“JANEY CANUCK”: WOMEN IN CANADA, 1919-1939

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Back Cover: Domestic Science Class, King Edward and William Whyte Schools, 10 March 1921, Foote Collection 1584. Courtesy of Manitoba Archives N2684.
In Canada differences rooted in history and material circumstance distinguished women from one another just as the reality of gender gave them much to share. Historians disagree regarding the relative importance of gender, race, and class. While it is not easy to sum up “Janey Canuck” now or in the 1920's and 1930's, I have tried to understand women’s different as well as similar experiences. In particular, the objective and subjective realities of capitalism, which divided society into classes with greater or lesser control of the means of production, were especially powerful. Class was a daily lived experience for all women. Racism also divided women. Those of British origin in particular shared important privileges with their menfolk. In contrast, women of colour and those from the First Nations, like their men, often met discrimination and violence. Women’s experiences have also varied according to ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, and sexual orientation. Ultimately, however, women were defined and delimited not so much by any lesser capacity for work or determination or thought, but by patriarchal custom and male authority. Men’s sisters, however situated relative to other women, encountered more confined horizons than their brothers of the same class, race, or colour. From birth, Canadian women daily worked through the consequences of a gender identity that informed every part of their experience.

I. Growing Up Female

Two images of girls dominate the interwar years. The first to appear, in the 1920's, was the flapper. Women’s wartime efforts as suffragists, “farmerettes,” munitions workers, army nurses, and volunteers, and feminists’ long assault on male privilege in the home, the paid workplace, and public life had, it seemed, borne fruit in a new liberated youth. Brimming with the promise of adolescence, women of the Roaring Twenties, the hedonistic Jazz Age that threw over wartime constraints, seemed to symbolize new beginnings for women. The second image, emerging from the 1930's, retreated from the worldly freedom typified by the flapper to return to childish innocence. This was the girl as “moppet.” Ontario’s Dionne Quintuplets, the British Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose, and child film star Shirley Temple, were its most visible expression. While the flapper with short hair and short skirts was essentially confrontational, poised to contest the conventions of workplace and bedroom, the curly-headed moppet, simultaneously conventionally feminine, touchingly dependent, and often implicitly flirtatious, appeared more calculated to appeal for protection and support. The shift in public
attention from flapper to moppet accompanied a retreat from the optimism of the early 1920's, from the essential liberal faith that women could manage gender politics to the advantage of themselves and their daughters. Adventurous young women survived the Great Depression and continuing anti-feminism, but tough times robbed them of certainty that the world would welcome new initiatives from their sex.

The reality behind the images was complex. Girls had to deal with a world that appeared to offer new experiences, but simultaneously retained strong resistance to any significant change in sex roles. In addition, many had to confront the special problems of class and race in an economy that kept large numbers in poverty and without power. From birth girls were engaged in relationships that finally subordinated them and their interests to male prerogatives. And yet they also stored up an experience of self-assertion that remained a powerful component of female culture.

The nation's daughters needed every ounce of the learning, courage, and independence that champions such as Agnes Macphail, Canada’s first female MP, desired for them. Fortunately, many Canadian women welcomed girls. B.C. feminist Helen Gregory MacGill inspired two daughters to purse graduate degrees in unconventional fields, sociology and aeronautical engineering. A Quebeccer, Marie Gérin-Lajoie, encouraged her daughter to win scholastic honours and go on to establish an influential order of social work nuns. A Jewish mother, repudiating her family’s favouritism to sons, prepared Fredelle Bruser to work for a Ph.D. in English. Close relationships among kin often initiated an invaluable network of female associations for girls. The resulting culture may not have offered the prestige of female-male coupling, but it persisted as a vital component of many lives.

In these years public health programmes, ranging from school vaccination campaigns to Quebec’s Gouttes de lait to visits by the Victorian Order of Nurses, improved health for many expectant mothers and children. Even in the 1930's most girls got a better start in life than in the nineteenth century. And yet poor nutrition and unsanitary housing in both decades stunted bodies and minds. Some problems, such as the sexual abuse of children, particularly girls, were not limited to any single social or economic group. Young prostitutes in Canadian courtrooms were only the most visible expression of children’s vulnerability.
The emergence of a commercial consumer culture in these years largely ignored such problems. Girls were targets of a mass advertising assault that depended on thousands of purchases replacing the homemade or rarely used items of the past. While some families self-consciously resisted the dictates of fashion — Doukhobors for example — poverty was the more common cause of failure to participate. For those who could afford to ape fashion, the new styles of clothing did offer unprecedented physical freedom. They also largely upheld gender differences.

Film, radio, newspapers, and magazines assured girls that "You are in a Beauty Contest every day of Your Life." Marriage was the ultimate prize. "Little Mother" classes joined homemaking badges in Girl Guides and lectures in Canadian Girls in Training (CGIT) to encourage girls to assume domestic duties. In homes where mothers bore heavy obligations for children, not to mention housework and paid labour, daughters everywhere had long been expected to act as lieutenants. The loss of parents led some to take on still heavier duties. Girls were hard put to escape the traditional message, now reinforced by modern commentators, that normalcy meant mothering.

Explicit sexual information was, however, hard to come by. Opponents to distributing such advice objected to coarsening, others might say empowering, girls by telling them the "facts of life," and many parents remained too embarrassed to deal with the subject. Reflecting the lack of consensus about how much advice was appropriate, sex education was handled extremely cautiously, even by progressive organizations like the CGIT. These years' greater explicitness in advertising products like Kotex and Modess sanitary napkins, and even the douches and gels appearing in Eaton's Catalogue, must have countered ignorance but, as unwanted pregnancies revealed, many girls remained tragically ill-informed.

While most children remained at home until elementary school, a few took shelter in creches, day nurseries, and orphanages, all the special preserve of the poor. In Halifax, local charwomen's children, from the age of three months, passed their time in the nursery of the Jost Mission, finding the toys, food, and sanitation their own homes frequently lacked. Other institutions, such as New Westminster's Providence Orphanage, Montreal's Hôpital de la Miséricorde, and the Lejac Residential School intended for First Nations' children in northern B.C., crowded occupants together in facilities that regularly did more harm than good. In response to the
shortcomings of institutions, fostering out of "neglected" children also became more popular. In many instances, youngsters were handed over to strangers with little question. Anne of Green Gables had many successors in finding herself passed casually from hand to hand to meet an uncertain fate.

While preschoolers from well-to-do families normally stayed home, a small minority began to explore the child study centres at McGill and Toronto universities. There, behavioural psychology demanded the regular scheduling that children in the poor institutions would have recognized. Much better was the staff-student ratio, individual attention, food, and equipment. In contrast, the unhappy experiment by social welfare "experts" with the Dionne girls in the 1930's in Northern Ontario confirmed the special vulnerability of poorer and non-WASP Canadians.

