

Old Women and Their Place in Nova Scotia, 1881-1931

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ABSTRACT

The demography of Nova Scotia during the fifty year period 1881-1931 reveals an unusually high proportion of older women. Suzanne Morton examines their social and economic circumstances.

RÉSUMÉ

L'étude de la démographie de la Nouvelle-Écosse, pour la période de cinquante ans qui va de 1881 à 1931, révèle que les femmes âgées représentaient un pourcentage important de la population. Suzanne Morton examine les causes et effets de ce phénomène, d'un point de vue social et économique.

One of the most striking aspects of the female experience in Nova Scotia between 1881 and 1931, and in fact in all of the Maritime provinces, was the high proportion of women who were old. Older societies with relatively few new immigrants foster an aging population so that when one speaks of the elderly in this context, one is generally referring to a population which is female.¹ In 1931, Nova Scotia boasted 13,442 women over the age of 69, a number greater than the total population of each of the counties of Antigonish, Richmond, Queen's or Victoria. There was not only a large proportion of elderly women living within the province, but, as elsewhere in Canada, older women were increasing as a percentage of the total female population. In 1881, 3.3 percent of the female population of the province had been age 70 or older but, by 1931, this group had risen to form 5.4 percent of the total female population. (See Table One)

Old age was a common female experience, yet elderly women had an unclear and at times an almost

invisible position in their communities. When they were noticed, elderly women evoked images that extended from lonely helpless old ladies, sweet grandmothers, dominant matriarchs, to witches. The variety of stereotypes and their contradictions obscured and distorted the position of elderly women in both Nova Scotian culture and society. A woman's place was shaped not only by class, ethnicity and marital status, but also by age. This paper begins to explore this complex status by investigating the material conditions of elderly women's lives.

Considering the number of older women in Nova Scotia between 1881 and 1931, one might expect they would have had a greater presence in the contemporary literature. Margaret Marshall Saunders, despite her reform-minded writing and her personal involvement in the Halifax Old Ladies Home, did not see older women as a special group in society needing assistance, and references in her books amount to condescending descriptions of an old woman who collected bones, a "gay lively little grandmother," and

the “poorly dressed” guests at charity “cripple teas.”² Frank Parker Day, in his novel *Rockbound*, created the formidable matriarch Anapest, but like characters created later in the twentieth century, such as Charles Bruce’s Mrs Josie and Ernest Buckler’s Ellen Canaan, the symbolic value of elderly women supersedes actual character development. The writings of Prince Edward Island author L.M. Montgomery, more than any Nova Scotian writer, were full of old women who ranged from old rich ladies in great houses, such as Mrs Josephine Barry, Great Aunt Nancy, or Elizabeth grandmother’s in *Anne of Windy Poplars*, to witches such as Peg Bowen of *The Story Girl*. Older women might even be considered abundant in Montgomery’s novels as many were based on the motif of a young girl living among old women and surrounded by aged female relatives and neighbours. Thus, Montgomery emerges with an exceptional perspective, perhaps reflecting her own rural experience where older women composed a particularly important component of the population.

Although older women generally had an inconspicuous place among Nova Scotia’s cultural icons, when they were utilized for their symbolic value they could generate a powerful response. In 1885, it was the treatment of an elderly female pauper that was primarily responsible for initiating the inquiry into the treatment of the poor in Digby County.³ Aged women’s potency as a cultural symbol was also witnessed in the 1925 Conservative party’s provincial campaign, in which the image of an older woman emerged as the powerful reason to vote the Liberals out of office. During this election, the Conservatives adopted a slogan of “Vote Him Home” that ran along a series of drawings illustrating the impact of out migration on those who remained in Nova Scotia. The sketches represented parents “breaking down under the strain of carrying on alone,” a fatherless child, an empty house, a lonely sweetheart, and the absent young men themselves. The most successful of these advertise-

ments was one portraying a kindly, grey-haired, bespectacled older woman asking “Where’s My Boy?” (See Figure #1). The full-page advertisement ran twice in the *Halifax Herald* and a smaller portrait of just the elderly woman was published in the two days immediately preceding the election. The symbol struck such resonance with the public that, in the 1930s, when political cartoonists recalled this provincial election, they used the image of the old woman from the 1925 campaign.⁴

The powerful reaction old women evoked as political symbols was associated with economic vulnerability. The correlation between female poverty and aging is certainly not a new phenomenon; older women in Nova Scotia were always among the most economically powerless. Yet, the fear of passing one’s final days in the poorhouse was inaccurately regarded as a female problem. Here lies the mystery. Although aged women in Nova Scotia comprised a larger portion of the total female population than most places in Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and although many of these women were destitute, Nova Scotia possessed one of the lowest levels of institutionalization in Canada among the female elderly. In fact, despite its older population and the existence of a system of county and municipal poorhouses, Nova Scotia had a significantly lower ratio of institutionalized elderly to overall population except for the newly settled three most westerly provinces.⁵ If elderly women were not generally being cared for in institutional settings, where and how did they live? Investigation into the subsistence of elderly women sheds light on family and friends, revealing strength, abuse, and high personal costs extracted during a period of great out migration and dislocation.

