Preface

This book results from a failed political struggle in 1996 at the McCord Museum of Canadian History. Decisions made at the museum and condoned by McGill University destroyed people's work, struck at the research role of museums, and disconnected the McCord Museum from its scholarly base in the university. Among those at McGill prominent in the campaign to restore the archives and to retain university teaching and research at the Museum were Annemarie Adams, Catherine Desbarats, Suzanne Morton, Sherry Olson, and Steve Watt. Alex Roshuk, an MA student in history, not only helped in the campaign but won a seat on McGill's board of governors to defend the rights of students for access to university collections in Canadiana.

Several interviews were crucial to this work: Judith Berlyn – daughter of Isabel Dobell – met with me several times and opened her mother's papers to me. The illustrator of Dobell's books, Cécile Gagnon, brought copies of her correspondence with Dobell to my house. Anthropologist Bruce Trigger, wise in people and university politics, took an afternoon to explain his perception of the museum and his failed struggle before 1987 to integrate teaching and research between museum and university. His insistence on historicity – that is, the McCord Museum itself as part of history – is fundamental to the arguments herein. Architect Guy Desbarats combined a crystal-clear memory with passion for the issues surrounding the renovation of the McGill Student Union building into the McCord Museum. Former costume curator Cynthia Eberts offered sherry in Toronto and insights into the history of the McCord in the 1960s. Always thoughtful, Stanley Triggs, longtime curator of
the Notman Photographic Archives, helped me understand the archivist’s perspective. Luke Rombout, director of the museum during its renovation, accorded a peppery interview. In separate interviews, Derek Price, head of the McConnell Foundation, David Lank, former chair of the McCord board, and David Bourke, the present chair, sat down with me and explained their perceptions of the museum. Over lunch at the McGill Faculty Club, Stanley Frost shared his memories of his vice-principalship and McGill’s history. Marcel Caya, former director of the museum, took care in explaining his perspective of museum politics during his mandate. Peter McNally of McGill’s Graduate School of Library and Information Studies commented on my draft manuscript and enriched my text with his knowledge of Canadian Studies at McGill. Historian and former dean Michael Maxwell read parts, offered important improvements, and gave me access to his unpublished research on the History Department. Béatrice Kowalczko kept insisting on the fine line between an academic book and pamphleteering and pushed me to link the McCord experience to larger cultural and intellectual phenomena in Canadian life.

Members of the Montreal History Group helped with both theory and research. Don Fyson helped with research and my understanding of the McCord family. Tamara Myers read a draft and emphasized the twinning of gender and class in Montreal’s English-speaking community. Research in the McGill Archives was completed by Jarrett Rudy and particularly Mary Anne Poutanen. Always accessible, archivist Gordon Burr of the McGill Archives was generous in helping with photo research. The theoretical underpinnings of this work benefited from multiple conversations with Kathryn Harvey, who is herself completing a thesis on David Ross McCord.

At McGill-Queen’s University Press, Aurèle Parisien pumped up the author on blue days and shepherded the manuscript over several significant bumps. The manuscript was edited with wisdom, grace, and a strong sense of the mot juste by Mary McDougall Maude. The anonymous comments of two readers for the Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme were of immense use in my revisions.
All of these individuals helped greatly in improving my text; I remain solely responsible for errors.

Mentally incapacitated and resident of a Westmount nursing home during the writing of the book, Isabel Dobell – to whom this book is dedicated – could not be interviewed. As an historian whose normal turf is the nineteenth century, I found it surreal to write of a person living close by but who had lost the capacity to speak for herself. But I did come to know her well as I read her papers in the quiet of her study in the Linton Apartments, followed her paper trail across McGill and the museum, and interviewed people around her. She died in April 1998.

Researching and teaching seminars in the McCord Museum, I learned much from observing archivist Pamela Miller. Besides professional expertise, she had passion for the work of students and researchers who came to the historical archives. Like Dobell who hired her, she moved with surefootedness in the English-speaking community in which the museum is rooted. I associate her intellectual vigour, tolerance, and generosity towards the work of others as essential attributes of the curator or archivist.

In January 1996, the position of archivist at the Museum was abolished and Miller’s work summarily terminated. I was angered to see her punished for resisting museum authorities and for standing up for her profession and the work of her fellow curators. As I watched the firing and its aftermath, I came to realize that the crisis at the McCord had professional, institutional, and human parallels in museums across Europe and North America. I want to remind university, museum, and philanthropic authorities of the important histories in the bones and mortar of their institutions by documenting the work of Pamela Miller, Isabel Dobell, and their predecessors back to David Ross McCord. These individuals perceived the social value of historical artifacts, encouraged collaboration between university, museum, and community, and insisted on the centrality of intellectual work in a history museum.