

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *A Radiant Life*

“Merle Massie is an excellent storyteller, and what a story this is—of Sylvia Fedoruk—academic, physicist, inventor, athlete, chancellor, lieutenant-governor, role model and a friend to many. This biography is a page-turner, and I didn’t want the story to end! Merle has captured the true essence of the full life of Sylvia, covering both the public and private life of a Saskatchewan leader with humour, insight, and sensitivity.” —THE HONOURABLE GORDON BARNHART, OC SOM, 20th Lieutenant-Governor of Saskatchewan

“Merle Massie has given us a remarkable biography of a remarkable woman. Sylvia Fedoruk’s outstanding, and in many respects trailblazing, career in medical science, sports, and public service deserved the best. She got it.” —JOHN COURTNEY, Senior Policy Fellow, Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy

“*A Radiant Life* is an important, well-researched story of the fascinating, well-lived journey of one of Saskatchewan’s most accomplished citizens.” —VERA PEZER, former Chancellor of the University of Saskatchewan, inductee in the Canadian Curling Hall of Fame, Saskatchewan Centennial Medal recipient

“A very important history about a very important Canadian”
—THE HONOURABLE ROY ROMANOW, PC OC SOM QC, 12th Premier of Saskatchewan

A RADIANT LIFE

THE HONOURABLE
SYLVIA FEDORUK

Scientist, Sports Icon, and Stateswoman

MERLE MASSIE



University of Regina Press

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*This book is dedicated to the memory
of Mary Kirychuk McGowan,
whose wisdom offered a path to bravery.*

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PREFACE

SEARCHING FOR SYLVIA—THAT’S A DESCRIPTION OF THE path that led to this book. The traditional Saskatchewan media iconography of Sylvia Olga Fedoruk has painted an astonishing portrait of a woman whose excellence in science, sport, and public service became nothing short of a touchstone, a story of leadership, Saskatchewan grit, and the power of possibility. With Ukrainian roots in east-central Saskatchewan and an education in one-room schools, Sylvia represents the essence of Saskatchewan, of building a life with world impact in a place well used to being forgotten. It has been a privilege to dive deep and follow her legendary accomplishments, from smashing sports stories in school athletics, ball, curling, and golf; to her international reputation as a cancer physicist; to excellence in leadership, culminating in the capstone as the first female lieutenant-governor of Saskatchewan.

I came to this biography by way of friendship. C. Stuart Houston, Saskatchewan’s famed radiologist–ornithologist–medical historian, was looking for help. A long-time friend and colleague of Sylvia, he had co-taught with her for years as the “Stuart and Sylvia Show,” otherwise known as first-year radiation physics for medical students at the University of Saskatchewan. The two had also co-authored several works on Saskatchewan’s early role in radiation history, particularly regarding the betatron and the cobalt bomb. Sylvia had written the foreword for Stuart’s original *Steps on the Road to Medicare*, published in 2002.

PREFACE

Stuart and I began working together on short essays and longer manuscripts in about 2007, including a revised and expanded version of Saskatchewan's medical history, published as *36 Steps on the Road to Medicare: How Saskatchewan Led the Way*, which included Sylvia's original foreword. Soon after her death in 2012, Stuart began contemplating and outlining a biography of Sylvia and invited me to be his co-author. Amassing and curating from his own files and via correspondence with Sylvia's other colleagues, Stuart built the paper bones of her life. Enumerating her many firsts, those biographical outlines of accomplishments and accolades were long but needed flesh on the bones. My role was to dive deep into the research and understand Sylvia's rich life beyond her accolades and scientific accomplishments.