It is difficult to define old women as a distinct segment of the population. The meaning and understanding of what it meant to be old differed for men and women as it was based on a combination of economic, biological, life-cycle and cultural criteria that varied



Figure 1. The Halifax Herald, June 20, 1925 (Detail)

according to gender.⁶ The emphasis our society placed on women's reproductive role meant that women were considered old with the onset of menopause. Menopause was understood not only as the end of women's reproductive and sexual life but also marked a long period of illness or decline.⁷ The use of menopause to herald old age encouraged the myth that women aged earlier than men, although they lived longer. The early aging of women could also be reinforced by cultural associations around grandmothers. As women had fewer children spaced more closely together and finished child bearing earlier in marriage, they were increasingly likely to become middle-aged grandmothers with no children remaining at home. Old age could also be linked to widowhood, a common experience among married women who lived long enough.⁸

It would be a mistake to see only the different ways

men and women experienced old age. Both men and women were classified by an arbitrary bureaucratic definition of old age beginning at 70. This chronological point was used by the Nova Scotia government in its collection of statistics under the provisions of the Workmen's Compensation Act and by the federal government in its introduction of an old age pension in 1927. The arbitrary use of the same age for men and women has led historian James Struthers to refer to this as Canada's first gender neutral welfare program.⁹ Classification, however, must also have been subjective, as material circumstances could affected the experience of aging. In her study of the underclass in late Victorian Halifax, Judith Fingard noted that "people on the precarious margin of existence aged rapidly."¹⁰ Given the variance in the manner that old age could be defined and experienced, the

label of elderly women included a wide and heterogeneous group.

Older women were both rich and poor, but this wide continuum of wealth was not evenly distributed. One of the common characteristics shared by many women was poverty. Its roots can be found in their own lack of employment opportunities and in the death, illness, underemployment or unemployment of a wage-earning husband. The Nova Scotia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty specified "old people" as a segment of the population who needed the "attention of our officers."¹¹ Research conducted by a provincial government commission into the introduction of an Old Age Pension in 1929 confirmed the widespread poverty among those in the population over the age of 70. Over one third of the 929 urban elderly Haligonians interviewed reported no income at all and over half subsided on an income of less than \$199 per annum. The 1931 census reported that, while most Nova Scotians lived in urban areas, women over 70 were almost twice as likely to live in a rural area.¹² In the rural counties, such as Hants, older people had even less access to cash than in the city as 43 percent reported no income at all and among those who did 70 percent had an income of less than \$199 a year. Of course in the countryside, the absence of cash might be mitigated by other forms of income. The diversity of their survival strategies was acknowledged by a frustrated bureaucrat who could not quantify "the value of a little work done in the garden, of a free supply of firewood or 'twelve hens and a pig'."¹³ These non-market strategies were also employed in the city but space and resources would have limited their scope.¹⁴ Home production may have stretched scarce dollars but rarely provided a livelihood in itself and the Commission concluded that the province's aged had either successfully accumulated a moderate income and found themselves able to live off savings or were "practically destitute and dependent" on others.

Many women's impoverished situation was linked

to the death of their husband. Women over the age of 70 were much more likely to be widowed than men. The 1930 report on Old Age Pensions found that only a quarter of women studied, compared to over half of the men, had a spouse living.¹⁵ This dramatic difference was explained by the dual impact of women living longer and choosing older marital partners. For example, women over 70, who had a husband under 70 accounted for only 2.3 per cent of the study group, while nearly one out of every five male septuagenarians fell into this group.¹⁶

The death of the male breadwinner meant that women lost the predominant source of economic support and were sometimes forced to rely on their own initiative. In Halifax, where the published census for 1921 categorizes female employment according to age, few women over 65 were engaged in formal waged employment. The less than seven per cent of the total age group reflected similar circumstances across the country.¹⁷ The jobs, which these elderly women found, did not greatly differ from their middle-aged female neighbours, except that they were fewer in number and were rewarded with even lower pay.¹⁸ Employers discriminated against older women and choices were often limited to domestic service, or petty entrepreneurial activities, which could be conducted from their own homes such as dressmaking, laundering, or operating a rooming house. These occupations straddled the boundary between casual and formal paid labour and were often left unrecorded.¹⁹ Of the 1,322 women in Nova Scotia 65 years of age and over said to be engaged in paid labour in 1921, 55 percent were self-employed; the largest occupations classified were farmers, boarding-house keepers, dressmakers, merchants and nurses. The prevalence of self-employment that bordered on casual labour was also evident in earlier manuscript censuses. Women over the age of 60 farmed, kept lodgers, worked as tailors, midwives, nurses, grocers, and washerwomen. Literary evidence also attests to the independent labour of older

women; Edith Archibald's description of Marget MacRory in *The Token*, for example, notes that this Cape Breton grandmother "had regular customers ... for her eggs, butter and garden produce."²⁰

These forms of self-employment often provided little more than subsistence. For example, the 1901 manuscript census indicated that Lizzie Williams, a 51 year old Yarmouth widow supported her 70 year old mother by operating a Boarding House. In the census year, she reported earning \$700 from which she would have deducted all expenses including food and a servant's wages, before she arrived at a net income by which she could maintain herself and her mother.²¹ Women without the security of property faced an even more difficult challenge. In 1898, Helen Stewart a 58 year old widow from Newcastle, New Brunswick, arrived in Springhill without friends or resources, "thinking to get some kind of business to make a living." On arrival she discovered "things different from what I expected and am without money or friends and dont [sic.] know what to do".²² Helen Stewart's attempt to venture out on her own failed and she was reduced to petitioning the province of Nova Scotia to provide funds for her return to New Brunswick. Lack of opportunity was compounded by failing health. Irish-born Margaret Quinn who, in 1902, had lived and worked in Nova Scotia and the United States for about fifty years, finally abandoned her efforts to support herself at the age of 85 when she petitioned the Nova Scotia government for admittance to the poorhouse owing to the fact that at this advanced age she was "unable to work."²³

With limited opportunities for formal paid labour, few women qualified to receive pensions from the rare companies that granted annuities to female workers. Companies with formal pension plans such as Maritime Telephone and Telegraph set a minimum of twenty years with the company, a length of employment far beyond the normal paid labour careers of most women.²⁴ Some women may have been eligible

for military pensions issued by the federal government based on their position as widows of Canadian soldiers. Certainly some older women in Nova Scotia were recipients of pensions from the 1885 Northwest Rebellion, although as Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright have pointed out, this largesse was often subject to "good behaviour."²⁵ Most older women, however, had to rely on their own ingenuity or the generosity of others.