In good times and bad, schooling remained tied to the rhythms of the family economy. Schools themselves could be a mixed blessing. Some girls found friendships and learning; others were uncomfortably singled out by virtue of appearance, origin, or ability. Anti-feminists, especially in the 1930's, both challenged co-education and opposed equality in funding separate women's educational initiatives. To counter fears about new roles for women, students in home economics or domestic science, or in Quebec the "cours ménager agricole," were groomed to prize the strict division of labour between the female homemaker and the male breadwinner or farmer. Commercial classes also affirmed sex roles. By 1920 pupils in many towns and villages could take typing, shorthand, stenography, and bookkeeping. The inauguration in the 1920's of the department of secretarial science at the University of Western Ontario explicitly recognized the existence of a dual labour market in which women were preferred as clerks, secretaries, and stenographers. Commercial courses, promising stable and respectable occupations before marriage, attracted both working- and middle-class girls who found their presence did not raise unsettling questions about competition with boys.

Secondary education provided girls' surest route to white-collar jobs. The interwar years, with their elimination in many jurisdictions of tuition, tighter enforcement of child labour laws, and increase in school-leaving ages, saw working-class youngsters enter high schools in unprecedented numbers. Toronto's Harbord Collegiate, for example, enrolled Jewish daughters whose families had previously sent largely sons. Girls with physical and mental handicaps were not so lucky. More than ever they might
enrol in public schools, but they were also more likely to drop out. In their
treatment of First Nations girls, residential and public schools mirrored the
racism of the larger society. In Quebec the absence of public high schools
for girls ensured that secondary education was especially restricted. A very
different welcome came from Canada’s flourishing private schools.
Institutions like Vancouver’s Crofton House and Quebec’s classical colleges
for girls promoted a separate upper-class culture and instilled a sense of the
appropriateness of the social order. Only a few, like radical writer Dorothy
Livesay, who attended Toronto’s Glen Mawr school, went on to question
their good fortune.

Girls with some years of high school often went straight into the job
market or received more specialized training in the normal and nursing
schools which graduated thousands to staff cheaply Canada’s developing
health and educational systems. More privileged was the tiny minority
entering universities and art schools. Women made significant gains in
enrolment during the 1920’s, although they lagged far behind their brothers
and the “Dirty ’30’s” hurt them more. Smaller numbers at all levels of post-
secondary education reflected parents’ greater unwillingness to finance
girls’ schooling and the greater difficulty girls had in funding their own
education. The repercussions of the Great Depression’s dramatic decrease in
women’s graduate registration extended into the second half of the century.
Equally problematic was the concentration in few areas, especially arts,
education, nursing, and household science, and the decline in the percentage
of women in medicine, law, and theology. Lacking the critical support of an
articulate feminist movement and the inspiration of an older maternalist
ideology that offered women a special role in many professions, women
were ill-equipped to challenge the restrictions of their socialization and the
hostility of misogynist male preserves.

Even when female students harboured relatively modest ambitions,
misogyny flourished. At Dalhousie in the 1930’s, awards in honours
mathematics and classics, like the prestigious Rhodes Scholarships
everywhere, were intended solely for men. The failure of the artist, Jori
Smith, to win a scholarship at Montreal’s Académie des Beaux-Arts,
because, as she was told, “You know, you should get it, but we cannot afford
to give it to you, because you are a woman, and you will go over and get
married, and you’ll stop painting” was repeated countless times. In 1935 the
head of the University of Alberta’s Woman-Haters’ Club was elected
president of the students’ union. Coeds were everywhere exposed to
instructors like Stephen Leacock in Political Economy at McGill whose anti-feminism was flaunted in a host of articles. And yet female students continued to find pleasure in higher education. As in the high schools, a flourishing youth culture emerged with women participating in a host of intellectual, athletic, and social activities.

As always, outstanding individuals questioned prevailing views. The religiously minded sometimes joined the Student Christian Movement which criticized social inequalities. A few radicals repudiated religion. The poet Dorothy Livesay and her friend Jennie Watts engaged in fierce debates over birth control, free love, Marxism, atheism, and the future of the family at the University of Toronto. As Marie Tippett points out in By A Lady (1992), painters like Prudence Heward, Paraskeva Clark, and Louise Gadbois resisted the emphasis on landscape sparked by the success of the Group of Seven to produce outstanding portraits. They often, like some women in every profession, remained career-minded.

Learning was not restricted to schools. Some accomplished artists like three Quebec sisters — Marie-Cécile, Edith, and Marie Simone Bouchard — were self-taught. Reading everything from comic books to classics occupied hours for children. The future novelist, Adele Wiseman, and her sister “book-molesters” could sidestep, at least for a time, some of the restrictions on their sex. No wonder magazines for women, like Chatelaine (founded 1928) and La Revue moderne (founded 1919), grew prodigiously. Girls also turned to clubs such as the Guides, the CGIT, and the Junior Red Cross, finding opportunities for fun and leadership.

In the 1920’s and 1930’s athletics also developed a special appeal for girls. Bobbie Rosenfeld in track and field, Gladys Robinson in skating, and Phyllis Dewar in swimming won unprecedented victories. Teams, like the Edmonton Grads, also flourished. These basketball players, all originally from Edmonton’s McDougall Commercial High School, won steadily from 1915 to 1940. Athletics permitted girls and women to test their physical mettle, bask in the support of a crowd, and forge the friendships of the playing field.

II. Working for Pay

In the interwar years girls also came to expect to spend some part of adulthood in the labour force. Women over 10 years of age increased their
labour force participation rate from 17.7 per cent in 1921 to 19.4 per cent in 1931 to 22.9 per cent in 1941; in the process they made up 15.5 per cent (or 490,150) of the total labour force in 1921, 17.0 per cent (or 665,859) in 1931 and 19.9 per cent (or 832,840) in 1941. More than ever, the waged labour market could not be understood without reference to women.

Money-making was nothing new. Working-class women had long toiled, especially while young and single, as servants, agricultural labourers, seamstresses, and factory hands. Traditionally, unless impoverished, most married women left waged labour to devote themselves to the domestic economy. Responsibility for housework and child care, coupled with the reality of female wage rates, which remained 40 to 60 per cent of those for comparable male labour, meant that women who wished to add to family income were likely to take on home-based tasks, such as sewing, childcare, and boarders. In non-urban areas women farmed, fished, trapped, ran telephone and postal services, and took on a variety of unpaid duties. These were rarely acknowledged in the Canadian Census.

A newer phenomenon, although it originated in the nineteenth century, was the entry of middle-class girls into paid labour. Clustered first as teachers, nurses, and clerical workers, they generally left jobs upon marriage. Many women also found fulfilling employment, which offered an important alternative to the economic dependence of marriage. Artists found galleries and cultural institutions, such as the Royal Academy of Art, more generous in recognizing women's achievements in painting and sculpture. For all such gains, "career" women normally found themselves "dead-ended," even in the female professions.