Following Sylvia's death in 2012, her friends and relations had to find a balance between clearing out her house and memorializing her life. What should be kept, and who should keep it? Sylvia had been her own archivist and museum curator, cataloguing with meticulous detail. In some cases, she had already gifted specific items to museums or archives. The majority remained. The house had papers, photographs, videos, and artifacts crammed into every corner. Sylvia's executor, Myrna Berwick, dispersed the contents of the house with the help and support of Sylvia's cousin Garry Vann. The University of Saskatchewan was one of the first callers. Archivists Cheryl Avery and Patrick Hayes brought a crew to see and understand the scope of Sylvia's potential archival collection. The team moved through the house, expert eyes and minds in assessment mode, finding that balance between artifacts (which take up so much space) and archival documentation. Photographs, videos, and of course textual records were efficiently identified and hauled back to the university by truck to the third-floor Archives and Special Collections division. There they sat.¹

When I finally arrived at the archives in the summer of 2016 to let staff know about the potential biography project, they asked me "Are you sure you're ready for this? You need to see it for yourself." I was then taken through the archival labyrinth to the Sylvia aisle. My eyes flew open in shock, my head tipping up and down, left and right, to try to take it all in. Trophies peeked out of boxes. Photograph albums and oddly shaped artifacts pushed lids upward. Some of the boxes had yellow Post-it Notes stating the origins of their contents: "black filing cabinet" or "TV console" or "basement shelf." The archivists had not had the opportunity or the time to go through

and create a detailed accession record of the fonds, but we created a research agreement based on the facts that I had lots of archival experience as a historian and would use best practices. Setting up a desk near the collection, I worked to find my way into Sylvia's life.

There is so much more to Sylvia Fedoruk than a list of accomplishments and achievements. I met a deeply interesting character bursting with audacity, overflowing with generosity, unable to contain a raging energy for life. Sylvia burned with a need to prove herself, always to be at her best. Her personal archive showcases pride in her life and accomplishments, yet she was her own toughest critic. Sylvia self-curated to highlight excellence and downplay disaster. As an example, her curling scrapbooks from 1959 to 1962 focus on the two successful runs for national championships but nearly eliminate the run for the third championship, when the team came up short. I realized that wins brought happy memories and that losses or other stumbles caused Sylvia real pain, not for the losses or mistakes or missteps but because she blamed herself for them.

In part because she was hardest on herself, Sylvia worked to put others at ease. A natural grace and self-deprecating sense of humour gave her an approachable, open countenance, laughing direct eyes, and a zest for the funny side of any situation. She loved practical jokes, delighted in dressing up for skits, sang lustily, laughed uproariously and often, and believed that life was for living. The candid shots in her archive—playfully sticking out her tongue for the camera, saluting with a drink, smoking a stogie, rolling up money to shove in her ears—showcase a playful woman of confidence. If a reporter talked about her sports exploits, Sylvia was more than willing to share less-than-stellar klutzy stories to provide some balance. Great at basketball and baseball? Sure, but I can't swim, she would point out, deflecting and demurring. Sylvia was also practical and helpful. At an official function in Canora as the lieutenant-governor, she ended the event in the kitchen with her aunts, cousins, extended family members, friends, and old neighbours, an apron tied around her middle, helping with dishes.

Even so, for all her public roles and athletic exploits, Sylvia was an intensely private person. She needed solitude, and lots of it, to recharge and refresh. That privacy included her closest friends, with whom she was simply *Syl*. Although Sylvia made friends with great ease and came from a large extended family, her private circle was built of close, long-term connections. These connections spill across her archival holdings, which adroitly connect her public and private

lives via letters, photographs and slides, notes, home videos, and day-planners. The intensity and importance of these private connections stand in marked contrast to the public persona of a single, busy, no-nonsense professional physicist, leader, athlete, and political figurehead. The two halves of her life are inextricable, though the one was virtually invisible to the public during her lifetime. Sylvia rarely articulated the importance of her private support system in giving her the freedom and time to build her public life, but during times of stress or celebration she reached out to her closest friends and confidantes. Their presence was a constant.

Research is not a straight path, and some decisions are not easy. With about six chapters written, from Sylvia's earliest days to her summer ball exploits and national curling championships, I paused in the research for and writing of this biography. I struggled to reconcile the well-known public story with archival evidence that revealed a somewhat different reality behind the public persona. I needed to work through how to tell Sylvia's story, the whole story. The hints and abrupt comments in her files forced me to conduct research elsewhere. Her files are extensive, but even so they are incomplete and a bit truncated. I had holes to fill.