The economic vulnerability of the elderly and their sometimes dependent state meant that the aged, along with widowed mothers and orphans, were at the forefront of the development of the welfare state. The federal Old Age Pension Act of 1927 provided the possibility of an income of not more than \$20 a month to British subjects 70 years of age, with an annual income of less than \$365 who had lived in Canada for 20 years and had lived in the province, paying the pension for the preceding five years. The financial burden for provinces in this cost-sharing program meant that Nova Scotia delayed participation until March 1934. Once the program began, almost immediately, 14,518 Nova Scotians were receiving pension cheques that averaged \$14.13 a month.²⁶ But this meagre monthly allotment did not provide financial security nor was everyone who was deserving qualified to receive a government cheque. A 74 year old Eastern Shore widow was rejected, for example, because she shared her home with a son who was capable of work — had there been any.²⁷

There were provincial provisions for care for the elderly before 1934. Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, like the New England states, but unlike the other colonies that comprised Canada, adopted a Poor Law based on early British legislation. The Poor Law placed responsibility for care of the dependent poor on the smallest and most local unit of government and enshrined the principle of public taxation for relief.²⁸ In Nova Scotia this meant that the poor, including elderly paupers, were the responsibility of the local town-

ship or municipal government. Ironically, the existence of the Poor Law may have been partially responsible for the low level of institutionalization among old women. Provisions under the Poor Law freed local benevolent organizations to allocate their meagre resources into other areas than the institutional care of the aged and so few non-state institutions were established. The lack of religious-based care for elderly woman in Nova Scotia, in particular, provides a striking contrast to other North American communities.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth-century, most Nova Scotian counties stopped boarding out the poor to the lowest bidder and established permanent town, township, and county poor asylums or farms.²⁹ While the boarding system was open to horrendous abuse, it had also permitted a degree of flexibility and individual response that had served some dependents well. Elderly paupers were occasionally placed with their own family members who received partial grants for their care; grants ranged from a couple of bags of flour to cash, clothing, and medical attention. These allotments to family members could be both higher and lower than the local rates for boarding out the elderly. In the 1880s, Digby County Poor District Four paid \$2 a week to 92 year old Miss Crandall who lived in her own home and was cared for by her great-niece and nephew. The expense of keeping Miss Crandall with her family was much more costly to local ratepayers than the \$45 they spent on boarding a neighbour Widow Comeau for a year.³⁰ Thus, local responsibility for the community's poor older women could lend itself to individual solutions.

Local responsibility and small populations meant that institutions were not uniform and the poorhouses perpetuated the local variation of conditions that had existed within the earlier boarding-out systems. Unlike the American poorhouses described by Michael Katz or the Ontario Wellington County House of Industry examined by Stormie Stewart, inmates in most Nova Scotia poorhouses tended to be less homogene-

ous as the elderly continued to share these institutions with children, unwed mothers, and the harmless insane.³¹ Although the elderly remained the most numerous patrons, classification within the poorhouses was according to sex, and, in one case race, rather than age.³² In Annapolis county, African-Nova Scotian paupers did not appear to have been separated by sex but were placed together in a separate building to the rear of the county institution.³³ While the poor condition of this building caused the provincial inspector to urge the end of racial segregation, he admitted that, "The colour line is pretty distinctly drawn, and I imagine this last suggestion will not be popular."³⁴ Other counties did not appear to practice such blatant racial segregation, although African-Nova Scotian paupers, a number of them elderly women, were specifically identified in the records of the Halifax Poor Asylum in the 1880s. Care for elderly African-Nova Scotians was a concern of the Nova Scotian black community and, after the establishment of the Colored Children's Home in 1921, the British Methodist Episcopal conference discussed the possibility of establishing an "Old Folks Home."³⁵

The diversity in asylums was not only a result of their client base but also their size. In 1907, the 337 inmates in residence at the Halifax City Home were divided into four groups along the lines of both sex and sanity and each subgroup resided separately in the large institutional structure complete with the most modern conveniences such as bathrooms and water closets on every floor. In contrast, North Sydney's Poor House was a simple cottage that in the same year housed a single old woman. In 1909, the Pictou Town poorhouse provided shelter for four old men and one old woman and was praised by the provincial inspector as being "very homelike and there is nothing of an institutional character."³⁶ Other poorhouses were operated as farms removed some distance from towns and villages.

It is, in fact, rather difficult to determine the num-

bers of elderly women in county and township poorhouses and farms since annual reports categorized inmates according to sanity, gender, and the broad classifications of adult or child. The lackadaisical record-keeping suggests that the age of adults, or singling older people out specifically, was not considered important by government bureaucrats. Annual reports, however, alluded to the presence of the elderly in comments about the poor capacity that the aged had for work and the necessity of hiring additional help for domestic and farm labour.³⁷ The elderly character of many inmates was further suggested by comments regarding the special care and needs of the aged. The Digby poorhouse in 1899 was praised, as "The old people, now cared for in the house are well looked after, and are as comfortable as it is possible to make them in their present residence."³⁸ The provision of rocking chairs for aged inmates in the Halifax County, Barrington, and East Hants poorhouses in the first decade of the twentieth century also signals an elderly clientele, the chairs being "much appreciated by the old people."³⁹