Feminists like Violet McNaughton and Thérèse Casgrain remained acutely conscious of the importance of economic options. Identifying the undervaluing of female labour as central to women's oppression, they advocated equal pay for work of equal value. They were disappointed. In the face of recurring widespread male unemployment and persisting misogyny, women were on the defensive, especially during the Great Depression. In 1933 Agnes Macphail rebutted the charge by Médéric Martin, a former mayor of Montreal, that women caused male unemployment and should be banned from wage-earning. Taking her antediluvian opponent quickly from fiction to reality, she noted that homes were hardly havens. Much of women's traditional work had left with industrialization and now provided paid labour for men. Wage-earning
women were ensuring the survival of themselves and their families. For male unemployment, the agrarian radical faulted not her sex, but the economic system. In 1935, women’s defenders had to be vigilant to defeat Quebec’s Francoeur Bill, which proposed restricting female wage-earners to farm and domestic work.

The ruthlessness with which women were hounded from jobs in the 1930’s suggested Canadians’ profound investment in ideas about family, home, and women’s place. Wages were widely regarded as a male privilege. Yet the Great Depression finally proved that women could not be herded home. Not only did their clear need rally sympathizers, but the labour market itself was structured around gender-specific employments. Indeed, the chronic oversupply afflicting female job-seekers in both decades was a direct response to their ghettoization in relatively few employments. In 1921, 70.9 per cent of women were found in six of the 25 industrial categories covered by the census — textiles and clothing, retail and wholesale trade, education, health and welfare services, food and lodging, and personal and recreational services; in 1931 the figure was 73.2 per cent, and in 1941, 72.0 per cent. Segregation was still more evident in their occupational distribution. Most women were factory hands and small shop assemblers, clerks and salespeople, teachers and nurses, servants and waitresses, and typists and secretaries. While this pattern did not change, the Great Depression retarded the long-term decline in personal, especially domestic, service, slowed the growth of the professional and clerical sectors, and slightly accentuated the long drop in women’s manufacturing and mechanical occupations.

Ghettoized by gender, female workers’ choices were further restricted by class, race, and ethnicity. For less privileged Canadians jobs meant personal service and blue-collar occupations. Even excellent credentials did not guarantee placement as Japanese-Canadian nurses discovered in applying to B.C. hospitals. First Nations women learned not to bother applying to racist Vancouver department stores. Farm and cannery labour were among their limited choices. In Nova Scotia, but elsewhere as well, black women relied on domestic service since little else was available to them.

Personal service, containing as it did domestic servants, was the oldest and largest of female occupational groups. It was also among the most assiduously avoided and the lowest in status. The growth in this sector
reflected the straitened condition of the economy in much of the interwar period. As domestics, waitresses, laundresses, and hairdressers, women encountered small work units, low productivity, non-standardized conditions, and unregulated authority. Such employments enlisted the youngest and oldest of paid workers — those whose need and vulnerability were greatest. Not surprisingly, many immigrants found themselves in this sector. In 1931, for example, 64.4 per cent of all gainfully employed Central European women and 70.4 per cent of Eastern women toiled as domestics.

Women did not predominate in manufacturing, but this sector too remained a major employer. In Toronto, 29.6 per cent and 23.8 per cent of the female labour force worked in this sector in 1921 and 1931, respectively. In Winnipeg, the percentages were 14.2 per cent and 10.4 per cent. In Montreal, factory work was more common, involving in 1921 33.5 per cent, in 1931 23.4 per cent, and in 1941 29.6 per cent of the female work force. There were also single-industry mill towns, like Paris, Ontario, whose major employer, Penman’s hosiery and knit goods, drew, as Joy Parr has described in The Gender of Breadwinners (1990), overwhelmingly on female recruits. Low-wage industries like clothing, textiles, shoes, and food processing hired relatively large numbers of women and girls but higher-wage, often monopolistic, firms engaged in the production of automobiles, electrical machinery, farm equipment, and liquor, had little room for them. This ghettoization occurred despite women’s experience working in heavy industry during the First World War.

Female wage-earners were especially vulnerable to layoffs. Their low wages, however, did provide some advantage, especially when bad times occurred simultaneously with de-skilling. This happened in 1921 in Vancouver when new cigar-making machinery permitted employers to switch from men to women and children. Ironically enough, the introduction of women’s minimum wage laws in most provinces in the 1920’s failed to protect female employees. In Quebec’s cotton mills, employers replaced women with men and boys whose wages were unregulated. The implications of technological innovation for the gender identification of work was nowhere cast in stone. While the combination of French-Canadian Catholic conservative values and technological change in Quebec’s cotton goods industry reduced women’s job options in these years, Ontario’s knit goods industry had no difficulty accepting new technology and a heavily female work force. Yet, for all factories’ dangers, they remained preferable to the home-based labour that continued a feature of
clothing manufacture in particular. Home sweatshops thrived, however, because women struggled to combine domestic and waged labour, and employers reaped larger profits.

The shortcomings of domestic service and manufacturing made job-seekers eager to explore the expanding white-collar sector. From 1921 to 1941, women went from 32.8 per cent to 40.5 per cent of all clerical and sales workers. Working-class girls, newly armed with high school diplomas, mixed with their middle-class sisters more familiar with white-collar occupations. Where previously, post-elementary education had prepared middle-class males for employment as clerks, usually as a first step to management, twentieth-century commercial life had changed dramatically. The white-collar labour force was increasingly feminized, drawn from a broader sector of society, and no longer normally on an extended career path. The emergence of large offices and powerful retailers created a new pool of repetitive, subordinate employments into which women were directed.

Female applicants may have commanded lower salaries but, as Bell Telephone discovered in its shift to women operators in the nineteenth century, their manners and demeanour pleased clients. More personal relationships between bosses and white collar workers also helped make jobs palatable to women socialized to value human contact. And yet there were downsides as well. Pretty faces and nice manners were double-edged assets, as recurring evidence of sexual harassment demonstrated.

The federal government was no model employer. Ottawa institutionalized discrimination, allowing the Civil Service Commission to set job competitions on the basis of sex in 1918. A policy of equal pay for equal work, in place since the inauguration of the federal civil service, was meaningless because women were never offered equal opportunity. In 1921, equality was still further undercut by stringent regulations on the hiring of married women. From 1921 to 1931, and throughout the Depression, women’s numbers in federal and provincial civil service employment dropped.

