



## Breakthrough

*Linda Macdonald*

*Linda Macdonald was 25 years old when she unknowingly became an experimental subject of the late psychiatrist Ewen Cameron at the Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal. This is part of her story about what happened to her during the six months of incarceration in that psychiatric institution.*

The name on my admission chart at the Allan Memorial reads "Linda Helen Cowan (nee Macdonald)." It was March 28, 1963. A young wife and mother, I was to become one of the last victims of Dr Ewen Cameron's experiments on the human brain.

I am 49 years old today. I accept my age only because my birth certificate validates the time, day, and the place of my birth. In reality, *my* reality, I am 23 . . . I have no memory of existing prior to October 1963, and the recollections I do have of events of the following years until 1966 are fuzzy and few.

My mother and father and a few childhood friends have spent endless hours trying to give me back some connection with my lost past. They tell me that I was a happy, gregarious child; that I loved and studied music from the age of five until I left home to become Philip Cowan's wife at the age of eighteen; that I started writing poetry when I was eight and had a few pieces published before I was thirteen; that I had achieved some measure of respect in the critical music circles of Ottawa as a promising young

lyric soprano, and that I married my childhood sweetheart and became the proud mother of five babies in less than four years. The person who was "me"—the person I was and will never remember being—birthed her first child in 1957, her second in 1958, her third in 1959, and healthy twins in 1961. Nothing remains in my memory of any of those learning, laughing, loving years. Dr Cameron's "brainwashing" experiments wiped my brain clean of every experience I had ever known.

I had no reason to question Cameron's "schizophrenic" diagnosis until I heard rumblings in 1984 that his "experiments" had been funded by the CIA and that they were being investigated and challenged in court. From 1963 until 1984, I had lived with the belief that I had been insane.

It was remarkably uncomplicated to become one of Cameron's guinea pigs; he needed human beings, preferably women, to experiment on. People suffering some degree of sickness are easily found in hospitals and are usually vulnerable, as are their relatives, to persuasion by renowned, supposedly ethical members of the medical profession. Ewen Cameron was, in the 50s and 60s, reputed to be a famous doctor with impressive credentials. With no reason to suspect "foul-play," Philip Cowan committed his tired, overworked, sometimes depressed young wife into the "care" of Dr Cameron and the teaching staff at the Allan Memorial Institute.

According to my medical files, I was a walking, talking, coherent, functioning human being upon my admission in March 1963. I was heavily sedated *before* I was given three routine psychological tests. I received a basic physical check-up and it was confirmed that there were no abnormalities. My file states I "slept a full and undisturbed sleep" without the aid of sleeping pills. Within three weeks of my arrival at the Allan Memorial and in spite of my "normalities," Dr Cameron diagnosed me as a "possible paranoid schizophrenic" or "manic depressive." He told my husband I would be institutionalized for the rest of my natural life if he did not agree to "deep sleep" treatment. Cameron *did not* inform Philip or any other member

of my family *what* his treatment included. I also was not informed and there is not a signed consent form anywhere in my file.

One short month after my admission, I became a comatose guinea pig on North 2—the “sleep” ward at the Allan Memorial Institute. For the next two months and thirteen days I existed in a constant state of coma . . . 73 barbituate-induced days of sleep. I also was subjected to 109 electroconvulsive treatments (68 Page-Russell ECTs and 41 Offner ECTs) concurrent with high doses of mind-crippling drugs.

My medical record states that most of the Page-Russell shocks were delivered in double doses. They would zap my brain with 150 volts of electricity six times in rapid succession, wait a few hours and repeat the procedure a second time. “Depatterning tapes” were driving under my pillow, electricity was destroying my brain cells and barbituates were pumping into my body day after day for 73 consecutive days during that summer of '63.

This information, I repeat, comes directly from my medical file. I cannot confirm or refute the data because I do not have a memory of any part of this time in my life, nor of any other time in my life preceding these experiments. Dr Cameron's objective, “to remove a total memory,” was achieved—absolutely in my case. And my family cannot validate the contents of my file, for they were allowed only one visit with me during my incarceration that summer. My father, though, does remember his daughter sitting in a chair staring off into space like a “zombie.”

I was incontinent two short weeks before my discharge. Fortunately for Philip, it appears I learned a few essential motor skills before he took me home. There was no rehabilitation program, no counselling. Such follow-up treatment would have been contradictory to “experimentation for the sake of experimentation.” I had been a guinea pig and my brain had served their project well. Within the first two years after my release in September 1963, I twice tried to kill myself.

I did not know the young man who would try to teach his wife, an infant in a grown-up body, everything she

needed to know to survive in his world. I ended up resenting him. Several years ago, I was finally able to let go of my anger towards this man who calls himself my husband. He too was a victim of Dr Cameron's devastating tricks on the brain. How could anyone know how to live with, love, nurture and teach a totally "wiped" human being, especially when doctors in the 1960s slammed their doors on us each time we mentioned Dr Cameron's name and the Allan Memorial Institute?

My parents were introduced to me that winter of 1963/64. Of course, I did not know them. The children came back from wherever they had been living. I had no idea who they were and I certainly had no sense of what a "mother" was. They were all "older" than I; the oldest could read and write—their mother could not.

I remember how frustrating it was trying to learn to read . . . without a past. Words had nothing to hang on to . . . they sat on a page without meaning. I carried a dictionary everywhere I went for the next five years, trying desperately to understand the language of my world. Until I was old enough to be aware of myself and until I began to claim a sort of identity, I was like an infant, incapable of embarrassment. Those first few years are fuzzy in my memory bank. But what I do remember plays back with little emotional pain.

As time went on, my living and learning became a frantic, hellish, groping mess of failures with few successes—just enough to spur me on. But I kept going. I'll never know where my undaunted determination came from. Some caring people have suggested that Cameron's experiments could erase the memory of a life but could never erase the life-force born in me in 1937. I want to believe this. I need to believe that some part of who I used to be survived Cameron's criminal assault.

I lived in constant terror that I could get "sick" again—that the "other" Linda would come back and reclaim my mind a second time. Until 1984, I had no reason to disbelieve that I'd been "schizophrenic" and that Dr Cameron had saved me.

In the late 1960s, through avid reading of personal

growth material and through the miracle of being a "risk-taker," I began to assert myself. I wasn't easy to live with. I discovered I had a brain, a mind of my own and I was going to use it before I lost it. My growing-up threatened my marriage. I became a divorced woman and a mother without children in 1972. There are no words to describe the pain these years of separation brought, but by the mid-70s, I knew I was a survivor, a person who could live each day as it dawned, trusting that I could cope with whatever the world had to dish out.

I am well today—not because of Dr Cameron, or the Allan Memorial, the CIA and the Canadian and American governments which funded the diabolic "brainwashing" experiments, but in spite of them. I want compensation. But how can anyone estimate compensation for the loss of 26 years? The loss of learning, the experiencing, all the theory absorbed, the skills acquired, the confidence earned over the years through interactions with family and friends, the social awareness, the values, opinions, and moral decisions made during those years. The stuff we are today grew from the roots of our early experiences inside family structures and cultural scripts. I do not have these roots and never will. I have no memories of any of the formative years upon which to build my todays and tomorrows.

A woman robbed of her life, I had decided to share my life with you. If sharing my personal experience can help to educate the public so that such abusive experimentation will not, for any reason, with or without consent, be performed on human beings ever again, indeed something positive will have emerged from a living hell!

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