If the presence of older people in the poorhouses is vague, still more elusive are specific references to older women. As mentioned above, women outnumbered men in later years, but the often used phrase "older people" remains one of the rare examples of nineteenth-century gender neutral language. American scholars have suggested that elderly men were more likely to face institutionalization than were women, but work in a slightly later period in Ontario, by James Struthers, has found that while men predominated in rural districts, women formed the majority in urban institutions.⁴⁰ Circumstances in Halifax, where the poorhouse registers survive, indicate a similar pattern to the American findings. In Halifax, the impoverished aged were admitted to the City Asylum (or after 1907, upon the suggestion of the Local Council of Women, the City Home) along with a number of provincial charges.⁴¹ Here, inmates over fifty com-

posed the majority of the paupers and throughout the period of 1881 to 1931 there were always more elderly men than women in residence. Women composed between 35.7 percent in 1880 to 41.4 percent in 1931 of all inmates over the age of fifty. (See Table Two)

A number of suggestions have been proposed to explain why elderly women, who outnumbered elderly men in the general population, were less likely to end their days in the poorhouse. Michael Katz, in his study of American poorhouses, suggests that adult children were perhaps more willing to care for their mothers than their fathers. Katz utilizes the 1896 arguments of Stanford University professor Mary Roberts Smith who claimed that since female dependence in old age was universally recognized "it is a most disgraceful thing for relatives or children to allow an old woman to go to the almshouse." In contrast, men in their youth had access to economic opportunities inaccessible to women and therefore could be held personally accountable for their inadequate provisions.⁴² The bonds created by affection and social obligation may have been stronger towards women but these links were also reinforced by older women's capacity to contribute to domestic labour. Women in good health continued to take part in improving the conditions of the household through their labour. Older women babysat, cooked and cleaned and, in many cases, may have permitted unmarried sons to maintain independent households.

Altogether, it is the non-use of local poorhouses by elderly women that is most striking. In 1931, 43 percent of all Nova Scotian women in institutions were age 70 or older, but this total of 130 women was but the tiniest fraction of the 13,442 women seventy years of age or older in the province. While aged females were the women most likely to be found in institutions, their experience was very unusual. The 1929 interim report for the Commission into the Old Age Pension argued that the introduction of the pension would in no way reduce the number of people in the

province's poorhouses as only "a part of the inmates are septuagenarians and of these many are incapacitated mentally or physically so as to require institutional care."⁴³

It is not only striking how few elderly Nova Scotian women ended up in the poorhouse, but also how few alternative institutions were available to serve the community. In addition to the poorhouse, middle-class Protestant Halifax women operated the Old Ladies Home on Gottingen Street for elderly ladies in diminished circumstances. The home was opened in 1860 and in 1885 boasted 20 inmates with five women on the waiting list.⁴⁴ The provision of decent housing for these elderly middle-class women was described in the rhetoric of filial duty. At the opening of new facilities in 1885, one of the many clergymen present stated, "If we cannot take these ladies into our own homes, we can do the next best thing, provide for their comfort."⁴⁵ Clearly, in a perfect world, the Halifax minister believed that such an institution would not be necessary as elderly women would find homes with their families. As this was not the case, comfort was a duty and a public responsibility.

While the Old Ladies Homes served a very small segment of the Protestant middle class, there were few similar facilities for Roman Catholic elderly women. The Sisters of Charity opened a home for aged women in 1886 but this Halifax institution quickly evolved into the city's Catholic hospital.⁴⁶ In 1931, a listing of benevolent institutions in the province included two Catholic asylums for adults: St Teresa's Retreat in Halifax and St. Anthony's Home in Sydney, but neither specified an aged clientele.⁴⁷ Moreover, the work of the Sisters among the elderly in Halifax must have been limited since Roman Catholic women composed the largest religious denomination to reside in the Halifax City Home through the period 1881 to 1931, and the Catholic benevolent association, the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, regularly cooperated with admissions to this secular civic institution.(Table Three)⁴⁸

The lack of concern among religious denominations for elderly women was not characteristic of other North American communities.⁴⁹ This was particularly curious in the case of Nova Scotia's Roman Catholic community. Bettina Bradbury has recently reminded us of the importance the Catholic church in Montréal placed on the care of elderly women in the nineteenth century and the role that these religious shelters played not only in providing material support but also in facilitating a good or Christian death.⁵⁰ Although the concept of a Christian death did not have the same importance in Protestant sects, churches in other North American communities were active sponsors of care for elderly women. In part, the negligence of churches in Nova Scotia can be accounted for by the Poor Law itself. Basic needs were met by public taxation and in large institutions, such as the Halifax City Home, the definition of basic needs included spiritual comfort provided through an annual grant to the Catholic, Anglican and an Evangelical Alliance for regular visitation to the institution.⁵¹ In the annual reports of all provincial facilities submitted by the provincial inspector, comments regularly referred to the frequency of visits by clergy.⁵²

Regular worship services and spiritual solace were probably small comfort to the women who resided in the poorhouses. Poor asylums were difficult places for elderly women to live. Conditions varied across institutions but many offered poor physical surroundings with problems ranging from bed bugs, poor diet, lack of heat and blankets, to dangerous fire hazards.⁵³ On the night of 6 November 1882, the Halifax Poor Asylum was destroyed by fire, killing 30 inmates, 23 of them women. In a shocking case of employee negligence, the infirmary on the top floor of the asylum, housing old and crippled inmates was not evacuated.⁵⁴ Blame for this tragedy was assigned to the incompetent help; certainly this is the most tragic example of the universal difficulties poorhouses had with staffing. Brutal or inept personnel exasperated substand-

ard conditions in some poorhouses, a problem undoubtedly connected to the poor working conditions and wages to which these attendants were subjected.

