

# A "Servant Problem" or a "Servant-Mistress Problem"? Domestic Service in Canada, 1890-1930

Middle class Canadian women at the turn of the century faced a situation which, they claimed, threatened "to entirely annihilate" their homes.<sup>1</sup> Confronting a widespread shortage of domestic servants, these women directed their individual and collective efforts towards solving the "servant problem." With the characteristic nostalgia of the servant-keeping class, they lamented the passing of a golden age when supply exceeded demand, and servants were grateful for the opportunity to work in a "good home." They viewed with alarm the tendency for working class women to prefer factory work to domestic service, and the growing discontent among those already in service, which manifested itself in demands for higher wages and better working conditions.

The two solutions to the servant problem most often advocated by middle class women at this time were the establishment of servant training schools, and the promotion of female emigration schemes aimed at bringing trained British servants to Canada. A topic which received considerable attention, both in the guidebooks for prospective immigrants, and in the magazines for middle class Canadian women, was the servant-mistress relationship. The tone of these discussions strongly suggests that the "servant problem" was, in large part, a "servant-mistress problem." Despite the discomfort which both sides were experiencing,

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the conditions which gave rise to these difficulties—the isolation of the workplace, the absence of a clearly defined job description and the inequalities of social status exacerbated by the intensity of daily servant-mistress interface—all received scant attention. The fact that these same issues contribute to the continued exploitation of female domestic servants today, while remaining, for the most part, unchallenged, attests to the ways in which class interests are served by these arrangements.

The shortage of domestic servants came about at a time when patterns of working class women's labour force participation were changing and the middle class demand for household help was escalating. Canadian-born working class women were beginning to enter new occupations in industry and commerce, turning away from the traditional occupations in domestic service, which offered only hard work, low pay and isolation. To these young women, the servant's lifestyle was incompatible with the evolving image of the independent "working girl," who, despite the same low pay, could enjoy greater autonomy

both on and off the job. Middle-class women, too, were beginning to view housework differently, and to reassess their domestic responsibilities, recognizing that home and family need no longer constitute the boundaries of "women's sphere." These women began to play an active role in the social reform movement at the turn of the century by participating in church and charitable organizations which attempted to address the needs of Canada's growing ranks of urban poor.

Changing conditions both inside and outside the home contributed to the escalating middle-class need for domestic help. The housewife who was expected to maintain middle-class standards of cleanliness and order, in a home where elaborate furniture and furnishings required considerable care, faced a demanding task in household management at this time. Household technology was relatively undeveloped before 1920, with few electric-powered appliances and primitive heating and plumbing systems. Oil, wood and coal provided fuel for cooking and heating, and human energy alone produced the power for cleaning the house and doing the laundry. Although the middle class housewife could afford to purchase goods and services to ease her own labour at home—readymade clothing, canned fruit, vegetables, meat and fish, and bakery bread—housework continued to make large demands on her time and energy. Physical conditions alone, however, were not responsible for the need for domestic help. A more important factor was the changing role of the middle-class woman in society. The special qualities of wives and mothers, which had always inspired rhetoric, were now recognized for their value to the whole of society and so middle class women were urged to delegate the household tasks which had previously occupied most of their time, in order that their civilizing influence no longer be confined to home and

family. The remarkable growth of women's organizations at this time is an indication of the widening scope of their activities. The women who devoted their time and energy to a charitable cause—often equivalent, in its demands, to a full-time job—were no longer able to maintain middle class standards of housekeeping without assistance. Apparently anticipating that such changes would be viewed as an abdication of domestic responsibilities, the author of an article in the *Canadian Pictorial* gave this justification:

With the removal of the pressure of money and time-devouring occupations . . . (women) have undertaken the new duties of social service and reform, not that they have abandoned their home duties by any means . . . but now, as someone has cleverly put it, while home is the centre, it is not also the "circumference" of women's sphere."<sup>2</sup>

For women who entered the sphere of social service and reform, the servant problem was of personal as well as social concern, and there was no dearth of speculation and discussion regarding possible causes and solutions. It is instructive to consider, first of all, Lucy Salmon's comprehensive analysis of the servant problem in the U.S.A. Discussing the popular solution—training schools for servants—she made a strong argument opposing such a scheme on political and social grounds:

A training school for servants is an anomaly in a democratic country . . . American men will never recognize one kind of training for a superior social class, and another for an inferior . . . Democracy among men and aristocracy among women cannot exist side by side.<sup>3</sup>

A system which channelled certain members of society into a permanent low status position was clearly at odds with the concept of social mobility through personal achievement. Salmon's English counterparts, however, unhampered by the rhetoric of a "land of opportunity," adopted the solution of servants' training schools. The Canadian compromise at this time was to promote the immigration of servants who were already trained. Consistent with the prevailing Anglo-conformist and ethnocentric attitudes, Canadian employers tended to prefer women of British origin. In practical terms, the British-trained servant was superior because she was both capable and respectful, characteristics often lacking in native-born women. The success of immigration schemes, however, was limited, as Buckley has pointed out.<sup>4</sup> British authorities were not eager to lose trained servants and aimed their recruitment programs at those women currently in other occupations who were willing to enter service in a country which, it was claimed, was not subject to class distinctions.

