

Allie Vibert Douglas 1894-1988

distinguished Queen's astrophysicist

Dr. Allie Vibert Douglas, one of Canada's best-known astrophysicists, was a remarkable woman, far ahead of her time.

She was born in Montreal to itinerant Methodist missionaries and raised with her brother by her aunt, who took them to England for several years. Vibert attended elementary school in Sussex and a Quaker school in London. When the family returned to Montreal she went to Westmount Academy.

She became a strong swimmer at her family's island near Gananoque, where they spent summers. After high school, Vibert attended McGill, but suspended her studies in 1916 to work as a statistician at the War Office in London. For her contribution she was made a member of the Order of the British Empire.

She continued at McGill, earning her B.A. in 1920 and her M.Sc. a year later. Vibert then won a scholarship to Cambridge. After auditing an introductory class with leading astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington, she fell in love with astrophysics and started studying with Eddington. In 1926 she completed her doctorate in astrophysics at McGill, performing a spectroscopic study of the very hot A and B stars. She was a lecturer at McGill for 13 years.

In 1939, Vibert, now a distinguished astrophysicist, was hired as Dean of Women at Queen's, a position she held for 20 years. She arrived in Kingston the very day war was declared. A tall woman with a sensitive face who wore her hair in a bun, Vibert oversaw 500 female first-year students and in early years lived with them at Ban Righ Hall. "Dr. D" was deeply loved and students sought her out for support or advice. She was kind, warm and understanding and, as one student put it, "somewhat otherworldly".

Vibert kept her door open and encouraged students to drop by her office for a chat. She was influential in getting women accepted into engineering and medicine at Queen's and generally promoting women in science. The first Canadian president of the International Federation of University Women, she believed in equal opportunities and once said, "I don't believe in all this yap, yap, yap about being a woman."

In the 1940s, Vibert was asked to teach, in addition to her duties as Dean of Women. "I jumped at the chance," she later said, and went on to become a full professor of astronomy. She was the first woman to serve as president of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada; she was a fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, and a delegate at many International Astronomical Union conferences.

Largely because of Vibert's efforts, the Kingston Centre of the Royal Astronomical Society was formed. Interested students and faculty came together to observe with telescopes at the Kingston Observatory; Vibert, who chaired the meetings, often gave talks afterwards.

Vibert spent 40 minutes with Albert Einstein in 1954, when he visited Princeton. They talked about Sir Arthur Eddington; Vibert published her widely acclaimed biography of Eddington two years later. She and Einstein had a mild disagreement, she later recalled. He said scientists shouldn't popularize theories to make them understandable to lay people. Vibert disagreed, saying scientists have a duty to educate the public. She loved knowledge and sharing it was one of her life's missions.

Throughout her career, Vibert travelled extensively; she holds the Canadian record for attending the largest number of International Astronomical Union meetings. Intrepid, she taxied through Ghana, traversed the Khyber Pass and walked through Checkpoint Charlie into East Berlin. She travelled to Morocco, China, Japan, Russia and Australia, among other countries. Once called “the only woman to travel the world with a tea-kettle and a handbag,” Vibert continued to attend conferences after her retirement and travelled with zeal until a few years before her death, keeping extensive journals.

Vibert ended her term as Dean of Women in 1958 but taught for six more years. Students and graduates still sought her friendship and guidance; Vibert would welcome them at her home on King Street, with its large glassed-in porch and cheery fireplace.

In 1967, she was named one of the Women of the Century by the National Council of Jewish Women, which honoured 11 women, one from each province or territory. She also became an Officer of the Order of Canada.

At 93, Vibert died at home at the Sydenham Street apartment she shared with her niece in her later years. Several months later an asteroid, Minor Planet 3269, was named Vibert-Douglas in her honour. In July 2002, an even more prestigious honour was bestowed on her when the Astronomical Union named a *patera*, or crater, on Venus after her. She will be in good company: Venus’s craters are all named in honour of women, including such greats as Frida Kahlo, Cleopatra and Sarah Bernhardt.

A renowned scholar and an impressive role model, Allie Vibert Douglas was a champion of women and a humanist who touched many lives.

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