Since revenue was generated by direct local taxation, community committees were often reluctant to spend money on the poor. This alone accounted for the wide variation in local conditions. But the unpleasant surroundings in poorhouses were not only the result of physical factors. Inmates lacked privacy and elderly women often had to share the female wards with unwed mothers.⁵⁵ Given social prejudice against single mothers, this residential association may have been as difficult as poor physical conditions. Poorhouses, as homes of the elderly, also had high death rates and a great deal of sickness.⁵⁶ Some inmates were senile and there were reports that the "old people were quarrelsome among each other."⁵⁷ Indeed, the miserable conditions in many of the province's poorhouses could affect provincial bureaucrats, such as the provincial inspector who, in 1919 after a tour of facilities in Kings' County, declared, "one's heart goes to those who, in their misfortune, must take refuge in such places."⁵⁸

As difficult as the physical and social conditions of the poorhouse was the stigmatization with which they were associated. In a rare example of sensitivity towards its elderly inmates, the Lunenburg overseers of the poor undertook the construction of an addition to the county institution "to serve the purpose of an infirmary for both sexes, and as a refuge for a class of inmates who have been accustomed to better things, and to whom the ordinary surroundings of a poorhouse are especially humiliating."⁵⁹ The disgrace of ending one's life in the poorhouse reflected failure, not only in terms of the lack of material success but also in terms of social relations. It signalled that one was financially impoverished, and also that one lacked the family or social relations that would save one from such a demeaning end.

Poorhouses were thus more significant as a cul-

tural symbol than as an actual place for caring for aged women. This was reflected in a wonderful piece of doggerel that appeared in the Morning Chronicle, in 1874, entitled "Over the hill to the poor house."⁶⁰ The poem, though authored by a man, voiced the perspective of a 70-year-old woman. The woman, after a life of hard work and devotion to her six children, is dismayed to realize that none of her children want her in their homes. Upon the marriage of her youngest son, she and her daughter-in-law quarrel and the son sides with his new wife.

*So twas only a few days before the thing
was done -
They was a family themselves, and I another
one;
And a very little cottage for one family will
do,
But never have I seen a house that was big
enough for two.*

After leaving her own home to her youngest son and his wife, the woman briefly lived with her daughter, who already shared her home with her husband's family. Her next move was to her oldest son's home but there she clashed over the lack of discipline of her grandchildren.

*And then I wrote to Rebecca, my girl that
lives out west -
And to Isaac not far from her - twenty miles
at best;
And one of 'em said it was too warm there
for any one so old,
And the t'other had the opinion that the cli-
mate was too cold.*

*And so they have shirked, and slighted me,
and shifted me about-
So they have well-nighed soured me, and*

*wore my old heart out;
But still I've borne up pretty well, and wasn't
much put down,
Till Charley went to the Poor master, and
put me on the town.*

*Over the hill to the poor house, my chil-
dren dear goodbye.
Many a night I've watched you when God
was only nigh;
And God will judge between; but I will al-
ways pray,
That you will never suffer, the half I do to-
day.*

The image of a rejected mother is powerful and it is perhaps not so surprising that this appeal to duty usually succeeded despite the heavy individual costs. In L.M. Montgomery's The Tangled Web, 85 year old Aunt Becky lived on her own in two rooms she rented within a friend's home. Montgomery wrote that this housing arrangement had been Aunt Becky's own choice, for any number of her relatives "would have been open to her, for the clan was never unmindful of their obligations."⁶¹

A few elderly women ended their days in the poorhouse and others managed to survive on income from their savings or property, but the 1930 report of the Nova Scotia government concluded that "by far the greatest number were supported by their children." Over half of the sample group from the Old Age Pension Commission received full support from their children, the likelihood of full support increasing with the greater the number of children living.⁶² Wide-spread parental support conforms with traditional wisdom that children formed the best old age policy, but differs from the findings of American historian Daniel Scott Smith who concluded that after 1900 the number of children did not affect the likelihood of support in old age in America.⁶³ Traditional family commitment to

the elderly may have been higher in Nova Scotia than elsewhere in Canada or North America.

But children were not always available to give the needed assistance nor were they always willing. Approximately a quarter of the septuagenarians interviewed by the 1930 Commission had no child living and, in the remaining group, nearly a third of their adult children had left the province.⁶⁴ While many of these adult children did and were expected to provide financial support through remitted wages, they would not have been available for physical assistance or residential cohabitation. Care and support for elderly parents fell hardest on single-child families and this responsibility appears to have influenced the life options of these children in adulthood as they were less likely to leave Nova Scotia.⁶⁵

Under provincial legislation, children and grandchildren, if they had the means, were legally responsible for the care of their parents and grandparents.⁶⁶ This was not always an accepted duty, as in the case of George Brown of Sydney who petitioned the government in 1899 that he be relieved of supporting his mother-in-law. Brown had supported his wife's mother for sixteen years and claimed he was "not going to support her longer without some help.... something must be done right away." He complained that the old woman was "sick all the time," which presumably meant that she not only needed additional attention in nursing but also that she was unable to contribute to the household through domestic labour. He requested \$8.00 a month for her support, which he described as "little enough."⁶⁷

Other adult children took care of aging mothers or grandmothers at high personal costs. Fiction mirrored reality in L.M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables when Anne postponed her education to stay home with Marilla. In 1898, L.M. Montgomery herself returned to Cavendish where she lived with her grandmother, with the exception of a few months in 1901-2, until her grandmother's death in 1911. Not unlike the fic-

tional characters she created who postponed marriage until the death of a parent, L.M. Montgomery delayed her own life plans, marrying four months after her grandmother's death.⁶⁸

Certainly some cases of familial responsibility led to elder abuse. In 1909, the Nova Scotia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty investigated the case of a 77 year old Tancook woman who was kept locked in her room, thrown food, and subjected to a "wicked" daughter-in-law. The Society removed the aged woman from these circumstances and made arrangements with the local overseer of the Poor for her maintenance.⁶⁹ At the other extreme of elder abuse were those older women who feared burdening their adult children and refused to approach them for assistance. In 1890, an elderly woman in Brant County in Ontario rejected both admission to the local House of Industry and going to Nova Scotia to live with her adult children as they "had as much as they could do to keep themselves without looking after her."⁷⁰

