11</sup>). I'm sure you will like them when you read them.

Au revoir and please write soon.

Yours as ever

Mary

Telegram to William J. Browne, 89 Casey Street, St. John's, Nfld  
Halifax, N. S.  
October 10, 1923

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<sup>11</sup>"When I was a little lad  
With folly on my lips,  
Fain was I for journeying  
All the seas in ships..."

See, for example Marjorie Pickthall, *The Selected Poems of Marjorie Pickthall*, ed. Lorne Pierce (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1957) 43.



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HAVE ORDERED RING SEND MONEY IMMEDIATELY LETTER FOLLOWING  
LOVE MARY

Convent of the Sacred Heart  
Halifax  
October 13, 1923

Bill my dear love,

At last two letters have come to delight my heart, and I'm so glad that one of mine has at length reached you. Two others are either on their way or in St. John's by this time. Everything you told me interested me deeply and I read your letter again and again to make sure I had skipped nothing. The mails must have been in a frightful condition because both of us seemed to be wondering why the other had not written. That's not very well put I'm afraid, but you know what I mean don't you dearest?

Some of the nuns have heard from I don't know who, that I am engaged and they are delighted about it. I have told Reverend Mother,<sup>12</sup> Mother Turgeon and Madame McDermott and they are all unanimous in their approval. Reverend Mother said "Mary, you would never stand the religious life so I am glad that you are to have a good Catholic husband to make you very happy."

Monsignor Foley, a great friend of mine, told me not to think of entering again<sup>13</sup>. He said my vocation is the married life and that's what the Lord wants me to do. He said that when God

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<sup>12</sup>Reverend Mother Wauters, a Belgian nun, "a lovely gracious lady whose English was picturesque," was the nun in charge of the Halifax Convent at that time. Sister Isobel Page, R.S.C.J., letter to the author, 4 Jan. 2002.

<sup>13</sup>Rt. Reverend Monsignor William Foley (-1926), frequently referred to as Dr. Foley, was a much loved Halifax priest. He was born in Halifax, attended old St. Mary's College and then studied at Laval University where he received a Doctor of Divinity. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1889. While he spent nine years serving in Wedgeport, then Parrsboro, Nova Scotia, the remainder of his priesthood was spent in Halifax where he was best known as Rector of St. Mary's Cathedral, now St. Mary's Basilica. Rather unusually, Monsignor Foley was chosen as bishop in 1906, but this decision of the advisory council was over-turned by Pope Pius X. While Monsignor Foley was considered a scholar and writer who was especially interested in education, he was best known and loved in Halifax for the warm, caring manner in which he related to others, regardless of religion or income or education. Karen White, Archivist and Librarian, Archdiocese of Halifax, e-mail to the author, 20 Sept. 2001 and "Community Mourns for Late Prelate," *Halifax Herald* [Halifax, N. S.] 7 June 1926: 1 and Dr. J. D. Logan, "With Charity Towards All," *Halifax Herald* [Halifax, N. S.] 7 June 1926: 5 and "A Prince Has Fallen This Day," *Halifax Herald* [Halifax, N. S.] 7 June 1926: 5 and "Monsignor Foley," *Halifax Herald* [Halifax, N. S.] 7 June 1926: 6.

took away my health He did not do it in a haphazard way, but with the intention of showing me that I was not meant to be a nun. He said too, "I never thought you were cut out for a nun anyway." When I told Madame McDermott his opinion she said, "The clergy will be Bill's friends forever." She has reached the stage when she calls you "Bill" now. So, I'm happy and my mind is at rest, you're happy and we're all happy eh?

I would be much more so if my pocket book was not so empty. Five dollars is the extent of my wealth at present. Darn Aunt Agnes anyway!

I'd love to have seen All of a Sudden Peggy. It must have been good. So, Maria Hutton really did well. She is crazy to go on the stage you know.<sup>14</sup>

I had a letter from Betty yesterday. She has had a furious siege of homesickness, but is over it now. She says Jack's home is beautiful and he's teaching her to drive his car. She told about Jim Conroy on the way up and I couldn't suppress my gurgles of surprise!<sup>15</sup> Her mother is quite upset about it (or was).