In the nineteenth century, feminist hopes rested in large measure with the professions. In Canada, as elsewhere, lay and religious women came to dominate teaching and nursing, with home economics, library science, and social work developing more slowly. In their concentration at the bottom of
increasingly hierarchical educational and health systems, their dependence on the public purse, and their difficulty in enforcing professional standards, teachers and nurses were the archetypal female professionals. While these two decades saw an occasional first, as with Lydia Gruchy’s ordination into the United Church, women in general could not break men’s monopoly in medicine, law, politics, theology, the military, or the new scientific professions. Nor was it easy to maintain the status quo, as married women teachers and social workers, for example, were often pressured to resign.

Aspiring professionals scoured the country for employment. Dedication was especially tested during the Great Depression. One Saskatchewan teacher recalled her rural school with its books “in tatters” and her class spelling from Eaton’s Catalogue. Impoverished pupils, patients, and clients were no novelty, but the 1930’s found teachers, nurses, and social workers, often victims themselves of reduced salaries and worsening conditions, all the more on the front line against social misery. The Institut des soeurs Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil, a Catholic social work order founded in 1923, very typically found itself fully absorbed in assisting Montreal’s poor.

Because the female-male hierarchy was highly institutionalized, nurses, unlike teachers, were rarely pushed out. Nursing itself was divided among hospital, public health, and private duty workers. The 1932 Survey of Nursing Education in Canada portrayed an occupation that had come a long way since the nineteenth century, raising standards of training and employment. Dedicated professionals like Ethel Johns of the Winnipeg Children’s Hospital, Vancouver General, and the University of British Columbia gave extraordinary leadership in these years. Their inspiration helped recruits cope with long hours, heavy duties, ever-present contagion, and bad pay.

Women’s credibility was more problematic in “male” professions. Doctors and lawyers were typical in largely closing their ranks against female colleagues. Some combination of good fortune and talent nevertheless equipped a few bold souls to withstand a broad range of disincentives, from quotas in medical schools to a film projectors’ union for men only. Survivors like Elinor Black, a leading Winnipeg obstetrician, gave hope to ambitious little girls. Such women developed ways of coping with resistance. Deep commitments among friends helped many — like
social workers Charlotte Whitton and Margaret Grier or sculptors Florence Wyle and Frances Loring — withstand hostility to equality.

One category of workers defies attempts at enumeration: prostitutes. Women such as the teenage “Miss X,” who in loneliness and poverty turned tricks in Edmonton in 1929, paid in hard coin for whatever good times and easy money came their way. As the experience of one Winnipeg widow with three children who was forced to have sex with a relief investigator in the 1930’s suggested, the line separating “decent” working people from their “fallen” sisters was only too easy to cross when times were hard.

Jobs had their problems, but unemployment was more dreaded. Few working women could survive without wages. And yet seasonal layoffs characterized many blue- and white-collar occupations. In the days before unemployment insurance, the Great Depression worsened an already chronic problem. But because female unemployment appeared to pose no threat to the social order, its victims were largely ignored by governments, who directed inadequate resources to men.

Evidence suggests women resented their vulnerability. The more desperate, more politically sophisticated, or just luckier ones organized. Many professionals belonged to groups like the Canadian Nurses’ Association (founded 1908) and the Association catholique des institutrices rurales (founded 1937) which provided important support, while remaining ambivalent about collective action. Working-class women looked to unions, both Catholic and secular, largely run by and for men. Garment and textile workers, led by a generation of outstanding figures like Madeleine Parent of the United Textile Workers and Becky Buhay and Annie Buller of the Communist Party, were especially likely to unionize. Less visible activists laboured quietly on the shop-floor, learning lessons that contributed to the long-term strengthening of the labour movement. Like the young women who attempted to join the Great Trek to Ottawa in 1935, the Quebec shopgirls who won union recognition and higher wages in 1937, and the Vancouver telephone operators who stayed out during the General Strike of 1919, ordinary women contributed to a collective history that would generate a new consciousness of women’s capacity for radical action.

Many unions, determined to protect male breadwinners, were slow to offer women effective support. The labour movement’s uncertain sympathy was, however, better than the response of the state. Despite the introduction
of minimum wage laws, the principle of a living wage for women was never accepted by most legislators. Most employers arbitrarily set the terms of employment.

By the 1920’s, more women than ever had gained access to paid labour, collaborating in unions, professional associations, and less formally, in the workplace itself. Whereas exploitation and second-class status could more readily be ignored or viewed as a purely personal problem within the family, the contradiction between capitalism’s promises and wage-earning women’s reality was clearer. The Great Depression and the Second World War, however, postponed challenges to the sexual politics of the labour market. In these decades, therefore, most women responded by attempting to construct fulfilling private worlds.

**III. Courting, Marrying, and Other Adventures**

Most Canadians not only expected to marry but took for granted that marriage would provide satisfaction, security, and purpose. Wives and husbands were presumed to pool resources in working partnerships, creating the homes and families that signalled adulthood. While marriages were based on practical economics, they also promised important emotional benefits. Strong affections, rooted in common hopes and experiences, tightly bound many couples. At least as important were children. In their nurture, mothers found many of the joys of marriage.

Popular films, radio, and magazines encouraged young women to anticipate romantic passion. In the 1920’s and 1930’s, a romantic consumerism centred on families headed by male breadwinners was increasingly pervasive. Free spirits and critics never, however, disappeared. In the face of all such conditioning, some women constructed fulfilling lives independent of male sexuality.

Canada had a multitude of traditions about courting, marrying, and independence. These decades also saw the emergence of certain Canadian patterns. Only for a short time did the 1930’s reverse the decline begun by 1891 in women’s average age of marriage. The net result was a female population that, as a whole, was increasingly likely to wed at least once, usually in their early to mid-twenties. Courting was commonly a family-centred affair. Young people met in settings close to home, chaperoned by the community. While longer periods of schooling and female employment
were slowly increasing the pool of possible suitors, women tended to marry within their own social group. Their obvious resources were physical appearance and sexuality. Beauty contests such as that initiated at the Canadian National Exhibition in 1937 left little doubt where female assets lay. Women were also encouraged to believe that commercial preparations from lipsticks to depilatories could make the difference in beauty’s hard market.

In contrast to the commercial preoccupation with female beauty, explicit information on sex was much harder to come by, even for adults. To be sure, a few progressive thinkers such as Alfred Tyrer, the author of *Sex, Marriage and Birth Control* (1936), offered advice. A pioneering birth control movement provoked extensive debate. Until the 1930's, however, public advocacy of birth control remained the particular preserve of the left. The Depression widened public support, with champions like the eugenist, A.R. Kaufman of Kitchener, and the feminist, Violet McNaughton of Saskatoon’s *Western Producer*, who criticized the Criminal Code’s ban on birth-control advertising. The decline of the Canadian birthrate, that had begun in the mid-nineteenth century and only briefly halted early in the twentieth, resumed. When controls failed, married and single women turned sometimes to abortion and, much less frequently, to infanticide. So long as the parenthood’s burdens remained so potentially threatening, birth control preoccupied women.