Living with an adult child could also encompass a large variety of living arrangements. Accommodation could be seasonal, such as in the case of a Halifax couple who spent the winters in the 1920s with their son in Massachusetts. It could also be permanent, causing old women to be uprooted from the communities where they had lived their entire lives to find homes with their adult children. When Rachel Lynde was widowed in *Anne of Avonlea*, she was left with a mortgaged farm and "hardly anything left after the bills are settled." Her options appear limited to leaving her community to live with a daughter until her neighbour of forty-five years offers her accommodation within her new home. Montgomery expresses the difficulty of older women forced to leave their communities through the observation of Marilla Cuthbert, "it's breaking her heart to think of leaving Avonlea. A woman of her age doesn't make new friends and interests easy."⁷¹ In the Halifax working-class suburb of Richmond Heights during the 1920s a

number of rural elderly women made this difficult transition into the city to live with their children only to return home to be buried.⁷²

For the elderly Nova Scotians who had left the province to live with adult children the homesickness may have been more extreme, despite the ways in which they managed to keep in touch with provincial events. In 1929, the Nova Scotia Old Age Pension Commission was astonished and concerned by the large number of requests it received for its questionnaire from older Nova Scotians who now were living in the United States. The Commission found this flood of applications "striking, since no forms were circulated outside the province and no advertisements published except in provincial press." Older Nova Scotians were still keeping in close touch with events in the province. The response of Nova Scotians living with their adult children in the United States also worried the Commission for it brought to light the fact that many elderly persons have left the province to reside with children in other places, but who would be glad to return if they could get an Old Age Pension. Presumably those person would not have left home if Old Age Pensions had already been in force.⁷³

A woman's place in society is age specific. Marital status, health, rural or urban residency, class and race all nuanced the experience of aging. Most old women in Nova Scotia between 1881 and 1931 were poor, yet only a few ended their days as paupers in one of the public-supported poorhouses or as residents in the few religious refuges available. While fear of the poorhouse was widespread, more realistically, if they had children, older women could expect to spend their last days supported by their family under the same wide variety of circumstances that existed within the province's poor asylums. Family support was not always a positive experience as it was open to abuse and for many elderly women it meant separation from the community in which they had lived their lives, perhaps even the isolated experience of living in a new

province or country. Between 1881 and 1931, when they were awarded a public presence, older women in Nova Scotia were represented by the binary themes of vulnerability and strength. Not surprisingly, this contradictory message led to confusion. By understand-

ing the poor material circumstances under which most older women lived their final days, we can understand their helplessness. It is more difficult to understand the base of their power.

Table One

Percentage of Nova Scotian Female Population
over the age of sixty and seventy by year

Year	Percent of total female population 60 and older	Percent of total female population 70 and older
1881	7.7	3.2
1891	9.1	4.0
1901	10.3	4.5
1911	10.8	4.9
1921	10.5	5.0
1931	11.5	5.4

Source: Canada Census, 1881 Vol 2 Table VIII, 20-35; 1891 Vol 2 Table 1, 4-5; 1901 Vol IV Table 1, 2-7; 1911, Bulletin XVII, Table 1, 8-11; 1921 Vol 2 Table 6, 26-7; 1931 Vol Table 38, 740-45.

Table Two

Inmates in the Halifax Poor's Asylum
1881-1931

Year	Charge to			Total over 50	Total all inmates	Percent of women over age 50
	City	Province	Total			
1880-81	*	*				
women			81	227	376	35.7%
men			146			
1890-91						
women	96	19	115	281	530	40.9%
men	131	35	166			
1900-01						
women	96	7	103	304	552	33.9%
men	154	47	201			
1911-12						
women	99	11	110	307	521	35.8%
men	162	35	187			
1920-21						
women	97	4	101	280	464	36.1%
men	146	33	179			
1930-31						
women	91	22	113	261	436	43.3%
men	129	19	148			

* no breakdown of city and provincial charges provided.

PANS, RG 35-102, 33, A.4, City of Halifax, City Home Registers, 1880, 1890-1, 1900-01, 1911-12, 1920-1, 1930-1.

Table Three

Female City Charges Over the Age of 50
in Halifax City Home, 1800-1930 by
Age, Religion and Place of Birth

	1880	1890-01	1900-01	1911-12	1920-21	1930-31
AGE						
50-59	19	16	31	23	21	23
60-69	24	30	33	33	26	27
70-79	23	22	17	30	33	26
80-89	7	8	15	13	16	15
90+	4	5			1	
RELIGION						
Roman Catholic	47	38	48	56	56	47
Anglican	14	18	27	19	20	21
Baptist	5	17	3	10	6	9
Methodist	4	1	7	8	8	4
Presbyterian	7	3	11	5	6	8
other		4		1	1	2
PLACE OF BIRTH						
Halifax	22	24	44	35	39	47
Nova Scotia	9	20	20	37	36	21
Canada	2		1	3	3	3
USA	2	3		1		
England	2	1	4	5	4	3
Ireland	36	23	16	7	3	
Scotland	3	2	2	1	2	
Newfoundland		2	3	9	9	5
Elsewhere	1	6	6	1	1	1
Not stated						11
Total	77	81	96	99	97	91

Source: as above

NOTES

* I would like to acknowledge the support of a SSHRC post-doctoral fellowship for assistance in research.

