

# RED DAHLIA PROJECT

**NEWSLETTER**

**December 2025**

Accompanied by her brother Justin MacKinnon, Maureen (MacKinnon) Howlett lit a candle in memory of her mother today at an annual memorial service hosted by the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

The service honours the young women killed in the 1989 Montreal Massacre, Island women who have been killed by someone they know, and missing and murdered Indigenous women from across the country. Now, Mary Ann (MacAulay) MacKinnon receives similar recognition for her courage in standing against gender-based violence with her daughter, Estelle.

Every story is a blend of facts and feelings. Let's explore both elements so that we can truly understand this devastating event.

Condolences on the recent passing of Estelle (MacKinnon) MacAulay and warm thoughts for all of Mary Ann's extended family.

*Patricia*

## **National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women**

This is not just a story about the past. Sadly, similar events still happen today. We live in a world where girls and women are not safe from violence. And, if they resist, they can risk serious consequences. Let's think about what we can do to end violence and support survivors as we listen to the song that Catherine MacLellan debuted at today's service. Click below.

[CATHERINE MACLELLAN - MARY ANN.mp3](#)

# The Rifle and the Rosary

By Ernie MacAulay

RED Magazine, Volume 24, 2020



November 8, 1951 was a rainy day and, at about 8:00 PM, the local sheriff drove to Little Harbour, PEI to serve a subpoena on Mrs. Mary Ann MacKinnon. The subpoena was to compel her attendance at the trial for a charge of attempted rape against Joseph Gabriel "Joey" MacDonald that was scheduled to begin on November 13, 1951 in Georgetown. The sheriff had three other subpoenas to serve including one for Mrs. Ethel MacLean of Kingsboro. At Mary Ann's request, the sheriff took her with him to Kingsboro so that she could make arrangements to have Mrs. MacLean drive her to and from the scheduled preliminary hearing. Mary Ann was a widow with twelve children (eleven then living) and it was the second anniversary of her husband's death.

The events that led to the proceedings against Joe MacDonald occurred on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1951. Mary Ann's oldest daughter, Estelle, graduated from St. Mary's Convent the previous year and taught at the Kingsboro School and boarded with Mrs. MacLean during the 1950/51 school year. Estelle began dating Joey MacDonald in August, 1950.

On July 10, 1951, Estelle visited Mrs. MacLean who left in the early evening to attend a movie in Souris, leaving Estelle alone in her house. After Mrs. MacLean left, Joey MacDonald and an eighteen-year old male neighbour arrived at the house. A farmer who lived across the road from Mrs. MacLean saw Joey forcefully take Estelle from the house, put her into his father's car, then leave the area. They drove to an isolated place on Joey's father's farm in Chepstow where the other boy left and walked home. Joey attempted to rape Estelle in the back of the car then he drove her back to the MacLean residence to pick up some belongings, then to her residence. Mrs. MacLean noted that Estelle looked pale, her clothes "were mussed", and it looked like she had been crying.

On June 27<sup>th</sup>, Joey was at the MacKinnon residence and Estelle told him, in the presence of her mother, that she was afraid of him and did not want to see him anymore. Mary Ann unsuccessfully tried to reason with Joey at the time. Joey left the MacKinnon residence but returned about an hour later so Mary Ann reported the incident to the RCMP. Estelle had plans to enroll in a nursing program in Charlottetown in September that year and hoped that would end her contact with Joey.

There was a regatta in Souris on July 11<sup>th</sup>, and Mary Ann and Estelle attended hoping to see their pastor there but they did not find him until that evening at which time they reported the attempted rape. He instructed them to report the matter to the RCMP which they did, and Estelle underwent a medical examination the following day. The police charged Joey with attempted rape and he was committed to stand trial at a preliminary hearing on August 1.

While Mary Ann was away with the sheriff, local labourer Michael Francis 'Francis Davey' MacDonald arrived to stay a few days to cut some pulpwood with Mary Ann's oldest son Albie. The sheriff dropped off Mary Ann at approximately 9:00 PM and the family decided to say the Rosary before they listened to a radio program at 10:00 PM. While six of the youngest children slept elsewhere in the house, Mary Ann led the prayers from an organ stool while Francis and her older children, Albie, Alice, and Danny, knelt at chairs in the kitchen. Their prayers were interrupted by the sound of breaking glass and Mary Ann falling backward from her chair and bleeding. They originally thought that the globe on the Aladdin lamp had broken. Albie moved his mother to an adjacent room fearing further danger and directed Alice and Danny to seek help from the nearest neighbour.

They went to the neighbour who directed a family member to go to the nearest neighbour with a telephone, to call a doctor in Souris. The neighbour accompanied Alice and Danny back to their home and she noted that Mary Ann had no pulse and appeared to have been shot.