The author of an article in the *Canadian Magazine* attempted to explain the problem with Canadian-born servants as tactfully as possible:

The crudeness of a bright new democracy leads many of its citizens to forget . . . that the true democrat says not "I am as good as you," but "you are as good as I." Hence it is not surprising that the "maid" of Canadian birth does not take kindly to wearing a cap, and has not the deference of the best soft-voiced, rosy-cheeked servants from across the sea.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the author managed to defend the aspirations, brash though they might appear, of young Canadian women, while, at the same

time, to applaud the docility of the good, wholesome British woman, whose origins, the reader is assured, are not "of the pauper order." Like many of her peers, the author apparently felt compelled to voice the popular opinion that a "training institute" was "sorely needed," and to propose that the receiving homes for immigrants might ultimately serve that function. Marjorie MacMurchy, in her 1916 survey of women in Canadian society, repeated the familiar theme when she asked: "Where is the trained and certificated worker that we ought to have?"<sup>6</sup>

The middle-class explanation for the servant problem generally pointed to the availability of other employment in industry and commerce, the long hours and lack of freedom and privacy, and the absence of a clearly defined job description. The problem of this occupation's low social status was often mentioned, in passing, but rarely analysed. Clearly, the fact that both working and middle class women devalued domestic service was related to its common association with "women's work"—work for which women were believed to have a "natural" talent, and work which married women routinely performed without pay. Occasionally, it was hinted that the servant problem might be alleviated if employers were less demanding. In many households the servant was expected to be on duty from early morning until the family retired at night; often she was not allowed to receive guests and her free time was limited to one or two evenings per week.

Nellie McClung was one of the few middle class women to consider the extent to which the servant-mistress relationship contributed to the unpopularity of the occupation. She claimed that the "cold stupidity of the mistress of the average home" was, to a great extent, responsible for the current shortage. McClung

described the rules which many employers routinely applied to their servants: wearing a uniform cap, using the back door of the house, and working in the evenings, as well as the universal expectation that "she must be diligent, capable, amiable and serene at all times and know her place!"<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, McClung was critical of employers who demanded this degree of subservience on the part of their domestic help, but most of her middle class contemporaries failed to consider the ways in which mistresses contributed to the servant problem. Although employers were extremely conscious of social class differences between themselves and their servants, and expected the servant-mistress relationship to reflect these differences, their views were generally couched in more delicate language, using terms like "deference" and "respect," rather than the phrase, "know her place." An exception was a male contributor to the *Canadian Magazine*, George Greenwood, who publicly stated his expectation that servants should recognize their inferior status. Commending the work of a British emigration agency, the Women's Domestic Guild, he explained the advantages of hiring British servants: "They know their place and keep it, and do not feel or try to live above it."<sup>8</sup> Employers frequently complained of "suffering" at the hands of servants who were "tyrannous, disrespectful, lamentably frivolous and morally irresponsible." A major problem from the employer's perspective, was "the deplorable quest for romance"—behaviour which probably represented the quest for tolerable working conditions.<sup>9</sup> Laura Salverson, an Icelandic immigrant who wrote of her experiences in domestic service, maintained that a servant who failed to be "thoroughly grateful for the privilege of standing in the shadow of the Lord's elect" would probably be considered disrespectful.<sup>10</sup> Phyllis Knight, a

German domestic servant, expressed similar sentiments.

Most of the people who hired domestics really wanted a slave, somebody they could talk down to . . . They'd think up no end of ways to save a few pennies, even if their hired help had to work twice as hard.<sup>11</sup>

If these women's experiences were typical, then more than just "respect" was demanded. A servant who "knew her place" was one who tolerated middle class exploitation of her labour without complaint. There is evidence, however, that individual servants resisted the constant pressure to play a subservient role in the household, and that some were successful in improving their working conditions. Salverson recalled how one of her employers complained of her inefficiency in "wasting" an hour to make all the beds, and dust and sweep the upstairs.

