THE IMAGE OF THE

NEW WOMAN

AT WORK IN CANADA, 1890–1915*

Photos: Margaret Perkin

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Une étudiante parle du terme "New Woman", que l'on trouve dans la littérature canadienne vers 1890. Il se rapporte aux femmes qui s'intéressent à leurs responsabilités de citoyennes, à leurs droits à une meilleure formation, aux professions utiles et à la réforme de l'habillement. Elle note, qu'à l'inverse d'aujourd'hui, le terme "féminisme" était lié au mouvement des suffragettes. Il était très répandu à cette époque et se basait sur le rôle principal de la femme, à savoir: la maternité. En tant que nourricière, on s'attendait à ce qu'elle répare les dégats résultant des changements sociaux et économiques. On considérait que les femmes qui reniaient la maternité amenaient l'extinction de la race! Si elles voulaient travailler, les seuls emplois auxquels elles pouvaient aspirer appartenaient à la catégorie soignante. L'auteure discute des effets de cette idéologie sur les femmes actives.

THIS PAPER PROPOSES to study the 'New Woman' at work to ascertain whether the traditional but prevailing view of woman's inherent maternal and domestic role determined the kind of job she was assigned in the work force, as well as the wages and working conditions accorded to her. It will consider whether society was able to separate the business and professional woman from the eternal wife and mother or whether she was penalized for what was viewed as her vital but supplementary, service-oriented, domestic role in society.

The term 'New Woman' appeared in Canadian fiction in the 1890s and expressed the growing image of women who were concerned with their citizenship responsibilities, their right to higher education and useful vocations, as well as dress reform. The 'New Woman' of the period rejected the idea of dependent womanhood.

Conditions for Protestant, Anglo-Saxon middle-class women (urban or rural) were changing radically; they were freed from a great deal of household drudgery by the new technological advances such as 'hot water heating, the gas or electric range, hot and cold running water, bathrooms, the telephone, the vacuum cleaner. . .'

The years between 1880 and 1920 saw a tremendous growth in women's organizations, many of which reached national proportions and which were often concerned with reform as a result of the new problems of immigration, industrialization and urbanization.

'FEMINISM,' a term linked to the suffrage campaign (one which became widely used in the 1890s), was maternal in outlook from the conviction that women's primary role was motherhood and that special nurturing qualities were common to all women. Nellie McClung wrote, 'Women are naturally guardians of the race and every normal women wants children. . .'

She, and others like her, felt that, because these innate qualities made them purer and more unselfish than men, they gave them both the right and the duty to participate in the public sphere; their maternal ideology was supported by doctors who emphasized the unique biological qualities which particularly qualified women for 'the work of repairing damage wrought by economic and social change.'

Thus for those of this class and time their new social and economic horizons were a natural extension of the Victorian ideal of womanhood and opportunities for new activities in this rapidly expanding and changing society were extensive.

Such reflections give the modern reader insights into the extreme polarization of sexual roles for women and men in Victorian society. Woman was viewed largely as a reproductive organ; neglect or abdication of this sexual role was considered tantamount to committing racial suicide. If she held a significant public position in the world of business or the professions, it was more acceptable if this position was moral and nurturing.

A POWERFUL IDEOLOGY inevitably followed the 'New Woman' into all aspects of the working world and ensured upon marriage her withdrawal into the private sphere of the home from which her only escape was through acceptable avenues of public participation.

For married women who found themselves in financial straits as a result of the illness or death of a family breadwinner, society made an exception. Many such women were extremely successful in their business or professional careers and were acknowledged as such.

As a single woman in the business work, the 'New Woman' was viewed as a potential wife and mother and subsequently was considered to possess such necessary and innately female qualities as patience, conscientiousness, tact, docility and the ability to suffer long and in silence; therefore she was relegated to less desirable, service-oriented, and often tedious jobs of routine which men disliked.

NEVERTHELESS, there were many single women at the turn of the century who acknowledged the verdict but refused to accept the sentence. According to statistics of the time these 'few gifted sports' were more numerous than one would generally assume.

While warning those with unrealistic business ambitions away from the pitfalls of independent enterprise such women blithely disregarded their own advice and successfully penetrated the working world to compete with men. In doing so, they were generally acknowledged by society to be capable, independent, successful women. Above all, they were able to achieve the status of 'person' defined by and respected for their abilities rather than their sex.

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