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Laurie Stanley-Blackwell's Talk About Faith in Action: Celebrating Isabella Gordon Mackay Rita's Tea Room Isabella Gordon Mackay was the force that brought Bibles and missionaries to the Presbyterian settlers of Cape Breton Island. On September 24, 1997, Laurie Stanley-Blackwell gave the following talk at Drummond Memorial United Church • at the unveiling of a monument to commemorate the work of Ms. Mackay and the work of the Edinburgh Ladies' Association. Ms. Stanley-Blackwell said: One of my favourite quotations comes from one of Jane Austen's heroines. "History," this character quips, "tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all, it is very tiresome." Until recently, women were relegated to the margins of history books. In the last few decades, there has been a significant blossoming of scholarship on women. Historians have attempted to give women a more central, equitable role in the great drama of history. In the process, they have discovered a history rich in achievement, complexity, strength and initiative. I first encountered Isabella Gordon MacKay in 1979 when I was working on my Master's thesis. As I read her letters, this vivid and mercurial woman leapt off the page. The documents offered evidence of a forceful personality, determinedly pursuing her own Big Pond, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia (Approx. 25 Miles West of Sydney on Hwy. #4) (originally a one room school house, the Tea Room was purchased by singer/songwriter Rita MacNeil in the early '80s where she lived with her family for several years. As Rita's popularity grew, her supporters would come to the small village of Big Pond to have a cup of Tea with Rita (Rita's favourite beverage). Eventually, it became so popular that Rita decided to convert her house into the Tea Room. Come visit the Tea Room and enjoy: • Baked goods. Sandwiches and Rita's Tea Room Blend Tea • Display room of Rita's awards and photographs • Gift shop Open: June 1st - October 15th 9 a.m. - 7 p.m. (7 days a week) Phone: (902) 828-2667 ambitions and vigorously playing a part in the world beyond the home. I found myself admiring her spunk, dedication, energetic mind, and comprehensive vision. And although I was vexed trying to decipher her sprawling, virtually illegible handwriting, I admired the fact that she did not write in a controlled, decorative script. Here was a woman who did not abide by the rules of ladylike penmanship. Isabella was no shrinking violet, nor did she conform to our perception of the Victorian lady, whiling away the hours, lying on her fainting couch, hiding behind her firescreen, reading a book of sermons, or stitching needlepoint mottos. In the initial stages of my research, I longed to put a face to this emerging personality. I was thrilled when I finally discovered the Rev. Murdoch Stewart's physical description of Isabella: "I may say," Stewart wrote, "it is worth noticing that she was rather below the ordinary size of women, rather thin too, or slightly built (i.e. not stout by any means) with round-ruddy cheeks, and moved about with great liveliness and energy. One could imagine that she must have been a beauty when



young." Dynamic and diminutive • that was how I had pictured her from the start. My Isabella Gordon Mackay was a "mighty mouse." Little wonder that her obituary singled out as her main attributes her "strong mind...energy and perseverance." Throughout her life, Isabella never failed to do justice to the Gordon motto, "Forward without Fear." Unfortunately, the specific details about Isabella Gordon Mac? kay's early life are sketchy. An obituary reveals that she was born in Sutherlandshire in 1778, the youngest daughter of John Gordon and Isabella McLeod. In 1803, "Bella," as she was sometimes called, married John Mackay, a native of the parish of Lairg, in the county of Sutherland. 'oott'" Smarter Safer Prouder Encouraging everyone to work safely Nova Scotia Construction Safety Association 66