The doctor called the RCMP and both came to the MacKinnon residence. The doctor pronounced Mary Ann dead and the RCMP notified the coroner and a murder investigation. Being aware that Mary Ann and Estelle had reported their fear of Joey earlier, he became an immediate suspect and they arrested him in his bedroom in the early hours of November 9. They noted that his clothing was wet and they seized the clothing he had been wearing the day before. The RCMP brought a trained tracking dog to the scene from Moncton later that morning. The dog was not able to establish a complete track but did locate Joey's scent in some sheltered areas between the MacKinnon farm and his residence. Also on November 9, a neighbouring farmer noted some horse tracks across newly plowed land that hadn't been there the day before and later noticed that some of his and his neighbour's fences had been cut and there were horse tracks through the gaps. The RCMP investigated and they seized a rope and some samples of horse hair. The RCMP executed a search warrant at Joey's father's farm and recovered a Cooley .22 calibre rifle with the stock shortened and a pair of pliers from a tool box on a tractor.

The police charged Joseph Gabriel MacDonald with murder and a preliminary hearing was held on December 7 and 14, and on January 10, 1952, when he was committed for trial. On July 8, a grand jury returned a "true bill" and the murder trial began on July 9 in Georgetown.

The evidence included forensic evidence that the bullet recovered from Mary Ann's body at the autopsy was shot from a rifle with the same specifications as the seized weapon and was probably fired from that weapon. There was also evidence that the horse hair recovered from the site near the crime scene was similar to the sample taken from Joey's father's horse.

Forensic evidence established that the fences were not actually cut but were held with a tool and bent back and forth until they broke. The seized pliers were not eliminated as a possible tool used. A member of the RCMP located some footprints near the scene of the murder and made plaster casts of the footprints. He compared them to the rubber boots seized from Joey's residence and found a number of accidental similarities between the accused's boots and the footprints found at the scene. 'Francis Davey' MacDonald testified that, around the end of August 1951, he had returned from working in Nova Scotia and was standing near the Matthew and MacLean store in Souris when Joey asked him if he had heard of "the racket" he was in. Francis told him that he had not heard about it and Joey told him about Mary Ann charging him with rape and Joey stating, "I'll get the old son of a whore. I'll shoot her."

In submissions to the jury, Crown Counsel, without any medical evidence being called, raised the possibility of the accused being not guilty by reason of alcohol-induced insanity. The only evidence of alcohol consumption was given by Estelle who testified that Joey had often consumed moonshine prior to and during they dates. Defence counsel did not call any evidence or address either alcohol consumption or possible insanity but focused on the highly circumstantial nature of the case. The jury began deliberations at 10:55 PM on July 12 and, at 1:40 AM, they sent a note to the judge seeking clarification on the defence of insanity brought on by alcohol consumption. The court provided further instructions on the issue, the jury resumed deliberations at 2:25 AM and returned a not guilty because of alcohol induced insanity at 2:45 AM. Joey was then committed to the Georgetown Jail "until the pleasure of the Lieutenant Governor is known."

An August 21, 1953 Order-in-Council ordered that Joey be transferred from the Kings County Jail in Georgetown to the Queens County Jail in Charlottetown. On September 21, the Crown entered a stay of proceedings with respect to the attempted rape matter.

Joey's release from the Queens County Jail is mysterious. Despite diligent searches of all possible locations of historic records, staff of the PEI Public Archives was unable to locate any documentation about his release. It is known that Joey had a cordial relationship with the head jailer and his family. There are anecdotal reports of the jailer taking Joey home with him on weekends and even spending a Sunday afternoon and evening at the residence of the family who adopted Mary Ann's youngest son, David and Joey doing work at the jailer's property.

It appears that Joey was released on an agreement to move to British Columbia and remain there for the remainder of his life. Joey lived in Squamish and Vancouver, working in the forestry industry until his death in 2012.



## Mary Ann

A man fires a bullet and a mother is dead  
Surrounded by her children, just the  
little ones in bed  
With the rosary passing her lips  
Through the window, from a distance, it  
was the perfect hit.

Mary Ann how did it come to this  
One wild man with moonshine on his  
lips  
Set his sights on your eldest girl  
He wouldn't take no, then he took your  
whole world  
Mary Ann...

A bully in a small, small town  
When he hurt your daughter you don't  
stand down  
Charged him then he's out on bail  
You would've stayed safe if they'd kept  
him in jail  
Mary Ann...

And all along the cove  
Everybody knows  
And everybody's tied together  
11 children on their own  
Left to find their way back home  
Back to the farm at Little Harbour  
Mary Ann...

Life was never easy for you  
You always found a way to make it  
through  
You read your books and write your poems  
Married for love and made love your home  
And they can't take that from you  
Cause it's love that carries  
through  
And it's love that ties us all  
together  
11 children on their own  
They all found their way back  
home  
Back to the farm at Little Harbour

Mary Ann...



Catherine MacLellan



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