

“ . . . And Things Were Going Wrong at Home ”

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Late Victorian and Edwardian Canada tantalized its feminine bourgeoisie. Every school, every profession, every social institution seemed to promise unprecedented opportunity. Fascinated by the offerings, each woman sought in her own way to update her understanding of femininity--the conformist to complement her accustomed fields of activity, the adventuresome to pluck more radical alternatives from her changing environment.

The woman's club movement which blossomed in the 1890s was one manifestation of feminine unrest. Female societies represented a world of new activity and new power for their members. Women, aroused by the promise of the times, also assailed masculine preserves of learning. From universities, normal schools and professional faculties came a new breed of bourgeois woman: the professional. Some women were discovering rewarding lives in a career; others finding satisfaction as club women or sportswomen. For the first time, the Canadian community appeared both prosperous and sophisticated enough to accept social experimentation from a considerable number of women.

Despite such apparent potential for change, the development of fundamentally different roles for women was hampered from the outset. Urban, industrial society had not eliminated the need for labour within the home. Child

care and other domestic responsibilities continued to be defined as inescapable female tasks. This persisting liability may help to explain why the 'domestic problem' runs as a constant theme throughout the women's pages of newspapers and magazines, deliberations of female clubs and organizations, and private letters of individual women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Canada.¹

While the bourgeois woman chaired a meeting, studied philosophy, poured tea or hit a golf ball, some female had to scrub the floors and feed the children. Unromantic, not to mention often burdensome and menial, tasks could not be entirely avoided if the basic family unit was to be maintained. A well-ordered home was the solid rock upon which rested the bourgeois family. Academic journals and popular magazines promoted the role of home and family life:

The hope of the future lies mainly in well-ordered homes²

De toutes les questions dont la femme a le droit et le devoir de s'occuper, l'organisation du travail domestique est assurément celle qui s'impose à elle le plus impérieusement puisqu'elle comporte l'organisation du foyer lui-même et que la paix et le bonheur de la famille en dépendent.³

And a country without homes means a race without dignity and honour, a mere organized rabble tribe.⁴

Excited by their own broadening horizons, bourgeois women rather naturally expected the most menial and time-consuming tasks to be performed by the sisters of the men who served their husbands in Canada's expanding factories. For many, the possibility of pursuing new roles depended upon the services of working-class substitutes. Thus the recruitment of a permanent supply of inexpensive and efficient servants was a recurring preoccupation of bourgeois women. Only after repeated failure to discover their domestic paragon would they reluctantly seek other solutions to their domestic burdens.

In the late nineteenth century, the traditional and simplest method of obtaining household workers was through informal communication channels provided by family and neighborhood. These highly personal networks, which functioned best in smaller and more rural communities, were increasingly ill-adapted to the demands of an urban and industrial society. Since individual efforts often proved fruitless, many women relied on social institutions which had day-to-day contacts with the working class. Canada's embryonic social welfare and penal systems doubled as domestic training agencies. Reformatories, prisons, orphanages, homes

for unwed mothers and other charitable organizations offered rehabilitation to the fallen, the helpless and the homeless in the shape of occupational training as a domestic.

The accounts of the Toronto Girls' Home, the Mercer Reformatory, the Protestant Orphan Homes in Ottawa and Toronto, the Protestant Ladies' Society, the Protestant Home for Friendless Women, the Female Home Society in Montreal and many others make it clear that their girl inmates commonly became servants. The Charity Organization Society in nineteenth century Montreal was typical in viewing assistance to needy females almost exclusively in terms of domestic work. In Toronto, a fund raiser knew just how to appeal to both the social concern and the self-interest of her agency's supporters.

They [poor children] will be trained for servants and thus the neglected and suffering little girls of our city will become useful citizens and householders will be provided with trained domestics.⁵

Not all domestics were recruited in the city. In rural Quebec the curé responded to the pressure of French-Canadian women's organizations by directing farm girls into the servants' quarters of urban homes. Householders across the Dominion generally preferred

rural recruits crediting them with greater modesty and humility and correspondingly fewer demands and expectations.

Bourgeois women soon appreciated, however, that neither rural nor urban Canada could supply a satisfactory number of willing workers. Like their husbands, they turned to immigration for the solution to their labour difficulties. From at least the 1880s immigration societies designed to recruit domestics flourished in major Canadian cities. Agencies such as the Women's Protective Immigration Society, the Women's National Immigration Society and the Women's Domestic Guild of Canada contacted potential recruits in Great Britain, organized a swift and chaperoned crossing and provided temporary lodgings upon arrival. Many female domestics were bound by contract to a specific employer even before embarkation; others were placed as quickly as possible after stepping ashore. Even such multi-purpose organizations as the Salvation Army, the Young Women's Christian Association, the Fédération Nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste and the National Council of Women, not to mention the immigration departments of the Canadian Northern and Canadian Pacific Railroads, took a conspicuously active part in encouraging the immigration of domestics.