This day week will be Old Pupils' Day and great preparations for it are taking place. I'm

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<sup>14</sup> Maria Dolores Hutton Pigot (c1906-1997) was the eldest daughter of Charles (1861-1949) and Antonia Hutton. Charles Hutton had a long and distinguished career in St. John's, Nfld. as a musician. He was organist at the Catholic Cathedral for more than sixty years, taught, operated a music store, and organized musical productions in St. John's. He was honoured by the Catholic Church for his work and also received the Order of the British Empire. This was Maria Hutton's first theatrical performance in St. John's and for the remainder of her life music continued to be extremely important to her. Maria married actor Lesley Pigot and lived in Halifax, N. S. where she worked for many years at Mills Brothers. The Pigots had a daughter, Patricia MacNeil, and a son, David. See "All-of-a-Sudden Peggy," *Evening Telegram* [St. John's, Nfld.] 9 Oct. 1923: 4 and "Death of Most Noted Musician," *Evening Telegram* [St. John's, Nfld.] 2 Feb. 1949: 3 and "Obituaries," *Chronicle Herald* [Halifax, N. S.] 20 Mar. 1997:D10 and Patricia MacNeil, e-mail to the author, 20 Feb. 2002.

<sup>15</sup> James O'Neill Conroy (1900-1931) was the eldest son and one of the eight children of Charles O'Neill Conroy and Mary Agnes Weathers. He graduated from St. Bonaventure's College, St. Edmunds College, England and, along with Bill Browne, was enrolled as a Solicitor of Newfoundland in October of 1922. He married Betty McGrath in 1926 and they had two children - a son Charles who became a priest and a daughter Margie who became a nun (R.S.C.J.), both of whom were to become well-known missionaries. Jim was Solicitor for the city of St. John's for a number of years and, shortly before he died, he and his father, Charles, established the law practice of Conroy and Conroy; Jim's place in the firm was later taken over by his widow. Bill Browne described his friend Jim as "a great reader being exceptionally well informed on public matters here and abroad, as well as possessing great literary ability...he was most devoted to the country's welfare, particularly to the city of St. John's...he had a gift for friendship and although modest and retiring he was beloved by many and respected by all who knew him." See "Death Comes Suddenly to Young Lawyer" and "Expressions of Regret at Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram* [St. John's, Newfoundland] 12 May 1931: 4 and "Obituary," *Evening Telegram* [St. John's, Nfld.] 21 Dec. 1946: 3.

helping in all the singing. In the afternoon at the Entertainment I'm going to sing Nursery Rhymes and Break Break Break and at Benediction the Ave Maria I sang in the church that Sunday. All the old pupils I meet seem to be getting new dresses for the occasion. Reverend Mother Mahoney, one of the first pupils of this House, and Mother Padberg are here from Montreal for the occasion.

Tomorrow I'm going over to Dartmouth to stay with Margaret Lahey until Thursday. I saw Seventeen with her on Wednesday. We both laughed so much at it that I'm sure people near us thought we had softening of the brain!

I guess Maria Gomez will appear in all her glory on Monday. Too bad I won't be here to see her.

The woods around here are simply marvellous. Yesterday I was motoring with Helen O'Connor and we went way beyond Bedford. I never saw anything so pretty as the reflection of the trees in their vari-coloured robes, in the smooth, sun-lit surface of Bedford Basin.

Thank you a thousand times for the telegram announcing that you have sent the draft. I think the ring will be very pretty. At any rate I'm satisfied with it, and I think you will be, so what else matters?

Four of the girls from here have gone to Dalhousie this year, and two others are taking their M.A. this year, one in Economics and the other in Shakespeare. Both are friends of mine.<sup>16</sup> There is a wonderful new women's residence called "Sheriff Hall" and I'm going out to see it someday next week.

I'm so glad you have purchased some new books to feed your mind for a month. I got another one of Marjorie Pickthall's books yesterday. I just love her poems. She is not a Catholic but one would think she was, to read her poems. She must have had a very beautiful and a very spiritual mind to write as she did. I'm hoping you will like her poems too. I never know exactly whether your taste in literature coincides with mine or not.

I dreamt about you all night and it was a very pleasant dream too. You are not very often away from my thoughts although you will not believe this when I tell you I'm sure!

Yesterday Mother Turgeon handed me your letter and she was beaming all over. She said "this will make you happy as it looks like a gentleman's handwriting."

The filling fell out of Marge's tooth last night at supper and she has to go to the Dentist in a few minutes and as I am to accompany her I had better say au revoir to you dearest.