One area in particular required deeper investigation: University of Saskatchewan graduate student Christopher Lefler, whose impact is clearly found in the pages of Sylvia's archives. I had to understand the extent of that story, which led to an investigation of the larger Saskatchewan community, including the university, the provincial government, and the media. It was not a small, short, or easy task.

As that story took shape, I had to think clearly through a choice between two possible biographies. The first would be a traditional view of Sylvia's life. Curated and repeated by Sylvia via countless media interviews through a career that spanned more than sixty years in the Canadian spotlight, her life was well known, its shape and tenor defined. My original co-researcher, Stuart Houston, championed the traditional view. In that story, Christopher Lefler rated no more than a couple of sentences, a paragraph at most. He did not deserve more. Others might agree. But I could not share the perspective that Lefler's artistic practices had no place in Sylvia's biography. His impact was clear in her files, in high contrast to her public statements during the period in question. I had to address that dissonance. Life is messy, life has dark moments, and life has pain. I could not produce a biography without including that chapter of her life, out of respect for my training as a historian. I moved

forward as a single author, following the Lefler story to build my understanding of its scope. I remain grateful to Stuart for his insight, compassion, original energy, and support, and I'm thankful for his grace as I built a picture of Sylvia that includes stories less well known to the larger public.

By 2018, I had developed the chapter in question, and still I fretted. Sitting by the hospital bed as my mother succumbed to cancer in the spring of 2018, I laid out the Lefler story and its permutations across Saskatchewan history. Mom listened to my struggles with the morality of the piece. Would it overshadow Sylvia's story? Would that be the only piece that the media asked about? Would Sylvia want it told? The last was the toughest question, and it hurt to face it. Sylvia would not, I knew, want it told. But the wisdom of my mom was stark and fierce. Even though she felt great affinity with Sylvia, who had a similar Ukrainian background, and had great admiration for her life, my mother insisted that there is a critical difference between an autobiography and a biography. We do not always see what impacts we have, and perhaps we should not be the ones to try to articulate what our own lives mean. Assessment should be left for others. Mom insisted that an investigation of the Lefler story belongs and that Sylvia's story would be incomplete without it. It is in telling the darkest parts, in revealing the shadows, Mom said, that Sylvia's light truly shines. I agreed.

Looking to build some much-needed writing time into my schedule and to return to the archives and move forward, I applied for and won a Saskatchewan Arts Board Independent Artist grant in the fall of 2018. I am grateful for the support of the board. I've also had the great fortune throughout the project to conduct interviews with friends, family members, and both professional and political colleagues of Sylvia. Their insights helped me to develop a sense of Sylvia's life beyond a mere list of accomplishments—however lengthy—into a living and laughing person, a complex woman full of mischief and laughter, sternness and fierceness. I conducted most of those interviews after I'd spent time getting to know Sylvia through her archive. It was important to have solid and detailed pictures of events and places and people. Then oral stories and interviews filled in the personality and pugnaciousness and *presence* of Sylvia the woman. Their stories added much to my understanding of a woman given to pranks and fun, competitive in sports but giving in friendship, a traveller and fisher and dog lover and excellent cook. I am grateful.

PREFACE

The interviews also reminded me of complexity and how people are people, warts and all. Sylvia's self-drive toward excellence would spill over, on occasion, and become something less than charitable, less than perfect. Demanding high standards for herself, Sylvia wanted the same high standards from others. As a result, on occasion she could be short. With a strong personality and physical presence, Sylvia had a way of commanding a room. She was not afraid to direct people or tell them what she thought they should be doing. Sylvia did not suffer fools lightly, nor did she waste time. If the conversation was done, or she thought your visit to her house had been long enough, she would say that it was time for you to leave or abruptly hang up the phone. In a way, it reminded me that I, too, needed to learn that trick: I'd simply have to stop researching and writing and "hang up the phone," otherwise Sylvia's story would go on and on and on. I thank those who gave interviews or met me for lunch or received phone calls, including Vera Pezer, Irene Bell, Myrna Berwick, Doreen Fairburn, Joan Borsa, Garry Vann and his partner Carol, Michael Vann, Trevor Cradduck, Peggy McKercher, Pat Lawson, Mona Finlayson, Jim Russell, Peter Dickof, Pat Langston, Rock Mackie, Roy Romanow, and Gordon Barnhart. My own family members and friends chimed in with their connections and memories when they heard I was working on the biography, and friends on social media contributed more. I value your insight and support and your stories of Sylvia.