1. Chris Gordon, "Familial Support for the Elderly in the Past: the Case of London's Working Class in the early 1930s," Ageing and Society 8 (1988), 309
2. Margaret Marshall Saunders, Beautiful Joe (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1974 [1897]), Grandmother and the Crow (Boston: L.C. Page 1900) Canadian Institute for Historical Microproductions, 41; House of Armour (Philadelphia: A.J Rowland 1897), Canadian Institute for Historical Microproductions, 64.
3. Digby Weekly Courier, 13 February, 13 March 20 March, 27 March, 14 April 1885; Critic (Halifax) 28 March 1885; Herald (Halifax) 11 February, 17 February, 19 February, 23 February, 27 February, 14 March, 23 March, 10 April 1885
4. Margaret Conrad, "The Art of Regional Protest: The Political Cartoons of Donald McRitchie, 1904-1937," Acadiensis, XXI, 1 (Autumn 1991), 25.
5. Overall in Canada 208.7 per 10,000 over the age of 70 were institutionalized compared to 91.5 in Nova Scotia, 199.7 in New Brunswick, 378.5 in Quebec and 193.3 in Ontario. Canada Census, 1931, V 9, T 9, 280-1.
6. This is expanded upon in Suzanne Morton, Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1995), Chapter Three.
7. Peter N. Stearns, "Old Women: Some Historical Observations," Journal of Family History, 5 (Spring 1980), 44-5. In The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939 (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman 1988), Veronica Strong-Boag uses the age of forty to mark the final life stage. For a critique of the history of older women see Marjorie Chary Feinson, "Where are the Women in the History of Aging?," Social Science History, 9, 4 (Fall 1985), 429-452.
8. Tamara Hareven, Family Time, Industrial Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982), 173; Howard Chudacoff and Tamara K. Hareven, "From the Empty Nest to Family Dissolution," Journal of Family History, 4, 1 (Spring 1979), 59-63. For a review of literature on widowhood see Ida Blom, "The History of Widowhood: A bibliographic Overview," Journal of Family History 16, 2 (1991), 191-210. For a recent survey of the literature on the elderly in American society see Carole Haber and Brian Gratton, Old Age and the Search for Security: An American Social History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1994)
9. James Struthers, "Regulating the Elderly: Old Age Pensions and the Formation of a Pension Bureaucracy in Ontario, 1919-1945," Journal of the Canadian Historical Association, New Series, 3 (Charlottetown 1993), 237. Struthers notes that, although the program's intent was inclusive, "gender played an important role in limiting and constraining the entitlement of women to state support in their old age." It is worthwhile to note that historians of the aged have also been arbitrary in their definition of "old age", both influenced by our own contemporary classification of 65 and the age 55 which set by pioneers in the historiography. Daniel Scott Smith, "Life Course Norms and the Family System of Older Americans in 1900," Journal of Family History, 4, 3 (Fall 1979), 285-298. See a recent use of 55; Lisa Y Dillon, "Your Place or Mine? Household Arrangements of Widows and Widowers in Nineteenth-Century Ottawa: A Study of Three Wards," Paper Presented Canadian Historical Association, Charlottetown, PEI, June 1992. Stormie Elizabeth Stewart, "The Elderly Poor in Rural Ontario: Inmates of the Wellington County House of Industry, 1877-1907," Paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, 1992, 7.
10. Judith Fingard, The Dark Side of Life in Victorian Halifax (Porter's Lake, NS: Pottersfield Press 1989), 48.
11. Citizen (Halifax), 19 June 1925. Public Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS), MG 20, Vol 517.1, Minutes of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty, President's Report, 31 March 1921.
12. Canada, Census, 1931 Vol Table 38, 740-45.
13. Nova Scotia, Journal of the House of Assembly (JHA), 1929, Appendix 31 Interim Report of the Commission Appointed to Consider Old Age Pensions, 11. There was a correlation between rural residence and old age. In 1891 4.3 percent of the female populations of rural Shelburne, Queen's, and Hants counties were 70 years of age or older compared to only 3 percent of the Halifax female population.