Happily for the colonial bourgeoisie, their desire for domestics coincided

with the efforts of British philanthropists to provide jobs and husbands for the 'excess' female population of the mother country. Even then, hard-working, docile and domestically-inclined girls were hard to find and harder to keep. Potential mistresses were forced to compete with British employers, the Dominion's unwilling bachelors and the nation's factories. Persistent problems in finding cheap and reliable help eventually drove Canadian women to the recruitment of "foreign" domestics. In the post-1896 immigration boom, northern and eastern European servants became relatively common, particularly in the West. By the turn of the century, more cosmopolitan centres like Montreal were witnessing some black domestic immigration.

Not infrequently, federal and provincial immigration officers sympathized with the difficulties of the bourgeois householder. Governments collaborated with voluntary agencies by aiding reception centres, by advancing fares and by publicizing the advantages of domestic service in Canada. Such efforts were undermined by metropolitan and provincial rivalries. Every city and every province conspired to direct the flow of potential domestics to its own homes.

By the twentieth century, women were beginning to recognize that not even institutional mobilization could fulfil

their dream of unlimited numbers of perfect servant girls; nor could the private or government employment agencies, increasingly common in the 1900s, satisfactorily coordinate the supply and demand for efficient, inexpensive help. Fewer but better-trained domestics seemed a possible solution. More realistic mistresses sought to maximize the household labour available. Professional training would ensure a uniform level of competence while at the same time avoiding the costly and time-consuming process of 'breaking in' new maids. At the same time it was hoped that the establishment of recognized standards would remove some of the social stigma attached to the occupation.

Major women's organizations in the Dominion championed the professionalization of domestic service. The National Council of Women's early support of the household science movement was motivated in part by the hope that the public school system might incidentally train girls for employment in bourgeois homes. In Quebec, the French-Canadian bourgeoisie later sponsored the Ecoles Ménagères Provinciales, whose goals included the training of servants. In 1919, under the aegis of the Minister of Immigration and Colonization, women from all parts of Canada formed the Canadian Council of Immigration of Women for Domestic Service. Its recommendations included proposals to incorporate a home training program for girls within the pub-

lic school system. The Council optimistically intended some pupils for household service.

Some mistresses also reasoned that the arbitrary and informal nature of the servant-employer relationship was a major cause of the 'domestic crisis.' Women like Lady Aberdeen in the 1890s and Madame Gérin-Lajoie⁶ a decade later believed that associations of servants, aided by sympathetic mistresses, could control wages, standardize skills, protect morals and establish minimum working conditions. Under external supervision household employment would become a more attractive career for intelligent and capable young women. All bourgeois women did not share this insight and sense of noblesse oblige. The socially prominent French Canadian reformer found few supporters among her contemporaries, although as the following remark suggests, her efforts might be labelled thinly disguised opportunism:

En exerçant. . .une action morale et intellectuelle sur les domestiques, nous faisons de cette carrière si humble et si méprisée, une carrière attrayante, et ainsi nous améliorons non seulement le sort des domestiques mais aussi des maîtresses de maison.⁷

In fact, the insecurity and shortsighted parsimony of most mistresses precluded any widespread support for workers' organizations. The Calgary

Housekeepers' Association, formed in 1916, was, like many similar organizations, short-lived.

Repeatedly disappointed in their efforts to get domestic substitutes, some English-Canadian women toyed with the possibility of more radical solutions to their housekeeping difficulties. Domestic experiments elsewhere were viewed with considerable curiosity. In January of 1919, for instance, the Canadian Women's Party held a conference of employers and domestics whose key speaker was Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the author of Women and Economics and one of America's most radical critics of traditional domestic arrangements. The recurring proposals for communal kitchens, nursery schools, cooperative housekeeping, 'ready-to-wear' dinners and home catering which are scattered throughout the women's pages of newspapers and periodicals reflect widespread interest in the ideas which Gilman represented.

The social upheaval and manpower shortages of World War One dramatically illustrated the hazards of depending on the working-class woman. Subsequently, realists were more willing to ask:

Why should a more or less untidy kitchen, a weary woman, and since all women are not good cooks, an oft-times badly-cooked meal constitute a home? Why should the meals have to be even prepared in the house to preserve the home atmosphere? Wouldn't the time be

less wearisomely and more acceptably spent in attending to the dainty service of food which would with community kitchen service be brought to the home, hot and delicious, in containers used for that purpose. Would the fact that there would be no dishes to wash destroy anyone's appetite?⁸

There are rare instances of such ideas being implemented. In Toronto in 1921 a community catering service was started for those who could not get domestic help but who did not wish to eat in restaurants. Such experiments were not generally popular. Canadians clung to their self-contained homes and the individual domestic service of mistress or maid. In French Canada, the strength of the traditional social network of family and Church precluded even cursory speculation about alternative domestic arrangements.