One interviewee sent a shiver down my spine. "Syl would have hated it," she casually remarked. "Hated what?" I asked. "Oh, she was tired of having things written about her. She thought it was time they found some new people to talk about." As I drove away, I thought *I disagree*. One of the secrets of Sylvia Fedoruk is that she understood the art and necessity of self-promotion—with a generous underscoring of modesty. Throughout her life and exploits, only once did she shy away from the media. If she had an accomplishment that deserved recognition, she would make sure that the right people knew about it, quietly sending a copy of a newspaper clipping or letter of appointment or invitation to her professional or academic superiors or the media. The Sylvia Fedoruk collection itself is a testament to her belief that her life had worth and that someone would come along to tell her story. A guest appearance on the Canadian television show *Front Page Challenge* in 1989 foreshadowed this belief:

PREFACE

BETTY KENNEDY: Are you intending to do any writing?

SYLVIA FEDORUK: Not really.

BETTY KENNEDY: Because it seems to me that your whole life is something that, that is a very interesting story.

SYLVIA FEDORUK: Well, I'm keeping good notes.

Sylvia wasn't going to write an autobiography. Crowing about her own successes and exploits wouldn't fit her sense of modesty. But someone would likely come along to delve into her notes and build from them a story of her life. And she did her best to make sure that she kept all the notes that a biographer might find interesting. She was right. Her archive is a fascinating collection with great breadth and intensity, even with its holes.

I am also grateful to a number of people who read through an earlier draft of this biography to provide feedback and direction. University of Saskatchewan colleague Tim Jardine gave me part of his sabbatical time to read the manuscript as a scientist; historians Bill Waiser and Jennie Hansen gave sharp-eyed critiques and suggestions for direction; Vera Pezer was a generous support as an interviewee, a sounding board, and a sharp fellow author-critic, and she helped me to identify people in pictures; Roy Romanow gave an important interview and then reviewed the political portion of Sylvia's time as lieutenant-governor; Trevor Craddock sifted the manuscript for physics errors and gave some of the best work-related anecdotes; and both Stuart and Mary Houston read the manuscript, each with a different-coloured pen for comments. I treasure the notations made by Mary on that draft, for she passed away before the manuscript moved into the final stage of editing.

Despite its length, this biography of Sylvia Fedoruk is incomplete from a theoretical or classical academic perspective. Her life should be read within the context of numerous critical events and movements. They include the postwar nuclear era, feminism's push for equal pay and equal rights, the rise of women in sport, the promotion of women in science, the changing role and perspective of Ukrainians in Saskatchewan and Canada, the role of women in politics, changes within academia and academic publishing, technological advances during the twentieth century and twenty-first

century, advances in cancer diagnostics and treatments, the changing perception of the monarchy, and the role and importance of achievement, merit, and hall of fame accolades. I was unable to travel to Ottawa to view the files of the Atomic Energy Control Board, which might have added a whole chapter. The Saskatchewan rumour mill posits that Sylvia can be credited with scientific inventions that helped Canadian nuclear plants to solve some thorny technological issues. Her role within the AECB is ripe for in-depth research. The problem, simply, is that of scope: her life can be read in so many different directions and discussed in so many different ways that pursuing all of them to the fullest possible extent would drag me as author and you as reader into an endless quagmire of words. I chose a simpler path.