It was scandalous . . . unless I improved, she would hesitate to leave the baby in my care. To put it bluntly, I was not earning my wages.

"Very well" said I, quite calmly, "in that case, I shall not take it!" And, much to the dear lady's indignation, away I went.<sup>12</sup>

McClung gave the example of a servant who was told she could not use the bathtub, but would have to take her bath at the YWCA, on her day off. The servant insisted, "no bath, no work", and finally was permitted to use the family bathtub daily.<sup>13</sup>

Knight sometimes resorted to dramatic, perhaps extreme, methods to impress upon her employers that she had the right to be paid for the work she had completed:

... They wouldn't even pay me the three dollars I had coming, so I took this woman's prize soup tureen out of the china cabinet and dropped it on the floor. ... I said, "I'm so sorry, I was going to put it back in its place properly."<sup>14</sup>

Few employers, however, would have encountered servants who negotiated their working conditions with the spirit of these women; most servants had no other options available to them. For immigrant women, in a strange country, without relatives or friends, the household where they worked was their only shelter. As well, the option of finding other employment was not available to those whose fare had been advanced by emigration societies—they were obliged to stay in the arranged place of employment until they repaid the loan.

With a few notable exceptions, for example, Nellie McClung, most of the Anglo-Saxon women who wrote about their lives at this time displayed indifference towards their servants; they were neither exceptionally inconsiderate nor exceptionally thoughtful. In her account of growing up in a small prairie town, Galloway referred to the "hired girls" to whom her family always gave a nickname: "Galician Annie," "Big-Fat-Mary," "Little-French-Mary." Annie, she claimed, "could have posed for the soap ad, she was so clean and shiny."<sup>15</sup>

The tendency to depersonalize servants was reflected, in a different way, in Emily Murphy's *Janey Canuck in the West*. Apparently intended as a humorous anecdote, the account of her "struggles" with "an ignorant, wasteful, dish-breaking Swede" is, by contemporary standards, condescending and insensitive, poking fun at the servant's use of English and her shortcomings as a cook. Since Murphy

based her *Janey Canuck* stories upon personal experience, it seems likely that the sentiments expressed here were her own:

I left her a recipe today that called for 1/4 teaspoon of pepper. She read it for 14. The art of cooking is an insolvable mystery to her. That tea requires boiling water, and porridge frequent stirring, are facts far past her wit's end.

When Anna breaks a dish . . . she explains that the accident was the result of her hard heart. I have been trying to explain, of late, that such results not infrequently spring from (a) soft head.<sup>16</sup>

Middle class condescension towards servants was evident, too, in an article in *Everywoman's World* on the servant problem. The author, Margaret Hamilton, described, somewhat nostalgically, the extent to which mistresses had formerly exerted control over servants—their dress, both on and off the job, their hairstyles, their leisure activities. She then identified some changes which may have been the result of servants' demands for more freedom:

In some households, a girl is permitted to receive a friend on certain evenings . . . some mistresses, more considerate than others, make no objections if a girl sits down to needlework of an afternoon.<sup>17</sup>

Nellie McClung's views on servants stand out in marked contrast to those of many of her contemporaries, of the employer class. In her autobiography, she wrote:

A maid is a human being, not a robot, and has ambitions, desires and sensibilities of her own and must be allowed a certain amount of liberty so that she can have a life of her own.<sup>18</sup>

Her sense of humour and equanimity were evident in these comments:

If a maid burns a pan of biscuits, or breaks a dish, I remember some of my own shortcomings and am not unduly perturbed, nor do I make her feel she is a social outcast.<sup>19</sup>

McClung was not exaggerating by using the term, "social outcast", as Salverson's and Knight's accounts have already shown. Immigrant women coming to Canada as servants experienced this kind of alienation long before taking up their positions: the screening procedures set up by British emigration societies, in collaboration with Canadian organizations such as the National Council of

Women of Canada (NCWC), required the provision of medical reports and references, and a personal interview to assess moral character. In the words of Charlotte Lightbourne, an immigration agent for Canadian National Railways, "I must be satisfied that (the applicant) is thoroughly desirable . . . from every point of view." Lightbourne prided herself on being a particularly astute interviewer, alert to "the artifices resorted to by these maidens to conceal some defect" which would disqualify them.<sup>20</sup>

The "protection" of the young women selected for domestic service concerned NCWC women, many of whom were the prospective employers of the recruits. Consequently, their passage from England, and



their reception in Canada were closely supervised. Through the NCWC's efforts, receiving hostels operated in major cities across Canada by 1910, and most of their clients were domestic servants. In their zeal to protect, hostel matrons came close to cloistering the young women in their charge. One "Guild Girl," travelling with the Domestic Women's Guild in 1912, revealed the extent of this "protection:"