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<sup>16</sup>Two of the students studying at Dalhousie were Helen O'Connor - see footnote letter of 2 Oct. 1923 - and Mary Eileen Burns (1901-1995) of Halifax, who was the daughter of John and Eveleen (Enslow) Burns. Eileen had a sister, Eveleen, and three brothers, Gerald, John and Bill. Eileen received her B.A. from Dalhousie in 1922 and her M.A. in 1924, becoming a teacher and librarian at St. Patrick's High School in Halifax. She served for many years on a wide variety of Halifax organizations, receiving the Papal Medal in recognition for her work in "the Christian Community" in 1969, and, in 1973, she received the Canadian Library Trustees Association Merit Award "for her outstanding contribution to library service in Canada." See "Obituaries," *Chronicle Herald* [Halifax, N. S.] 18 Jan. 1995: c14 and Nancy Faulkner, Dalhousie University Alumni Records, e-mail to the author, 6 Feb. 2002.

Ever your affectionate  
Mary  
Give my love to your Mother.

Convent of the Sacred Heart  
Spring Garden Road  
Halifax, N.S.  
October 16, 1923

My darling Bill,

I've just returned from Dartmouth where I've been since Sunday with Margaret Lahey and I found a letter dated the 11<sup>th</sup> waiting for me. By this time you will be well assured that I have no intentions of becoming a religious as you feared. I wrote you on Saturday and hope you have received the letter by this time. I'm awfully sorry I haven't written oftener but sometimes it's absolutely impossible to write because people think they have to be sociable and leave me very few spare minutes to myself.

I also must say a very heartfelt "Thanks" for the draft so promptly sent - just like you Bill, to be so expeditious and thoughtful. The ring has arrived and it's absolutely "scrumptious" - a "ring of rings"; I couldn't wish for anything nicer, except for the time when you dearest will put it on my finger. The diamond is lovely - large and brilliant - and I'm enraptured with the setting. I have shown it to no one yet, but I want Marge to see it before I go.

I must take back all I said about Aunt Agnes because when I wired her for some more money she sent me a draft for \$50.00 immediately, which I think was wonderful of her.

Two weeks from today I shall be leaving for home and then we shall have a happy happy meeting because as the old proverb says "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" and its true in our case, although you won't believe me when I tell you so, I'm thinking.

You have no idea how happy I am to have my mind settled on the question of marriage once and for all. Now I can look forward to loving you and making a happy cheerful home pro semper.<sup>17</sup>

I am enjoying my stay in a peculiar manner because I probably won't ever be here in this capacity again, so you understand dear, don't you?

I've made a few additions to my hope chest. This morning I got a cloth suitable for a table or for a bridge cloth. It is a lovely piece of linen.

I've been wondering lately how your throat is. You haven't said anything about it in any of your letters, so I presume it is quite well again. I have not forgotten about the neckties, and I hope to have some other souvenir of this visit to bring you.

For pity's sake don't get a cold driving, because if I am any judge of weather it must be

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<sup>17</sup>Pro semper is Latin meaning *for always*.

rather cool in St. John's now. Have you been out around Broad Cove lately? It must be wonderful there now with the trees in their autumn dress.

How is Mrs. Sullivan? Remember me to her and to your Mother, dearest, please.

Every cute little house I see I think of what ours will be like. Land is much cheaper at home than here I think.

Well dear one I must say au revoir until tomorrow, and from this out I shall try to be a more regular correspondent.

All my love and a promise of many prayers for your health and success.

Mary



**APPENDIX****Margaret Mary Lahey  
1903 – 1987**

by Isobel Page, R.S.C.J.

Margaret Lahey was more than a fine religious, a born teacher, a faithful friend; she was a very complex personality: open, outgoing, warm, sympathetic, impulsive, cheerful, humourous, practical and efficient but at the same time often subject to despondency, to self-depreciation, to unnamed fears. Yet most of the people whose lives she influenced, even those with whom she lived, were unaware of the dark side of her character with which she struggled all her life. One was always conscious of her powerful personality wherever she lived, and when she died, fellow religious and close friends across Canada and the U.S. experienced the extinction of a light – something bright gone from their lives.

Margaret Mary Lahey was born June 30, 1903 in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, the eldest of the seven children of James Lahey and Harriet O’Toole. There were four boys and three girls in the family, ruled over by a stern Irish father and a gentle Irish mother. The oldest and youngest, Margaret and Agnes, became religious of the Sacred Heart. Margaret was supposed to give good example to the younger children, as well as help look after them and she used to describe her wonderful mother as she remembered her sitting in the kitchen peeling vegetables and simultaneously rocking a cradle with her foot and giving directions to Margaret. There always seemed to be a new baby and she liked to recall with humour her innocence regarding the mystery of birth. A mid-wife neighbour would appear, her mother would retire to the spare room for a few days and the children were barred from entrance. The doctor came and went and then a new sound, a wailing infant. She never knew exactly where it came from nor did she speculate.