Because Sylvia moved through Saskatchewan both geographically and across so many lines of academia, science, cancer treatment and research, sports, politics, and social consciousness, thousands of Saskatchewan people have their own stories and memories of Sylvia Fedoruk. I hope that you share those stories with others. The oral counterhistory that accompanies any history book has its own value and becomes part of why we write history: together the written and the oral stories go forward to a new generation, reflecting and growing and building new meanings of the past.

Sylvia loved this province and drew on her sense of place to build both a personal life and a professional life dedicated to achieving excellence, to travelling its backroads and fishing its northern waters, and to having fun. She was a proud Saskatchewan citizen born of its *terroir*, the environmental and social factors of place that coalesced into her unique qualities and character. Her brilliant essence, palpable and strong, made firm the path to becoming the province's foremost cheerleader, an ambassador of sport, science, and social volunteerism focused on making the province a better place. It is with immense pleasure and pride that I give you this story of Saskatchewan's own "rampaging Amazon."

1. BLIZZARDS AND FIREWORKS

ON SUNDAY, JUNE 22, 1924, THERE WAS A WEDDING IN the bustling Ukrainian village of Donwell in east-central Saskatchewan. With spring seeding done and gardens planted, late June was a time of celebration, a deep breath of green growing grass and fields surging with new life. Haying season was around the corner. It was a time to create newlyweds and give them the summer to have a honeymoon, set up housekeeping, and get used to each other before winter closed in again. The groom and bride were the centre of attention: Theodore Fedoruk, a dashing, bespectacled schoolteacher, and Annie Romaniuk, a slim young farmer's daughter whose intelligence and wit needed someone with education to keep up with her. We should imagine that this was a large and happy affair like all Ukrainian weddings in the tightly knit community. The Romaniuk-Fedoruk wedding vows took place at the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Transfiguration west and south of Donwell, to which the Romaniuks belonged.¹

The wedding vows happily made, it was time for feasting and dancing, with women bustling and carrying pots and pans and baskets and bowls filled with the makings of a true Ukrainian wedding feast. Fresh bread and buns, farm-churned butter, pickles, varenyky (perogies), kolbassa, and holubtsi (cabbage rolls). No doubt ham or some roast beef, potatoes, and sauerkraut. And

dessert—*khrustyky* or sweet nothings—was always a favourite. The band would perhaps be oiling their elbows and voices with a cold beer or a sip of something stronger. The groom, Ted Fedoruk, was a fiddler, too, but he would be too busy to join in. As guests entered, the band would greet each one at the front of the hall. Traditionally, guests would pay the band by stuffing coins and bills into their instruments. For a large wedding dance, those playing stringed instruments such as guitars and fiddles would have to take quick breaks to shake the money out of them. If they were too full of money, it would deaden their sounds.

The Romaniuk family were among the first settlers in the Donwell-Hamton region. Annie Romaniuk's grandparents, Dmetro and Ok-sana Romaniuk, immigrated to Canada in 1897 from Borschivski Povit near Lviv, Halychyna, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They sailed from Hamburg, Germany, and it took three weeks to arrive in Halifax at Pier 21, then another long train ride from Halifax across Canada to Yorkton, North-West Territories. They brought their four children, one girl and three boys; another girl was born to the family in Canada. The eldest son, Ivan, took the Canadianized name of John. He was fifteen when the family immigrated and went to work in Yorkton for a prosperous businessman, earning cash to buy cattle and horses and taking classes in English. There he met Anastasia Tarnowetzki, working in a hotel and restaurant. Anastasia had emigrated with her family from Bukovina in 1901. Married in 1902, the couple took their own homestead next door to his parents. John and Anastasia had six children, four boys and two girls. Annie was the third child and eldest daughter, born in 1907.