We all wondered if we were coming to a civilized country, for we were brought from the ship as though we were prisoners, and had to sit in a room, and hardly dared move, let alone speak. We were not allowed to bid goodbye to our friends we had made during the voyage, and in fact I think they thought we were heathens. Several passengers passed the remark as we were driven as cattle.<sup>21</sup>

The literature produced for prospective immigrants included frequent references to misconceptions concerning conditions in domestic service in Canada. However, much of the material which appeared to describe existing conditions was probably prescriptive, presenting the middle class view of a satisfactory employee. It was emphasized that the kind of servant needed was the "general." There was little demand for the specialized servant, even if she was highly skilled, unless she had "physical strength, willingness to do any sort of work, and a certain *rough efficiency* in the doing of it."<sup>22</sup> The requirement that servants be willing "to turn their hands to anything" was usually justified in terms of the less highly differentiated and specialized state of household management in a new country, compared to the situation in England. However, in view of the prevailing attitudes, it appears that this requirement carried the clear implication that servants were expected not

only to respond to every demand made by their employers, but also to abandon any aspirations of advancing in a specialized field of household management, seeking higher pay or improving their chances in the labour market.

Jeffs, in his guide for British settlers, *Homes and Careers in Canada*, was critical of servants who forgot their "place."

[A domestic servant] is tempted, indeed, to lose her head on finding what a jewel she is. She enters Canada with the old country ideas of dutiful submission to her mistress. When she has been a month in her first situation . . . she asks for her wages to be doubled, for every Sunday off, and for time off each evening of the week.<sup>23</sup>

The distinction between rural and city servants was stressed consistently in the publications for immigrants. In addition to the differences in household management in city and country homes, it was pointed out that only country home-helpers should expect to be treated "like one of the family," sharing in family meals and outings, and having the mistress help with housework. The "town girl," on the other hand, would be required to wear a uniform and eat and sleep in the servants quarters, but she could anticipate higher wages and a workload made somewhat easier by various household conveniences.

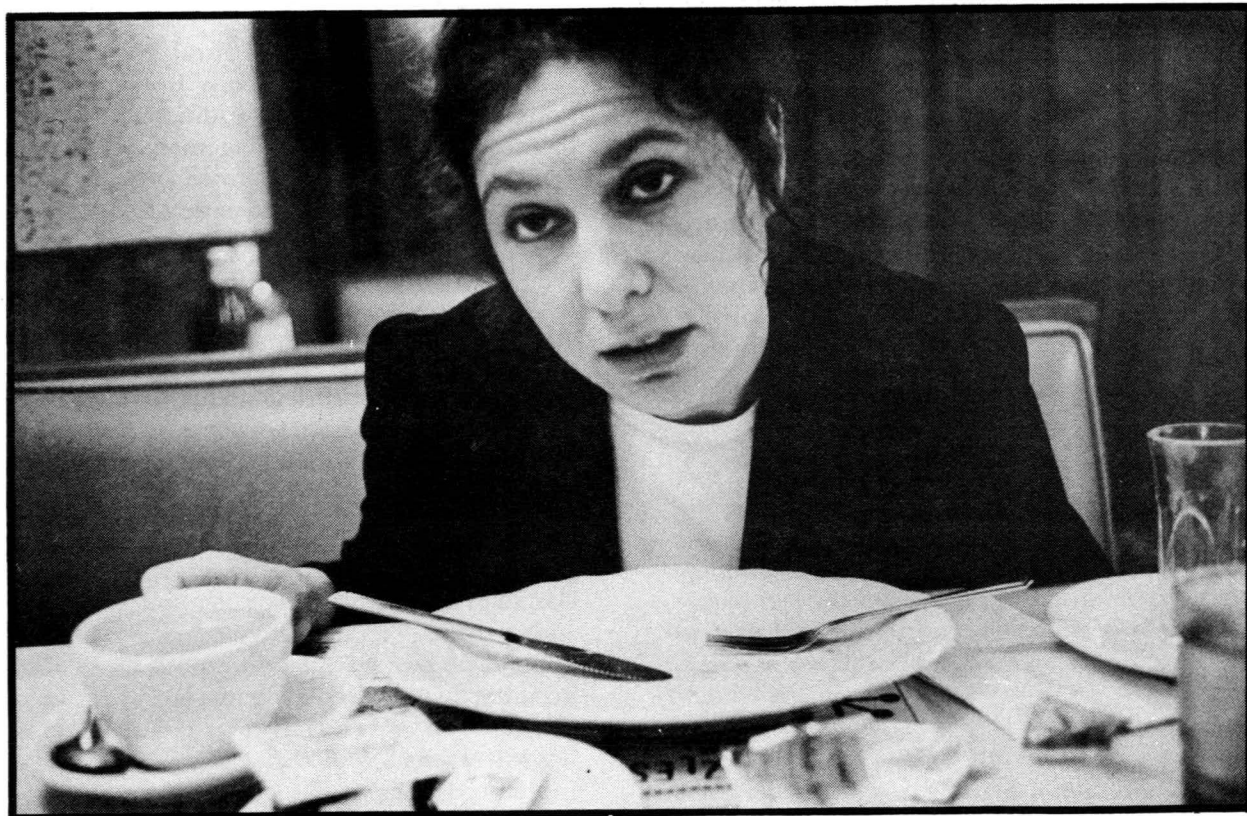
Emily Weaver, in the British publication, *Canada and the British Immigrant*, discussed the problems arising when a British home-help in Canada has origins in the "servant-keeping," and not the "servant-giving" class, and expects to be treated accordingly: to be excused from hard work, and to be accepted as one of the family.<sup>24</sup> Emily Sykes, a middle class English woman who wrote of her experiences in domestic service in Canada, gave an exam-