Margaret developed the reputation of a tom-boy as she grew up, getting into hot water with her brothers, tearing her clothes or losing her boots when she went skating. The family had a horse and buggy as a means of transportation and she loved to get the reins in her hands.

There was no Catholic school in Dartmouth so when she reached school age, Margaret began her years of ferry travel across the harbour to school in Halifax. She first attended St. Mary’s elementary school, and when she finished Grade 8, she enrolled at the Convent of the Sacred Heart where she was a student from 1917 to 1923. For the first five

years, she made the daily trip across the harbour which was followed by a mile and a half walk, mostly uphill, without ever being absent or late! For her last year in the graduating class, she boarded, which meant staying at the convent except for the Christmas and summer vacation and perhaps two days at Easter. She used to recall with gleeful horror, the one day her brothers came to visit her. The convent portress at that time had a city wide reputation for a non-welcoming stance in the face of anyone who dared ring the bell. Her concept of the role of portress seemed to be that she was there to keep intruders out rather than invite them in. When Margaret arrived in the parlour, there were her brothers, sitting uncomfortably on the hard chairs each in his stocking feet with boots in hand. Over them hovered the portress warning them not to dare let their boots touch the shiny floor. They didn't stay long nor did they come again.

Margaret was a good, hard-working student but she never enjoyed study and always claimed to be a non-intellectual, uninterested in books. Unconsciously, she let this tendency give her a feeling of inferiority. But at school, she was immensely popular with her teachers and fellow students and if any job came up requiring hard physical work, she was the leader. And she was quick to spot and to help any girl who was unhappy, homesick or in trouble. One contemporary recalls her first days at the convent. She was an out-of-town student and in one of the higher classes so boarding school was a new fearful experience for her. She was given a dormitory alcove next to Margaret, and sat frozen on her bed while the others went about their business in silence. Their night business in those days meant drawing a pitcher of water from the one available tap, pouring the water into a basin in the alcove, getting washed and then carrying the basin of soapy water precariously to a large tub in the centre of the dormitory. Around the tub stood girls in bath robes with mugs, cleaning their teeth – of course in silence. The newcomer, after initiation, was wondering how she could stand one more night when over the top of the alcove partition came a small bag with a note attached. The note offered help and the bag some candy. As the days went by more little tokens came her way until she felt at home. She and Margaret remained life-long friends and always signed mutual letters “over the top”.

Another fellow student, Sister Sheila Conroy, recalls her first winter at the convent in 1918 when there was still no heating in the school though a year had passed since the furnace was damaged beyond repair in the Halifax explosion. The boarders endured the morning study period in the study hall wrapped in coats or heavy sweaters. She lived for the arrival of her desk mate, Margaret, who would come into the study hall, curtsy to the surveillante and then greet Sheila with a smile that warmed her inside and outside. During the holidays an invitation came to the marooned boarders who could not go home to ice-bound Newfoundland, to spend an afternoon at the Lahey home which was bliss to the lonely girls.

The retreat she made during her final year at the convent with Father Fillion, S.J. convinced her of her religious vocation and after a year at home, when she did substitute teaching, Margaret went to Kenwood, Albany, the novitiate of the religious of the Sacred

Heart. Mother Gertrude Bodkin, mistress of novices, understood her as perhaps no one else did, and she loved this lively, generous, outspoken and unpredictable Canadian. When Margaret left the novitiate, after making her vows, Mother Bodkin remarked to the novices at recreation, "I hope you realize what you have lost". Yet she knew the real Margaret and when one congé day, the Mistress of Novices assigned two descriptive letters to each novice, Margaret's were "PP". No one could guess what they stood for and many were baffled to discover their cryptic interpretation "painful presentiment".

She made her First Vows in March 1927 and for the next year divided her time between Manhattanville and Grosse Point. One of her jobs at Manhattanville was night visitor which was time-consuming in that old rambling building and one she carried out with considerable trepidation as the lower corridors housed rats and scuttling cockroaches. She once even encountered a human intruder who ran from her light in terror. She went to Summer School at Fordham for the next few years obtaining her B.A. in 1930.

