

“The most important thing in life  
is to choose your parents.”<sup>1</sup>



# Anna Leonowens

## 1831-1915

Anna Leonowens blurred the lines between truth and fiction to create an extraordinary life story. To Victorian readers, she was the real-life English gentlewoman in a travel memoir about harem life in the royal court of Siam (now Thailand). To a feisty group of Halifax feminists, she was a sister in the struggle for women's rights, and a champion for women artists and artisans.

Years after her death, Anna's early memoirs were rediscovered and transformed into a Broadway musical (*The King and I*) and a grand procession of Hollywood movies and television adaptations.

Anna was a real woman. But who was she, really?

The real Anna began life in Poona, India, in the unglamorous barracks of the British East India Company. Her father was a sergeant who died before Anna was born. Her 16-year-old mother married another company man when Anna was six weeks old.

What Anna lacked in social advantages early in life, she made up for with ambition. She was an avid reader with a photographic memory, a keen intellect, and a gift for languages.

Anna married Thomas Louis Leon Owens when she was 18 years old. They lived in India, then Australia, and later Malaysia where Thomas managed a hotel. It was a modest existence. Thomas died suddenly in 1859, leaving Anna with two small children and no means of support. Sizing up her limited options, Anna chose to reinvent herself.

Six weeks after Tom's death, the 27-year-old widow and her children arrived in Singapore with a freshly scripted past and a more elegant compound surname. She presented herself as 24-year-old Mrs. Leonowens; born in Wales to a prominent family; educated in British boarding schools; disinherited by an evil stepfather; romantically wed to a high-ranking British officer who had died tragically at her feet, of heat stroke, following a tiger hunt. She had lost her fortune, she said, and all contact with her birth family. She stuck to that fantastic story for the rest of her life. Her children grew up believing it was true, and her readers and friends believed it, too.

1 \ Reputedly one of Anna Leonowens favourite quotations, reported by her granddaughter Avis Fyshe. (*Bombay Anna*, 79)

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With these improved credentials, Anna found work in Singapore as a private teacher to the children of British military officers. In 1862, she seized the opportunity of a lifetime, teaching the 67 children and many wives of King Mongkut in the royal court of Siam. Anna served the king and his family for five-and-a-half years. Her income enabled her to live comfortably with her young son Louis and provided her daughter Avis with a boarding-school education in England. But the long hours, the complex culture, and the separation from Avis wore on Anna's nerves. She left Siam in 1867 and never returned. She retrieved Avis from England, deposited Louis in Ireland for his turn at boarding school, and headed to the United States.<sup>2</sup>

2 \ Anna's son Louis went on to live his own adventurous life, eventually returning to Siam and becoming a wealthy businessman.

Anna and Avis settled in New York where Anna opened a school for kindergarten teachers before launching her writing career. Her first two books, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870) and *Romance of the Harem* (1873), blended eyewitness journalism, social criticism, and sensational gossip. The *New York Times* called her stories a guilty pleasure. "Your judgment is charmed to sleep," a reviewer said.

Anna bolstered sales of her books with lecture tours in the U.S. and Canada. She had an encyclopedic knowledge of Asian history and culture, and a gift for storytelling. She took elocution lessons to improve her delivery. To expand her reputation, she wrote articles for *Youth's Companion*, a popular magazine for young people.

When daughter Avis married in 1878, it was with Anna's full approval. Thomas Fyshe met every qualification for a son-in-law. He was smart, ambitious, well-connected, and willing to make room in his household for Anna. The newlyweds and Anna settled in Halifax, where Thomas worked as the respected "head cashier" (general manager) of the Bank of Nova Scotia.

The adjustment from literary celebrity to tea-pouring matron was difficult for the spirited Anna. In 1882, she wrote to an American friend: "I felt, when in the midst of a grand party of all the grandees here, like giving a wild war whoop, and running amuck ... I was burning to do something desperate, to stir up the cold vapid formalism and the empty minutiae of a still more empty life."

Anna did stir things up in Halifax. Starting gently, she founded a literary club and a Shakespeare club. She seized on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee<sup>3</sup> to mastermind a more ambitious project, the Victoria School of Art, later to become the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). Anna and others envisioned the school as a centre for excellence, a training ground for skilled artisans, and an economic engine for the region. She was particularly interested in improving the employability of women. Anna lectured, cajoled, and organized fundraising events, and was a central figure at the school's grand opening in 1887.

Anna also immersed herself in feminist causes. She was a founding member of the Local Council of Women of Halifax, along with **Edith Jessie Archibald** and other influential citizens; and she was the first president of the Women's Suffrage Association. Through these organizations, she lobbied fiercely for women's rights, including the right to vote in municipal and provincial elections and to serve on public school boards. She and her council

colleagues fought to improve conditions for women in prisons and for immigrant women. She also led a council campaign to open a home for truant boys, reasoning that children who missed too much school would be better off removed from their families. The idea gained some traction, but the facility was never built.

Even while calling Halifax home, Anna travelled extensively. After Emperor Alexander II of Russia was assassinated in 1881, Anna travelled to Russia as a correspondent for *Youth's Companion*, reporting on conditions in that country. Her vivid stories grabbed attention, and she was offered a job in Boston as one of the magazine's editors, a position she declined. Her home was with the Fyshe family, she said; and her true vocation was the education of her grandchildren. To that end, she organized extended study trips to Europe for herself, Avis, and Avis's children, based mostly in Germany. Thomas stayed behind in Halifax. Anna and Thomas wrote to each other frequently, mainly to confer about the children's education. Avis, it is said, deferred to their wishes in all matters.



Anna in 1903.

<sup>3</sup> \ Queen Victoria ruled the British Empire for 64 years, from 1837 to 1901. Her Golden Jubilee Year, marking 50 years on the throne, was a major celebration in Canada.

Somehow in the slim spaces between duties and adventures, Anna found time to write two more books. *Life and Travel in India* (1884) was not a commercial success, but it gave her a forum to restate the backstory of her childhood and marriage. Her fourth and final book, *Our Asiatic Cousins* (1889), was a progressive plea for cross-cultural understanding. “The Hindoos are our nearest of kin,” she wrote. She never did reveal that she had East Indian kin on her mother’s side.

**Boris Karloff**, the star of *Frankenstein* (1930) and other Hollywood movies, was Anna’s grandnephew. He was born William Henry Pratt in England in 1887, a grandson to Anna’s sister Eliza. When a member of the Pratt family tracked Anna to Halifax in 1899, she refused any contact. There were no Pratts in her invented past, and she was determined to keep it that way.

In 1897, Thomas and Avis relocated to Montreal. Anna joined them there in 1901. Anna continued to give lectures and to lobby for good causes. She died in Montreal in 1915, taking to her grave the truth about her own origins.

Anna’s lasting legacy to Nova Scotians is the school of art and design we now call NSCAD University. Who but Anna could have imagined a more fitting monument? Her whole life was a bold work of art and design.

## And now ...

**Jessica Scott Kerrin** is an artist, arts administrator, and award-winning author of children’s books, including the Martin Bridge adventure series for boys. She is a proud graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and a former director of the Anna Leonowens Gallery at NSCAD. She now works within government to raise public awareness about Nova Scotia’s culture and heritage.

Jessica knows the joys of a creative life, and the gritty challenges. She admires Anna’s can-do attitude and self-discipline. “Here was someone who started off with limited options,” says Jessica. “But she decided that she was not going to be a victim.”

Jessica is philosophical about Anna’s invented past. “Everyone should get the opportunity for a do-over at least once in their life,” she reasons. “Why not?”

## SOURCES

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