ple of a young woman who was looking for a position as a home-help "where the women of the house did all the hard work."<sup>25</sup> She also described her own confrontations with members of her employers' families when she insisted on taking her meals at the family table.

The author of *The Canadian Settlers' Handbook* raised the issue of social class when she discussed opportunities for "educated women;" she claimed that they would enjoy the novel "social amenities" in rural Canada if they accepted a position there. However, she warned: "No lady should dream of going as a home-help in the cities, for there class distinctions are as rampant as in England."<sup>26</sup>

As well as clearly defining the Canadian

position on the social status of the domestic servant, recruitment literature often left no doubt in the reader's mind as to the anticipated Canadianization of the immigrant. Sykes advised English women to learn "the excellent Canadian methods of doing things" and "the Canadian point of view."<sup>27</sup> In a similar vein, an immigration department publication warned prospective domestic servants from England of the different methods they could encounter in Canada, and advised them: "Try to adapt yourself quickly and cheerfully to the change."<sup>28</sup> It is clear, then, that there was considerable pressure on the immigrant domestic servant to fit the role defined by her Canadian mistress, and that her immigrant status made her more vulnerable to the injustices of the servant-mistress relationship.





Was the "servant problem" really a "servant-mistress problem?" The evidence presented here shows that the relationship between servant and mistress was often a source of conflict for both. Mistresses wanted a servant who "knew her place," and few mistresses would have agreed with Nellie McClung that a maid had the right to ambitions. Instead, she should be content with her lot and grateful for the privilege of a "good home." Nothing in the servant's daily conduct should indicate that she was less than satisfied with a social system which justified exploitation on the grounds of social class. The presence of a servant in the middle class household should symbolize the efficiency of such a system, rather than serve as a constant reminder that middle class comfort extorted a high price in loss of human dignity and potential for the servant class.

For the women who cooked meals and cleaned house, the options were few. In the typical one-servant household, on duty for six and a half days out of every seven, the opportunities to organize collective action were limited, thus, negotiations with employers had to be conducted on an individual basis. At the beginning of the century, as now, the private nature of the workplace and the daily negotiation of the servant-mistress relationship resulted in a low status occupation filled from the ranks of working class and immigrant women—a sector of the labour force limited in terms of both employment opportunities and bargaining power. At a time when middle class women were promoting protective legislation for other sectors of the female labour force, conditions for the women working in their own kitchens remained outside the jurisdiction of the state. Even today, for many women in domestic service, little has changed. The structural constraints which gave rise to the servant-mistress problem at the turn of the century continue to exist.

## NOTES

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5. Women's Sphere, "Women Immigrants," *Canadian Magazine*, 25 (May - Oct. 1905), p. 79.
6. Marjorie MacMurchy, *The Woman—Bless Her* (Toronto: Gundy, 1916), p. 147.
7. Nellie McClung, *The Stream Runs Fast* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1964), p. 258.
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12. Salverson, p. 430.
13. McClung, p. 259.
14. Knight, p. 128.
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25. Ella Sykes, *A Home-Help in Canada* (London: Smith Elder & Co., 1912), p. XI.
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27. Sykes, p. X.
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