Her first real apostolate was at the Sault from 1928 to 1932 in the capacity of surveillante of the Lower Seniors, and then in charge of the Junior School and teaching various elementary classes. The juniors found in her the mother they had left when sent to boarding school and they idolized her. Many kept in touch with her long after leaving school and their happy memories of the Sault were Mother Lahey. They were not easy children to manage – many of them lively French Canadians who were always into mischief. Yet she used to tell the story of how before Primes one day, when they were all squirming waiting for the arrival of the Reverend Mother, she told them severely "Mettez vos pieds sur le plafond". They didn't slide onto the floor with feet in the air as they well might have but one ran to her and whispered: "'plancher', ma mère". A fellow religious recalls that one warm spring day, Margaret let her charges pull off their stockings and shoes and run barefoot in the cool, new grass. Their squeals of delight reached the ear of some stickler for observance who reported the scene and Margaret was fully reprimanded and warned "never again". She was ready to leave for Summer School in June 1929 when the Sault was struck by lightning and a good portion of the building went up in flames. The pupils had left for the vacation but some retreatants were housed in one of the dormitories. Margaret went to their aid to help them get their belongings to safety and they had pretty well succeeded when irate firemen ordered them out of the burning building.

In February 1932, she went to Probation at the Mother House and she always kept happy memories of those days and of the kindness and understanding of Mother Datti with whom she corresponded for years. On her return she went to Halifax to begin one of the most fruitful and happiest times of her career, her years at College Street School. It was a challenging job, both her role as teacher and Principal, but it was one that gave scope to her many gifts: organizing scouts, guides, basketball and hockey teams, alter boys, school choirs and plays, training young teachers and maintaining the building with none too reliable janitors.

On top of it all there was the little matter of responsibility for some 400 students and

keeping on the right side of the School Board and inspectors. Again, her outgoing personality won her friends and she herself had a special place in her heart for the older boys who were in her class and who would do anything for her. One of these boys, Monsignor Richard Murphy, gave the homily at her funeral Mass and summed it all up when he called her a “surrogate mother for all of us”. The war years brought air-raid sirens and alerts and the commandeering of the boys’ playground by the War Measures Act, to be used for the building of army quarters for the WAAC’s. She took it all in her stride and hit upon the idea of using the stirrup pump, provided by the air-raid emergency equipment at the convent, to flood the girls’ playground to make a hockey rink. She would cheer on the Team, encourage them when they lost and spend the weekend washing the uniforms which were always kept carefully at the school along with gear.

When things were at sixes and sevens and rules broken as is the lot of every school from time to time, Margaret could give strong reprimands and have the miscreants shaking in their shoes, but they knew too, that her wrath would very soon abate, there would be a joke and the tension would break. College Street School had a history of memorable Principals and she carried on the tradition which gave the school a reputation for scholastic excellence and a family atmosphere. Nor did she lose touch with her students when they left for High School, and when they came to visit her as grown men and women she always recognized them. In 1964, when the school had been closed for 12 years and the building burned to the ground, she arranged a reunion of former CSS students which was a tremendous success. At the same time, there was a drive for contributions towards the cost of a sprinkler system for the convent building – a system which the fire department made of obligation if the building were to continue as a school. It was former College Street students who raised the necessary funds.

In 1944, Margaret resigned as Principal and returned to the Sault where she was Surveillante General and worked in the Treasury. In 1946 she began her “western apostolate”, her very active years as Assistant, Dépensière and Mistress of Health in both Winnipeg and Vancouver. All were new employments for her but she took them on with her usual energy and efficiency besides bringing her loving, vibrant personality to the new situations and winning lasting friends. She was a devoted Mistress of Health and her care of the sick was endless but more important was her unquenchable sense of humour which cheered her patients and endeared her to all the doctors with whom she came in contact. She would dream up all manner of little treats for her invalids which speeded the recovery process. The coadjutrix sisters knew that they had in her a redoubtable friend and advocate and they looked forward to recreations. Any employment she had was kept in meticulous order. She could always put her hand on anything requested: a pencil sharpener, a screw driver, a jar of ointment, a can of beans.

She spent three years at Ravenscourt, the foundation house in Winnipeg where everything was in short supply from money and pupils to space and furnishings. The small community put up with every inconvenience possible and managed to do it with a light heart

due in large part to Margaret's exuberance. She knew how to follow Chesterton's advice to look on an inconvenience as a great adventure.