Marriages themselves varied tremendously, from the union of those who knew each other well in settled Mennonite farm communities to the coming together of virtual strangers. Japanese and Armenian women, chosen as “picture brides” by men who had immigrated to Canada, had to make sense of a strange land and a strange man. While immigrants were especially likely to encounter threats to tradition, they were far from alone. The entire customary basis of marriage seemed in question in these years. Whereas men previously often toiled in close proximity to and even within the family residence, by the 1920’s more spent large parts of each week in and on the way to paid labour and received an individual wage. At the same time, women’s greater access to earnings, together with their newly-won right to vote, seemed to undercut men’s role as heads of families. The unsettling prospect of a revolution in marital relationships fuelled hostility to so-called “working” wives.

Recurring attacks on female wage-earners and chronic unemployment
meant that marriage continued to be women’s “most certain means of livelihood.” This hard reality prompted counsellors in both decades to urge girls to train for marriage. Women were also held largely responsible for failed relationships. Shame at society’s condemnation of “their” bad management and fear of poverty supplied women with a potent glue for marriage. This was just as well since divorce was extremely difficult to obtain. Before the First World War, only New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and British Columbia possessed divorce courts. Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario created theirs in the 1920’s and 1930’s. Elsewhere, the only option was an expensive appeal to a parliamentary committee. Given legal costs, the restricted grounds for petitioning, and the social stigma involved, unhappy Canadians, especially husbands, sometimes deserted, sought legal separations, or occasionally filed for divorce in the United States. Whatever they chose to do, women were deeply concerned about inequitable property settlements and child custody. Such fears minimized the rate of formal divorce.

The desire for an equal union surfaced regularly in women’s writing. A certain disregard for the boundaries between “her” and “his” work was most readily managed in farms or family businesses. Recognition of mutual dependence did not rely on constant association. Women married to policemen, doctors, missionaries, salesmen, lumbermen, fishermen, and fur trappers might well spend a good part of married life separated from their husbands. Partners benefitted from each other’s ability to manage alone. Commitments beyond the home also served as potent glue. Husband-wife teams, such as CCF’ers Lucy and James Shaver Woodsworth maintained each other’s courage in joint undertakings. Marriages blessed with a sense of mutual regard and common purpose could prevail over bad times and less-than-perfect spouses.

Not all women either sought or found husbands. A number lost prospective partners during the Great War. A few chose religious vocations. Others never made the suitable male contacts. Still others chose not to marry for lack of interest in the institution or in men or for love of jobs or other women. In the 1920’s, new economic opportunities helped give rise to an unprecedented generation of outstanding single women. Individuals like the politician Agnes Macphail, the social worker Charlotte Whitton, the novelist Mazo de la Roche, the journalist Cora Hind, the nurse Ethel Johns, the painter Anne Savage, the sculptor Florence Wyle, the painter Emily Carr, the nun Marie Gérin-Lajoie, and the historian Hilda Neatby, carved
out lives the equal of or better than those of more conventional contemporaries. Such women would have been extraordinary in any generation, but they stood out in these decades because few Canadians, with the notable exception perhaps of Catholic Quebec with its long history of outstanding nuns, knew what to expect of the public performance of talented spinsters. In choosing the rewarding path of their ambitions rather than traditional matrimony, many of these women were strengthened by influential female relatives and friends. Lifelong female companions often supplied a love found only in the best of marriages. Over the long term, their achievements left a worthy heritage for subsequent generations of independent-minded women.

**IV. Keeping House**

Once courtship and marriage had culminated in homes and families, wives, who were presumed soon to be mothers, were to take over as the emotional and practical mainstays of the private realm. Women’s waged labour did little to change this expectation. Yet the precise nature of women’s domestic exertions did not go unquestioned or unchanged. A fundamental technological transformation of the home was underway, although it neither began nor finished in the 1920’s and 1930’s. Nor were changes spread equally. Many families dependent on employment in resource industries or locked into ill-paid wage labour were hard put to update their operations. Only Canadians with relatively stable, skilled, white-collar, and professional employments readily became the beneficiaries of heightened consumer credit and mass production.

Middle-class city-dwellers were the first to experience the modernization of domestic regimes. Even they entered slowly and often incompletely into the world of homes equipped with central heating, indoor plumbing, and major appliances. Many purchases were financed by the expansion of consumer credit. Underway were the elaboration of credit mechanisms by which Canadians could purchase goods otherwise beyond their reach. The home and its female managers were at the centre of a rising tide of expectations.

Few consumers avoided massive marketing campaigns — on radio and billboards, in store windows, and in publications of every description — celebrating everything from household cleaning equipment, baby foods, and furniture, to plumbing and heating supplies. In their efforts to win
consumers, companies sought out women. Canadian General Electric, for example, advertised its Hotpoint Range as “Designed by Women for Women.” Corporate sensitivity was heightened by women’s leadership of a fledgling consumer movement. The shortages and spiralling costs during the war had made many women extremely conscious of the need to intervene directly in the marketplace. Although protest appears to have died down in the 1920’s, the hardships of the 1930’s drove women to reassert consumers’ right to a fair price. In 1938, the Housewives’ Association of Toronto boycotted dairies raising milk prices and the B.C. Housewives’ League battled the Retail Merchants’ Association over its efforts to limit discounting. Such campaigns prepared women to assume a major role after 1941 with the federal Wartime Prices and Trade Board in monitoring prices and led the way for the creation in 1947 of a new women’s organization, the Consumers’ Association of Canada.

After the 1918 Armistice, recommendations for transforming the domestic world abounded. Prairie women in particular looked to co-operative solutions. In 1918, Regina women formed the Saskatchewan Women’s Co-operative Guild to support a co-op store. Innovative proposals were not limited to one region. In Toronto a year later, the United Women Voters heard speakers praise community kitchens. For all their promise, collective remedies for women’s domestic workload ran full-tilt into Canadians’ attachment to the ideal of family privacy, an attachment fostered by business advertising. By the mid-1920’s, feminist hopes for reconstructing domesticity along more co-operative lines had largely faded. Housewives turned, when they could, to husbands and children for more help, but also to the opportunities of enhanced consumption.

Most women had to cope with unsatisfactory domestic environments. Crowded, substandard accommodation was the lot of many families. Essential to women’s hopes was the increasing availability of electricity: from 1920 to 1939, the number of residential users more than doubled. By 1941, 69.1 per cent of occupied dwellings had electric lighting. Even so, the maintenance of homes required large amounts of hard work. While most labour was unpaid, many women included cash-producing activities, from typing to taking in boarders, as a normal part of their day.