14. See Morton, Ideal Surroundings, Chapter Two.
15. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1930, Appendix 29, "Report of Commission on Old Age Pensions," 14.
16. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1930, Appendix 29, "Report of Commission on Old Age Pensions," 14. The report was based on research in Halifax city, and the counties of Cape Breton, Richmond, and Shelburne. See also, Peter Ward, Courtship, Love and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1990), Chapter Three.
17. Canada, Census, 1921, V. 4, T. 5, 382-99.
18. Women's wages peaked around 30 and thereafter declined. D.A. Muise, "The Industrial Context of Inequality: Female Participation in Nova Scotia's Paid Labour Force, 1871-1921," Acadiensis XX, 2 (Spring 1991), 19.
19. Joanne J. Meyerowitz, Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1988), 37 and Strong-Boag, New Day Recalled, 182.
20. Edith Archibald, The Token; a tale of Cape Breton Island in the days before Canada became a Nation (Toronto: Ryerson n.d.), 260.
21. Pseudonym, Muise, "The Industrial Context of Inequality," 5.
22. PANS, RG 25, C, Poor Relief, Vol 6, Helen Stewart 1898, 16 March 1898.
23. PANS, RG 25, C, Vol 7, Poor Relief, 1902 Margaret Quinn.
24. Dalhousie University Archives, MS 4, 180, Maritime Telephone and Telegraph, H 302, Employee Benefits. See also James Stafford, "The Class Struggle and the Rise of Private Pensions, 1900-1950," Labour/Le Travail, 20 (Fall 1987), 147-171.
25. Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915-1930 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1987), 11, 13, 45.
26. Denis Guest, The Emergence of Social Security in Canada (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 1980), 76. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1935, Appendix 32, Old Age Pensions figure for October 1934.
27. Strong-Boag, New Day Recalled, 189 from NAC, Canada, Ministry of National Health and Welfare, v 134, file 134: 208-5-2A, Old Age Questionnaires.
28. Guest, Emergence of Social Security in Canada, 9.
29. Pictou finally built a county asylum in 1922 and ended its system of boarding out the poor. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1922, Appendix 3D, "Humane Institutions," 13. I am working on a study of possible abuse in Digby County in the early 1880s.
30. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1885, Appendix 10, "The Poor of Digby," 45.
31. Classification and specialization of benevolent institutions in Nova Scotia was focused on the violent insane, juvenile delinquents, the blind, the deaf and the dumb, and finally general hospitals.
32. Michael Katz, "Poorhouses and the Origins of the Public Old Age Home," Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly, 62, 1 (1984), 110-40; Stewart, "The Elderly Poor in Rural Ontario," 7.
33. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1900, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 32; 1914, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 17; 1920, Appendix 3D, "Humane Institutions," 10.
34. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1901, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 28.
35. The Dawn of Tomorrow (London), 5 June 1924.
36. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1907, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 1907, 20, 27; 1909, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 37.
37. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1903, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 13; 1911, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 39.
38. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1899, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 33.
39. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1907, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 35, 47; 1908 Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 29.
40. See for example: Carole Haber, Beyond 65: The Dilemma of Old Age In America's Past (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983); Struthers, "Regulating the Elderly," 238.
41. PANS, RG 35, 102, Series 33, C.3, City of Halifax, Poor Asylum Charities Committee Minute Book, 2 January 1907,
42. Katz, "Poorhouses and the Origins of the Public Old Age Home," 134.
43. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1929, Appendix 31, "Interim Report of the Commission Appointed to Consider Old Age Pensions," 9.
44. Herald, 16 January 1885. See also Margaret Marshall Saunders, 12 March, No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women, 1771-1938 (Halifax: Formac

1988), 240.

45. Herald, 16 January 1885.

46. In 1899 it still served as a refuge for at least some aged women. Sister Maura, The Sisters of Charity of Halifax (Toronto, 1956), 32; National Council of Women of Canada, Women of Canada: Their Life and Work (n.p. 1900 [1975]), 352; PANS, MG 20 764, 17 Marion Haliburton, "Presenting Halifax," Canadian Nurse, XXXIV, 5 May 1938, 245-8.

47. The Monastery of the Good Shepherd Refuge in Halifax offered assistance to both adults and children with the approximately 100 adults in the refuge. Most of these adults would have been inmates in the Reformatory for females or Home for Penitent Adults rather than the Industrial Home.

48. PANS MG 1 Vol 315 #2, Diary of George Morton; Bettina Bradbury, "Mourir chrétiennement: La vie et la mort dans les établissements catholiques pour personnes âgées à Montréal au XIXe siècle," Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française 46, 1 (Summer 1992), 143-75.

49. Carol Haber, "The Old Folks at Home: The Development of Institutionalized Care for the Aged in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia," Pennsylvania Magazine for History and Biography, 101 (April 1977), 240-57. By 1900 in Philadelphia there were 24 private homes caring for the aged many of them associated and operated by specific denominations.

50. Bradbury, "Mourir chrétiennement."

51. PANS RG 35, 102, 33 C.3, City of Halifax, Poor Asylum Charities Committee Book 22 May 1895 to 6 Nov 1912.

52. For example see, Nova Scotia, JHA, 1891, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 4-11.

53. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1901 Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 13.

54. Nova Scotia, JHA, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 25-9.

55. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1901 Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 22.

56. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1905, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 36.

57. Grace, Aiton, "The Selling of Paupers by Public Auction in Sussex County," Collections of the New Brunswick Historical Society 16 (1961), 107. A description of a senile

inmate appears Home for the Truro report, Nova Scotia, JHA, 1901, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 11.

58. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1919, Appendix 3D, "Humane Institutions," 28.

59. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1901, Appendix 3b, "Public Charities," 10.

60. William Charlton, Morning Chronicle, 1 April 1874. It ordinarily was published on the cover of Harper's 17 June 1871. Haber and Gratton, Old Age and the Search for Security, 128.

61. L.M. Montgomery, The Tangled Web (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1931[1972]), 3.

62. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1930, Appendix 29, "Report of Commission on Old Age Pensions," 11.

63. Daniel Scott Smith, "Life Course, Norms, and the Family System of Older Americans in 1900," Journal of Family History, 4, 3 (Fall 1979), 285-298.

64. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1930, Appendix 29, "Report of Commission on Old Age Pensions," 10.

65. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1930, Appendix 29, "Report of Commission on Old Age Pensions," 7, 9, 11.

66. Nova Scotia, Revised Statutes of Nova Scotia, 1923, ch 48, s26.

67. PANS, RG 25, C Poor Relief, Vol 6 1899, Geo Brown's mother-in-law, 3 June 1899, Sydney. Unfortunately there is no record of the government's response.

68. Francis Bolger, The Years Before Anne: The Early Career of L.M. Montgomery. Author of Anne of Green Gables (Halifax: Nimbus 1991).

69. PANS, MG 20, Vol 515, Nova Scotia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 24 September 1909.

70. Brantford Courier, "A Very Old Timer," 11 November 1890, Stewart, "The Elderly Poor in Rural Ontario," 18-19.

71. L.M. Montgomery, Anne of Avonlea, (Toronto, 1909[1966]), 302.

72. Daily Star (Halifax), 26 January 1927; Acadian Recorder (Halifax), 29 December 1919; Daily Echo (Halifax), 14 May 1920; Evening Mail (Halifax), 28 January 1925.

73. Nova Scotia, JHA, 1929, Appendix 31 Interim Report of the Commission Appointed to Consider Old Age Pensions, 9.