Her next move was to Vancouver where she spent almost ten years – again as Assistant and Mistress of Health. In these employments she showed her concern for the young religious and for the various employees in the house. She used to say that she could tell a person's state of mind and health by her walk and if she sensed that some young person was having difficulties, she would respond indirectly by leaving a candy bar in an alcove or giving some little recognition which certainly saved a vocation here and there. On one occasion, a young over-worked aspirant, sleeping in a dormitory, failed to wake at the right time. Margaret noticed the silent dormitory, guessed what had happened so she roused the children and hurried them about their business while allowing the culprit to get dressed herself and make her way to Mass.

She easily related to the many handymen who were always part of the convent life. One of her "specials" was Tony – a Spaniard, who turned up for an interview in answer to the convent advertisement for help. Margaret hired him for his uncompromising answer to her blunt question, "Do you drink?" "Yes, I do, but I don't get drunk", he replied. They became fast friends and she tried to get him interested in his religion by giving him a Spanish edition of The Way of Divine Love. After a few years of dependable service and good workmanship, he grew restless and left Vancouver to make his way on foot through the U.S. to South America. He knew exactly the time and the place to get across the border without detection. He wrote to Margaret for years until he finally returned to his birth place and his sister sent news of his death. It was probably about this time that she began her letter writing apostolate which continued until her death.

Where most of us, after meeting a person in one place, generally lose contact, when we move to another, after one or two Christmas greetings, Margaret's letters continued and her envelopes nearly always contained enclosures – clippings, cards, anything she could find that might interest or amuse the recipient. One such person was a Dutch woman and her family whom she met in Vancouver. A probanist had met the father of the family on board ship and had given him the address of the Vancouver convent as somewhere he might go for help on arrival in a new country. Margaret took the family under her wing and for some time they lived in "the residence" a building on the property which housed the laundry and living quarters above. In time, the mother arrived with a retarded son and spent the first months of her stay working for the Canadian certification as a nurse. After difficult years, the family finally got on its feet. Margaret moved away but kept in touch with frequent letters for many years until Mrs. G. became ill and died. The next correspondent was the husband and finally the daughter. Margaret's letters and prayers were a constant source of support to this family through financial difficulties, through alcoholism and attempted suicide, through illness and death. Another refugee, a German woman who had escaped from Russia under hair-raising conditions, turned up in Vancouver and for ten years or so, looked after the "lingerie" at the convent. She, too, corresponded until her death. And then,



of course, there were the students, chiefly boarders, with whom she kept in touch. She had a special soft spot for the “Latinas” and had a gift for calming them when their Latin temperaments exploded under the restraints of boarding school life. Christmas always brought letters and gifts from several of them. One former student felt that Mother Lahey, more than anyone else, was the subtle influence which kept Alumnae groups alive and faithful. In Halifax, for example, some years after she had retired, the girls who wanted to celebrate with a class reunion, their tenth or twenty-fifth anniversary of graduation, would make contact with the school through her.

One last group of people with whom she corresponded was rather unique in that they were individuals she had not actually met. A few examples must suffice. When she was working in the Treasury at the Sault in the late fifties, it was the era of the tremendous popularity of Mother Nealis’s pictures and one of her jobs was to fill orders for holy cards. One such order came from an old pupil of Hove, England. Letters were exchanged and correspondence started which lasted until 1986 when a letter came from the correspondent’s father telling of her sad death from cancer. When Margaret herself died, her community received a letter from another woman she had never met. She was an air force officer during World War II who used to attend Sunday Mass at the convent with other armed forces personnel and she often had breakfast there with the chaplain. When she left Halifax for another billet, she wrote a note of thanks to the convent for their hospitality and Margaret volunteered to answer. The correspondence lasted from 1945 onwards and was always signed – “Your pen-pal”.

Sister Lahey’s last assignment in a school situation was a very fruitful ten years in Halifax. A new wing was built on the convent to allow for more students and she was given charge of the “Lower Seniors” who occupied the second floor of the new building with a spacious study hall and classrooms of their own. She had an enormous influence on these young teenagers going through the trauma of growing up through Grades 6, 7, 8. Her study hall was always spotless, desks in order and everyone busy. At noontime she organized clubs to cover a wide variety of interests from chess to puppet making. They loved her and so did the teachers with whom she worked. Her teaching methods might have been “old-fashioned” but the results were more impressive than those achieved by many a modern method. She taught Grade 7 subjects and by the end of the year there were very few who could not read and spell above their grade level. Many of these girls continued to keep in touch with her as they continued their education through university, entered the business world and in many cases, married. She made a rule for herself never to attend a wedding because if she went to one, there would be three more that year wanting her presence. In 1972, she resigned and there was no problem that year in deciding the dedication of the Year Book. An era in the life of the Halifax convent had come to an end.