Financial ingenuity was essential. In Cape Breton a miner’s wife, stretching a male wage that actually fell in the 1920’s, earned her reputation as “the greatest financier in the world.” Women had shopped for their
families for years, poring through catalogues, bargaining with merchants. In the past, goods were likely to be local, and the brands few and well known. Under the impact of mass production and a cash economy, new habits were slowly taking root, particularly in the cities. A notable part of the change was the emergence of chain stores and supermarkets like Kresge, Safeway, Tamblyn, and Piggly Wiggly, where shopping was feminized with female clerks serving female customers.

The introduction of new kitchen technology, such as mechanical refrigerators and more sophisticated stoves, also permitted experimentation and heightened aspirations. For most Canadians, however, technologies and menus remained wedded to the exigencies of a domestic economy that had little to spare. In part this was a reflection of gender politics. There was considerable reluctance to shift expenditure from farm machinery and stock to the improvement of the female workplace. More critical, however, was sheer lack of money to update practices. Few choices were available to the nursing mother in Alberta who survived on bread and potatoes for days at a time or the Saskatchewan family of five subsisting on bread and tea in the 1930's. Knowledge of modern appliances and nourishing menus meant little to the low waged and unemployed.

Domestic management, shopping, and cooking were the preferred part of housewives' days. Cleaning was more tedious. Advertising told housewives how to make clothes whiter than white, eliminate dirt in a jiffy, and sanitize bathrooms. The appearance of wringer washers in prosperous homes certainly did not end widespread hatred for washday. More useful, to those with money, were trends in house design favouring greater casualness, simplicity, and efficiency. Nothing, however, replaced the need for human labour, as the steady demand for domestic servants illustrated.

Responsibility for household maintenance isolated many homemakers. Yet modern consumer society relied on domestic privatization, on nuclear families making individual purchases. Ready communication with the world outside the private home was essential. In these years, the radio, the telephone, and the passenger car met this need as never before. Yet, when unemployment soared and crops failed, families gave up radios, telephones, and cars. The result could be women as isolated as the pioneers were in the nineteenth century.

Women knew full well that their sex carried its share and more of the
world’s work. Pride kept some women from seeking relief in bad times. Awareness of their own value made others equally unembarrassed about requesting assistance. While their suffering and deprivation were no less real for it, poorer women were likely to be perceived positively in their struggle to cope. As the institution of mothers’ allowances indicated, they accommodated to cultural ideals merely by remaining at home with children. In contrast, men without markets for their products or their labour were readily perceived as failures. Families hard hit by disaster, whether in Cape Breton coal towns in the 1920’s or prairie wheatfields in the 1930’s, relied all the more heavily on women’s capacity to make do. While male roles and identities were threatened to their core by unemployment and lost crops, the traditional sphere of the domestic economy and its female managers assumed more prominence. Duties broke the health and spirit of some women, but the resolve and energy of others rescued families and made homemakers the “Heroines of the Depression.”

V. Mothering

So far as most Canadians were concerned, motherhood was taken for granted as marriage’s logical outcome. Women of every background were socialized to discover personal fulfilment in childbirth and childrearing. Whatever else happened, proper performance of maternal duties gave women personal pride and public approval.

Many households had long depended on children and wives to augment cash income. No wonder that pregnancy and young children were sometimes a recipe for financial crisis or even disaster. In their efforts to match family size with available resources, women regularly tried to “put themselves right.” As noted earlier, contraception was a fact of life. The general fertility rate, that is the annual number of births per 1000 women aged 15 to 19 years of age, went from 128.1 in 1921, to 99.5 in 1931, to 89.1 in 1941. Critical to this reduction was the desire for a better life. Canadians of every income level tried to increase consumption, whether by going into debt, increasing cash income, or reducing family size. They wanted a share of the postwar world “fit for heroes” promised by politicians. Some also wanted a “fair deal” for women.

While pregnancy and childcare remained of intense interest to parents, society and the state had a major stake in the outcome. Whereas communities had always exerted a variety of sanction over private life,
public health, welfare, and educational bureaucracies staffed by powerful professionals now influenced parenting more directly than ever before. Motherhood was far from being viewed as either simple or natural, involving as it now did a complex and changing blend of private initiative and public supervision.

Women's authority as mothers was scrutinized intensely. Tutors in medicine, education, and social work contrasted their expertise with the dangers of maternal amateurism. Such attacks on mothers' credibility threatened the customary basis for women's self-esteem and public value. Yet childcare experts had much to offer that women wanted. The federal Division of Child Welfare sent thousands of its "Little Blue Books" on home and childcare free to women who feared ignorance. Information was also available from the Red Cross, VON, and various life insurance companies as well as in newspapers and magazines.

Continuing high levels of maternal and infant mortality underlay these fears. While improved public health initiatives and sulfa drugs by the end of the 1930's did bring a decrease, infant mortality rates remained higher than in many countries of western Europe. This poor showing did not incline most doctors to share care with midwives. These traditional custodians of female health remained unlicensed in most jurisdictions. Women nevertheless continued to seek them out, especially in rural and remote areas, like Newfoundland's outport communities. And right across the country, VON, private duty, public health, and missionary nurses delivered babies when purses were slim and doctors absent. Well aware of childbirth's dangers, women agitated for maternity assistance in cash or kind.

Women's desire for improved treatment and doctors' determination to monopolize delivery increased the likelihood of professional supervision and hospital confinement. The growing number of hospital births helped secure the position and authority of the medical profession. In hospitals, physicians could restrict the aspirations of nurses and patients more easily than in public clinics and patients' homes. Obstetrical practice and procedures underwent considerable change in these years. Chemical and endocrinological solutions to labour problems grew more popular. Zealous attempts to exclude women, whether as midwives or doctors, meant that in the 1920's and 1930's men presided over women in childbirth. Women and their relatives also demanded the full range of up-to-date procedures. For them, like the professionals they consulted, there were trends and fads.
Finally, however, prospective mothers were expected to deliver themselves into the hands of their doctors.

After the birth, experts warned women not to fail the initial challenge of breast-feeding. The heavy promotion of commercial milk products and the inclusion of formula preparation in major childcare manuals nevertheless suggest that many babies spent little or no time on the breast. The poor nutrition and heavy workloads of many mothers also jeopardized nursing. Yet babies weaned before eight or nine months frequently died.

Bottle or breast-fed, the modern baby was subject to rigorous scheduling. Mothers were to establish precise routines in everything from elimination to sleep. Such practices, augmented when necessary by isolation, were to substitute for physical punishment for children's offenses. With regular conditioning, all children could mature without trouble to themselves or others, except to mothers who were required to master the psychological tools of the new childrearing. A North America-wide child-study movement provided a few Canadian mothers with unprecedented opportunities to observe model practices. Child-study centres at Toronto and McGill universities investigated the personality of normal children and instructed parents and their offspring. Their influence was, however, more widespread as social workers and teachers spread their message to less privileged groups, such as recipients of mothers' allowances (introduced first in Manitoba in 1916 and last in Quebec in 1937). Mothers everywhere were encouraged to develop a strong sense of maternal mission.