While society stubbornly maintained its commitment to a domestic ideology which celebrated the sexual division of labour and the isolated household, it was simultaneously welcoming and utilizing labour-saving devices. The electric stove, the vacuum cleaner and the washing machine had become viable substitutes for some of the work performed by the domestic. Prepackaged foods and ready-to-wear clothing were presented as acceptable alternatives to the menial's long hours of cooking and sewing. Slowly and almost imperceptibly a new life-style in which the domestic servant had no place was

growing up around modern technology. Suburbs far from sources of working-class labour and reduced house size accelerated these changes.

Technical progress had not, however, abolished housework, it had merely altered the methods of its performance. The daughters of the bourgeoisie now were trained as domestic scientists to operate their new homes. And so, increasingly bereft of servants, bourgeois women found themselves alone with their household chores.

Their predicament was not entirely unappreciated. They were comforted and supported by a domestic ideology which glorified the lady of the house as the all-purpose woman, the efficient consumer and the skillful operator of household appliances. A war-scared nation employed its literature, its advertisements, its newspapers and its sermons to convince women to remain in the home. There, by becoming better wives and mothers, by baking and by sewing, they would reknit the loosened social fabric.

Ironically enough, as highly personal mothering and housekeeping gained renewed favour with the bourgeoisie, its womenfolk came to echo the complaints of their former employees: loneliness, interminable hours, insufficient appreciation, low status, lack of independence, ill health and dislike of housework. The old nightmare of re-

cruiting and supervising domestic help had awesome successors.

In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Canada, bourgeois women came full circle in their efforts to balance domestic obligations with their new opportunities. For the first time, large numbers of these women had glimpsed expressions of femininity other than motherhood and housekeeping. Nevertheless, these new opportunities could only be pursued if they did not disrupt the efficient operation of the household. Even the most rebellious of Canadian feminists was reluctant to deny her primary responsibility for the preservation and well-being of her home. For some time, through working-class substitutes and domestic experiments, women attempted to satisfy both their desires for freedom and their duties to their families. Despite their ambitions, however, the promise of technology eventually tempted women straight back to the home. The measure of post-war femininity was the efficient manipulation of machines, the intelligent organization of consumption, enlightened child care and the maintenance of glamour in spite of all.

Woman's inability to escape domestic tasks was the price she paid in accepting an ideology which institutionalized the sexual division of labour. Even the Dominion's most articulate feminists could not easily grasp the deep-seated nature of the limitations upon

their lives. Unable to gain a perspective on their femininity which did not make the home of central importance, bourgeois women were unable to fully exploit the tantalizing offerings of a modern society.

The fate of Canada's first generation of feminists makes it clear that any future expansion of horizons for women must rely ultimately on the questioning and rejection of sexually-determined spheres of activity, whether applied to the bourgeoisie or the working class. Until we are prepared to make this analysis and to live with its implications, we may expect to travel the same route that beguiled and betrayed earlier Canadians.

Footnotes

1. Much of the information for this article is gleaned from unpublished materials, including M. Boulkind, "Vocational Training Facilities for Women in Montreal," M.A., McGill University, 1938; Marie Lavigne, Jennifer Stoddart, et al., *La Glace est rompue*, m.s., Université de Québec à Montréal, août, 1973; Veronica Strong-Boag, "The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada, 1893-1929," Ph.D., University of Toronto, 1975; Johann Wilson, "A History of Home Economic Education in Canada," Ph.D., University of Manitoba, 1966. Other useful material on the domestic question can be found in the *Annual Reports* and *Yearbooks* of the National Council of Women of Canada beginning in 1894; *La Bonne Parole*, the publication of la Fédération Nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Montreal, from 1913 onwards; Mm. F.L. Beique, *Quatre-vingt Ans de Souvenirs, Histoire d'une Famille* (Montreal, 1939); Lucy Salmon, *Domestic Service* (New York, 1901); Ella Sykes, *A Home-Help in Canada* (London, 1912). A recent interpretation of the role of domestic service in Canada is Genevieve Leslie, "Domestic Service in Canada, 1880-1920," *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto, 1974), pp. 71-125.
2. "'The New Woman' and the Problems of the Day," *Canada Educational Monthly*, April 1897, p. 134.
3. "Rapport du comité des questions domestiques," *Recueil des Oeuvres Fédérées ou l'Action des Canadiennes-Françaises*, 1911, p. 62.
4. A. Herbert, "What shall we do about maids?" *Macleans*, June 15, 1921, p. 61.
5. Mrs. S.J. Brett, *Girls' Industrial Institute* (Women's Christian Association of Toronto, c. 1890), n.p.
6. Conclusions regarding Madam Gérin-Lajoie and her work in this paper are drawn in part from research done by the group, "Les Premières Feministes Canadienne-françaises" of Montreal.
7. Minutes of l' Association des Aides-Ménagères, Sept. 19, 1908, Archives of the FNSJB.
8. Mrs. Oag, "Address on Community Kitchens," *Women's Century*, April 1919, p. 37.