In spite of the successes she experienced in these years, it was also a time of great suffering, both physical and moral. Arthritis, which had attacked her knees in the sixties, became aggravated until she found walking painful. It was fear and the moral suffering she

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experienced in the face of the many and rapid changes overtaking religious life that disturbed her. She fought against them almost blindly and was sometimes very bitter in her reactions. It took her a long time to come to terms with the way young religious were discarding the habit, going to hairdressers and giving up fixed monastic customs. But she finally adopted secular dress herself, along with a wig, because she realized that one could not turn back the clock and that one's clothing was not the essence of religious life. Yet her 'painful presentiments' grew in magnitude when bouts of depression overtook her and she had to struggle to maintain her centre of gravity. Her natural buoyancy kept her going and then she was offered a new and wonderfully life-giving apostolate when she set out, in the fall of 1972, to work in the Kenwood infirmary.

On paper she was retired but, in fact, she was on duty for eight hours a day caring for bed-ridden religious whom she had known at Manhattanville when she lived there after her first vows. Then she had been awed and slightly overwhelmed by the scintillating conversation that went on at recreation between these remarkably intelligent and holy women. Now these same religious were dependent on the care of others. They loved Sister Lahey and she could always get them to laugh if only at her own antics. She had an assembly line system to get a group of her charges ready for Mass: stockings on the first, outer garments on another, back to the first with shoes and so on with the result that all were ready together. Contacts at Kenwood broadened her outlook and helped her see changes in a positive light. After ten tiring months in this work, she was asked to help with the organization of the first Canadian retirement house in Montreal and then to be in charge of it. She devoted herself with her usual wholeheartedness but the responsibility of running it was something she could not face. She helped in the infirmary at the City House for some months and then she returned to Kenwood for another year and a half of nursing. In June, 1976 she left Kenwood for good and then spent a deeply appreciated time of renewal at Pickering.

She returned to Halifax for the last stage in her life – 11 years when her activities would be curtailed in some measure but years when she was still carrying on an amazingly wide apostolate. Three of her brothers had already died, and the fourth, Fred, was in a nursing home in Halifax. She had the joy of being able to visit him and to be a support to him and his family until his death two years later, something she had little opportunity to do when Walter and Pat were hospitalized. During these years she lived first at Spring Garden Road and then at Barat Residence when it was completed in 1980. Through most of these years she was involved in the literacy program carried on at the Convent by volunteer tutors two evenings a week. The students were from all walks of life, all ages and varying educational backgrounds, from complete illiterates to those who had missed out on schooling and needed help and encouragement. For the first years she had a class of men, numbering four or five. As usual she struck up close friendships with these students, some of whom were with her for two or more years and who made excellent progress. One in particular went on to earn his Grade 12 in a G.E.D. programme. He was a skilled chef in a

hospital and Margaret was overjoyed when he won a gold medal in a Maritime chef's contest for his creation of Da Vinci's Last Supper modelled in confectionery sugar!

A year before her death, when pupils came to her at Barat Residence, as she was in a wheelchair, a young man was entrusted to her to learn spelling, grammar and basic Math. With her help, he passed examinations and was able to enter a university programme for mature students. She helped him in other ways as well. He lived with his mother who died very suddenly from a heart attack which was a traumatic experience for him and Margaret helped him live through it. He had never had much contact with any religion, let alone nuns, so he called her affectionately "Teach" and her face would light up when he came in, tired and dirty after work in a machine shop, and call out, "Hi Teach!"

Her last pupil was a black lady named "Lydia" who worked in the kitchen at the nearby Maternity Hospital. After three years of instruction, she had made very little progress in the art of reading but it was not a skill she really needed because she was filled with the Spirit and loved to speak up in her congregation and testify for the Lord. She came to pay her respects when she heard of Margaret's death and between her sobs of real grief, she cried: "She was real...you's all real but she was very real. I's gonna miss her terrible. She was jus like a mother to me." Perhaps her remarks sum up Margaret better than any other words.