Naturally, not all Canadians embraced expert advice. Childcare traditions were guarded tenaciously. Yet eager to reduce infant mortality and anxious about their responsibility for social maladjustment, women were susceptible to pressure to reject midwives, home births, folk remedies, and care by rule-of-thumb. While most parents were at liberty to reject or accept advice, many saw their authority eroded. Especially vulnerable were those who by reason of illness or unemployment or poverty found themselves dependent upon the emerging welfare state or older charities. The experience of the world-famous Dionne Quintuplets, daughters born in 1934 to a poor French-Canadian family in North Ontario, pointed to both the benefits and dangers of greater supervision. While quick transfer to an institutional setting ensured initial survival, the Quints were estranged from their family and its traditions. Ironically, however, the Quints, unlike the nursery schools or even the advice literature known mostly to middle-class
parents, drew mothers from many backgrounds towards modern conventions in childcare.

After the First World War, as the media and bureaucracies dealing with youngsters steadily extended their influence, it became increasingly difficult to bear or rear children in isolation. Wittingly or not, mothers were apt to be judged by the standards of middle-class childcare professionals. The result for some was a strengthening of their store of shared experience; others found alienation and despair. Not all would or could match a portrait of normalcy that was overwhelming white, middle-class, Anglo-American, and Protestant in character. Yet more than careers or husbands, children were likely to enshrine hopes and dreams for a better future. That challenge preoccupied many women from their early twenties into their forties.

VI. ‘Getting Old’: Forty and Beyond

In the 1920’s and 1930’s, youthfulness was celebrated to an unprecedented degree and, according to advertising, old age for women came at about age forty. For many Canadians, especially those in larger urban centres with front row seats on the creation of a youth-oriented popular culture, it was difficult to ignore messages that denigrated the value of experience and preferred the potential of the young to the achievement of the old. And women suffered more than men. Despite the promise of a better life after the “war to end all wars,” age frequently appeared to render women irrelevant.

At odds with the common disparagement of age, a minor refrain also emerged from the contemporary media. Less prevalent, but almost always present, was acknowledgement of female elders as sources of comfort, support, and advice. Such observations surfaced often enough to remind readers of an alternate reality. For some aging women, freedom from childbearing and rearing, and some degree of economic security, meant important opportunities to exercise talents and command respect, and, occasionally, power.

The media of the day urged aging women to devote additional time to remedying looks in decline. The stress on the overriding significance of physical beauty could hardly be anything but damaging to anyone who took it seriously. In particular, cosmetics and toiletries, from Tangee lipstick to Pepsodent toothpaste, Calay soap, and Listerine mouthwash, were widely
presented as the up-to-date solution to women’s problems with inadequate bodies. Men’s shortcomings in contrast were largely ignored. Even feminists, who knew full well the value of their sex, could quail before assaults on women’s self-confidence. Nellie McClung, in a classic statement of its kind, wrote in 1926 "I’ll Never Tell My Age Again!!" Significantly, she did not blame women, concluding that sex prejudice on the part of a male-run world forced women to engage in demeaning subterfuges such as hiding their age. Like many of her self-confident contemporaries in the suffrage generation, she gave every indication of enjoying good health and good friends well into her sixties and seventies. An essential conflict existed between a feminist ideal that relied on middle-aged and older women for the energy, time, and talent to reform society and a commercial culture that denigrated the same group just as it directed them to narcissistic consumption.

Maladies associated with older women’s restricted options attracted medical experts. Canadian doctors, like those elsewhere, had a history of surgical solutions — hysterectomies and ovarirotomies, for example — to the problem of difficult women. In time, electroshock therapy, as with Edna Diefenbaker, the wife of a future prime minister, and, eventually, overprescription of tranquilizers would take their place, all testimonies to the ultimate inadequacy of purely medical explanations. Disillusionment, frustration, and bewilderment typified some aging women whom money or age freed from preoccupation with house and children.

In fact, however, most older women were quite unlike the privileged, middle-class housewives targeted by medical professionals. For many, their later years entailed a struggle to survive on inadequate incomes. As had long been true, old age often meant poverty. Many struggled to support themselves and sometimes immediate families and grandchildren. Even then income frequently remained insufficient for good health or peace of mind. A reminder from the Imperial Life Assurance Company captured this reality “Poor Old Folks — Looks As If They’ll Have To Go Over The Hill To The Poorhouse.”

Since older women were a good deal more likely than their male contemporaries to be helpful with domestic chores and might very well have closer ties with children, they often lived with relatives. An alternative was some kind of retirement “home” or, to characterize better the majority, “refuge” for the elderly poor. Given straitened municipal and individual
budgets in both decades, institutions found it hard to meet elderly residents’ needs. Even when the family situation was ideal or health robust enough for separate residence, an independent income was invaluable. Without it, life could become psychologically and materially unbearable. Yet women’s subordinate place in home and workplace entailed life-long financial penalties.

The desperate plight of the elderly poor led to calls beginning in the nineteenth century for a system of state pensions. In 1919 the Liberal Party’s platform included a promise of old-age pensions, but only pressure from labour MP’s caused a measure to pass in 1927. Relying as they did on provincial compliance, old-age pensions took nine years to implement, beginning with B.C. in 1927. The means-tested pension given at seventy years of age ensured only an impoverished standard of living however. Despite increasingly niggardly interpretations of regulations in the 1930’s, requests for old-age assistance, just as with mothers’ allowances, far outstripped anticipated demand. Even relatively small sums could be critical. Winnipeg’s Middlechurch Home for the Elderly reported in 1938 that as a “direct result” of the new pension, the elderly were able to “stay in their own homes or in boarding houses as long as they can be looked after without much care and only apply for admission ... when they are very infirm in body or mind or almost bedridden.”

Yet, if aging could be fearsome in prospect and reality, the years after forty could bring new energy. Everywhere there were examples of great-hearted souls, like the Scottish-born, Calgary boardinghouse-keeper, Jean McWilliams McDonald, who, despite personal hardship, found reserves of time and sympathy for those around her. More visible still were the formal cooperative efforts of middle-aged and, often but not always, middle-class women. This group above all maintained a tradition of public life for women.

Canada had a history of such collaboration. The issue of woman suffrage was central. By the time of the First World War, its symbolic significance in uniting diverse sections of the women’s movement was powerful. Although farm, labour, and middle-class reformers frequently developed separate agendas, they were unanimous in denouncing a system that gave political power solely to men. This consensus was essential in winning suffrage. It also inspired great but finally unrealistic, expectations about the newly enfranchised electorate. In the 1920’s and 1930’s, no single
cause, with the exception from time to time of peace and the exclusion of Quebec’s women from the provincial franchise until 1940, elicited the same outrage.