She grew up on her parents' half-section farm three miles south of Donwell, west of the village of Hamton and east of Gorlitz. Well situated near freshwater streams and sloughs, it was also kitty-corner from the local schoolyard of Mennofeldt. But it had been a few years since Annie Romaniuk, even at seventeen, had been a student. Family lore suggests that Annie, a keen student with an astonishing mind, wanted to go to high school in Saskatoon—and some family members suggest that she actually made the trip and was starting to settle in, possibly even at the newly built Ukrainian Orthodox Mohyla residence. But circumstances intervened. Ill health at home meant that Annie was needed at the farm. Her chalk-fingered days were exchanged for bread baking and milking, butter churning and gardening, staying home to help her mother with farm chores after finishing grade eight. Her truncated school career haunted Annie throughout her life. Marrying

a schoolteacher brought a new, sharp edge to the old pain.

The groom, Theodore (Ted) Fedoruk, was born in 1898 in the Bukovina region of Austria, known for its large Ukrainian population. Ted was the third son of Alexander Fedoruk and Martha Boychuk, farm citizens of the village of Hawrylowtsi. Alex and Martha, with one-year-old Ted in tow along with older brothers Stephen and Michael, made the long trip from Bukovina to Canada in 1899. Ted was as ambitious and adventurous as his parents but scholastic. Farming was a pastime, not a passion, for him. He pursued high school at Yorkton Collegiate, working for room and board. He returned home and began teaching in small, one-room schools in the Rhein-Hamton-Donwell

district in 1919, but he soon decided to take his teaching to a professional level. By 1922, Ted was in Saskatoon, staying at the Mohyla residence and graduating from Normal School with a provincial teaching diploma. By 1924, he was a fully fledged schoolteacher, earning a decent salary, free to woo and win his bride. As the dancing finished and the stars came out that June night in 1924, the newlyweds slipped away.

Throughout his teaching career, Ted led classrooms in a number of small, one-room schools in predominantly Ukrainian communities.



Theodore (Ted) and Annie Fedoruk on their wedding day, 1924.

Being a native Ukrainian teacher did not mean that Ted spoke Ukrainian at school—or even at home. Throughout the war years and well into the 1920s, a huge Anglicization movement swept across western Canada. Historian Bill Waiser likened the push toward British conformity to a crusade within Saskatchewan, a site of “missionary” activity where English-speaking churches worked in places with high numbers of continental European immigrants, such as the Canora-Yorkton-Kamsack triangle. Night schools, mission hospitals, and Boy Scouts and Girl Guides clubs popped up. Ontario schoolteacher J.T.M. Anderson, who would later serve as premier of Saskatchewan, became a school inspector in the Yorkton region. Schools became training grounds for British values, institutions, history, language, and empire.² Like Indigenous children in residential schools, continental European children were stripped of their language and culture, often ridiculed for the “ethnic” food in their tin lunch boxes, and forced to speak English, and English only, while on school property. Dark tales of isolation, physical punishment, and even beatings have passed down through some families.

As harsh as these measures seem to modern eyes, Ted Fedoruk himself was a product of similar training. Raised in a Presbyterian (not Ukrainian Orthodox) household and educated in English at high school in Yorkton and Normal School in Saskatoon, he no doubt accepted provincial mandates, expectations, and curricula. Whether his English skills were good enough for him to be awarded the \$300 annual bonus given to English teachers in immigrant districts is unknown.³ What is known is that Ted remained a teacher within similar immigrant districts throughout his teaching career. His teaching posts included the small country schools of Federhill, West Skalat, Krasney, Bridok, Lysenko, Chaucer, Scotland, Ebenezer, Fonehill, Okno, Phoenix, and Rivington.⁴ Whereas Federhill, West Skalat, Bridok, and Kitzman (the spelling used in most history books) are within the small rural Ukrainian triangle of Rhein-Hamton-Donwell, other districts were a little farther afield. Krasney School District No. 1121 was southwest of Sheho, and Lysenko School District No. 494 was near Insinger, Saskatchewan.

If the school list for Ted Fedoruk is in sequence, then it is possible that he took the position at Krasney following his marriage to Annie and then returned a year or two later to teach at Bridok, south of Canora. A typical salary for a schoolteacher in the 1920s depended on the size of the school, the tax base of the school district, the decision of the school board, the length of the school term,