One could go on indefinitely giving instances of the wide spectrum of people with whom she made contact during her last years of so-called retirement: members of the nursing staff at St. Vincent's Guest House where her brother and then her sister, Jane, were patients; a woman who occupied the bed next to her when she was hospitalized in 1983; nurses at the Civic Hospital where she visited over the years. One particular patient was a young man who was completely paralysed as the result of an accident, so much so that he could neither move nor speak, but his sight, hearing and mental faculties were unharmed. She would take him anything she thought might interest him and above all, she would make him laugh. His parents appreciated her visits more than they could say.

One day she was asked by the rector of St. Mary's Basilica if she would be willing to help an Indian priest from Kerala who had been assigned to the staff. He could write English very well and spoke it with a certain fluency but no one could understand him when he preached. Margaret accepted to work with him to try to improve his pronunciation and intonation. She would listen to his Sunday sermon many times and persuade him to make it shorter until there was an improvement. When he left Halifax, he kept in touch, writing several times a year and very evidently appreciating her letters to him.

And what about her spiritual life? Her prayer life over the years was simple and based on her deep faith. She was a firm believer in novena prayers and for desperate situations, she would resort to the thirty-day prayer to St. Joseph. Her little book of retreat notes gives glimpses of her soul and her life-time struggle with her own self. On one occasion she realized that she had not learned "to dialogue with God" in her prayer nor did she know how to use Scripture to feed her soul. Quotations which she wrote indicate that

her director was always exhorting her to put all her sins into the hands of Our Lord and to realize that His love is more powerful than any sinfulness – that a loss of peace of mind comes from the evil spirit. One of the retreats made in the eighties which touched her profoundly was given by Father George Maloney, S.J. at Bethany in Antigonish. After one of the conferences she wrote: “no words can describe this talk – how good God is to me to let me be present at this retreat. I find myself saying ‘Lord, I am not worthy’ and I am beginning, after so many years of religious life and so many retreats, to realize that God loves me – always did and always will.” She came from this retreat with a new and deeper understanding of contemplative prayer, which previously, she said, was not for her.

From clippings she saved and quotations she copied on the “aging process” and growing old in general, one realizes how hard she had to fight to accept a role of diminishment, of unimportance, of pain and dependency. She struggled to believe that her inactivity could have any meaning though she tried to live her life each day asking for faith and courage to keep on. She found the new vocabulary used in the Society with words such as “discernment”, “co-responsibility”, “charism” incomprehensible and she resented the paperwork given to communities, especially retirement communities, as the Society worked at involving all its members in decision-making at every level. Shared prayer was something she could not understand and hence she disliked it. Yet she continued to pour out her concern for her many friends and to be a source of support to many people, failing to realize that her gift of herself to others was the expression of her love of God. We found out, for example, when she died, that for over ten years she had phoned daily a man who had once been a pupil of College Street but had become an invalid when still young and hence housebound. Her call was a life-line for him.

God, in His inscrutable wisdom, chose to purify Margaret during the last months of her life by severe suffering. Around Easter she became very suffering but did not consult her doctor. In May she fell in her room and her condition necessitated hospitalization. She was admitted to the Halifax Infirmary and subjected to five weeks of painful testing which gave the report that there was no disorder beyond her arthritic condition. So she returned to Barat Residence and began therapy which seemed to help her but she had a second fall and broke her hip. More hospitalization, surgery and then a return home while she was still very ill and confused. Then very evident symptoms of internal trouble took over, preventing her from retaining any nourishment. She herself asked to be admitted to the Civic Hospital where she had so often visited her paraplegic friend. Here she was received by a loving staff who knew her and also knew that she was dying. Two days after admission, she died quietly and peacefully while her sister, Sister Agnes Lahey, was praying with her. Her own community were at Mass on the feast of St. Clare, saying the entrance antiphon “Come bride of Christ, and receive the crown which the Lord has prepared for you”. There was rejoicing that her suffering was over but her death brought a sense of emptiness to many and an awareness that a bright light had been extinguished.

According to her own wish the wake was held at a local funeral parlour where large

numbers of relatives and friends came to pray beside her and to recall their relationships with her as well as to express consternation at her unexpected death. Some 300 friends filled St. Mary's Basilica for her funeral giving witness to the many whose lives had been touched by Sister Margaret Lahey during her eighty-four years. Monsignor Albert O'Driscoll celebrated the Mass, Monsignor Richard Murphy gave the homily and Bishop William Power the final blessing. She was buried in Mount Olivet Cemetery. A wreath laid on her grave came from a College Street boy in Newfoundland – a fitting tribute to one who never seemed to forget a friend.