In the interwar years, formal and informal coalitions in favour of birth control and equal divorce laws, wives’ right to paid labour and better maternity services, and international cooperation and peace existed among women of very different backgrounds, but few of these causes transcended class, racial, and ethnic divisions. Making connections was made more difficult by the pervasive misogyny of the day. Yet older women remained a force, both in their clubs and, to a more limited degree, in the male-dominated world of politics.

The majority of activities centred, as always, on the local community where libraries, hospitals, orphanages, parks, churches, refuges for unmarried mothers and the elderly, day nurseries, schools, museums, and art galleries still owed much to female efforts. In many instances, initiatives were women-centred, as with the campaigns for equal access to homesteads and the Quebec franchise. Women’s organizational work was also likely to have an international orientation, as with efforts to support the League of Nations and church missionary societies. Related to the recurring world-mindedness was the ethnic/racial character of many groups, such as the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, the Fédération nationale St.-Jean-Baptiste, the Negro Theatre Guild of Montreal, and the Ukrainian Women’s Enlightenment Society. Finally, women’s efforts were often narrowly interpreted in terms of class interest. The Women’s Labour Leagues associated with the Communist Party knew this full well when they agitated for workers’ rights. Others were less willing to admit biases, but they too, as with the National Council of Women’s opposition to the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, often defended particular class interests. Such divisions made women’s groups remarkably similar to their male counterparts.

The woman’s club movement expanded as it fragmented. While older organizations like the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, the Fédération nationale St.-Jean-Baptiste, and the National Council of Women experienced difficulty, women’s grass-roots involvement remained intense. No part of the country, for example, was without female activists in churches, synagogues, and sects. Most worked behind the scenes, but some outstanding individuals like Aimée Semple McPherson, a charismatic
evangelical preacher, who moved on to California, found occasions for public leadership. Catholic women, especially in Quebec, flocked to religious orders whose growth during these years empowered many members while simultaneously enabling their church to address health, educational, and social services imperatives in all provinces. Women's support for internationalism and peace in both decades, through groups like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the church missionary societies, was also critical in keeping Canadians in general much more conscious of world issues.

Activity was particularly striking in B.C. It had the advantage of sympathetic provincial governments in the 1920's, an outstanding group of well-educated women concentrated in two cities in close proximity, and very active socialist and labour movements. Elsewhere the situation was less promising. In the Maritimes politicians were regularly hostile, activists dispersed through small towns, and the left was much weaker. In Quebec feminists had to fight anti-franchise governments. Yet, even in unfavourable milieus, female activists lobbied for better legislation and infiltrated conventional parties. The demand for the provincial vote mobilized Quebec women in groups like the Provincial Franchise Committee (founded 1922) and the Alliance canadienne pour le vote des femmes du Québec (founded 1927). At the end of the 1920's, their agitation helped lead to the Dorion Commission to inquire into the status of the province's women. Its minimal concessions confirmed patriarchal privilege. Nevertheless, in 1938, female Liberals helped force the Quebec party to endorse suffrage.

Largely unprecedented, both locally and nation-wide, was the number of women involved in political parties of every description. Persisting anti-feminism encouraged a few activists to experiment with purely women's parties. In Toronto the Woman's Party and in Manitoba a Women's Independent Political Party surfaced briefly after suffrage. In general, however, women endeavoured to sensitize male political groups and insisted that they were politically more similar to some men than to women as a group. Yet within parties women regularly formed their own parallel organizations such as the Ontario Women's Liberal Association. Even progressive organizations like the United Farmers of Ontario and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation were more likely to view female recruits as sources of financial assistance and elbow-grease than ideas. As Joan Sangster has demonstrated in Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950 (1989), the presence of powerful leaders like
Annie Buller, Florence Custance, Bella Hall Gauld, Lea Robak, and Beckie Buhay, in their case in the Communist Party, rarely modified agendas that remained resolutely male-centred.

Once in office, parties sometimes acknowledged women’s support through appointments. In the early 1920’s, feminists took up posts that gave their sex almost unprecedented public authority. The appointment of mature activists like Emily Murphy of Edmonton and Helen Gregory MacGill of Vancouver as police magistrates and juvenile court judges testified to this new power. The most prestigious form government acknowledgement could take was appointment to the Senate. This right did not occur automatically with enfranchisement. Rather five Alberta feminists — Emily Murphy, Irene Parlby, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Nellie McClung, and Louise McKinney — had to appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in 1929 for recognition as “persons” according the the British North America Act and the right to sit in the Senate. None of the five applicants, however, was well enough connected to the Liberal administration of William Lyon Mackenzie King to win the first nomination, which went to Cairine Wilson, an active Liberal, in 1930.

The significance of partisanship was also evident in the determined campaign by women to gain the provincial franchise in Quebec. While some heroic champions like Idola Saint-Jean, founder of the Alliance canadienne pour le vote des femmes du Québec, remained unaligned, others such as the wily Thérèse Casgrain played on their links with the Liberal establishment. Their foes, both female and male, were likely in contrast to support the Union Nationale or the Conservatives. While Quebec, under additional pressure from federal Liberals, accepted woman suffrage in 1940, many women of First Nations and Asian ancestry remained disqualified across the country, and Blacks in general found it difficult to exercise political rights.

The 1920’s and 1930’s were also full of examples of mature women who won election to local, provincial, and national office. Western Canada supplied the greatest number, both as candidates and as successful politicians. In local legislatures, no woman was elected east of Manitoba until two, including Agnes Macphail, ran successfully in Ontario in 1943. Before then, six hailed from Alberta, four from B.C., two from Manitoba, and one from Saskatchewan. Not one represented the Conservative Party, and the showing from the “protest parties” — Non-Partisan League (1),
United Farmers of Alberta (1), CCF (2), and Social Credit (3) — testified to women’s generally warmer reception on the margins of Canadian politics and, perhaps too, the attraction of such politics for independent-minded women. All but two of the thirteen elected in these years were over forty years of age, most frequently with an extensive history of involvement in female organizations. The only two female MPs elected for these years — Agnes Macphail and Martha Black — show similar patterns, except that Black was a Conservative who replaced her ailing husband.

While political activists were often responsible for notable successes — the spread of mothers’ allowances legislation is a good example — men in the 1920’s and 1930’s continued to benefit from a “habit of authority,” which like the old English sense of superiority regarding other races, was of inestimable advantage in assigning women to and getting them to accept subordinate roles. Feminists like Macphail and her sisters in other parties, for all their courage and persistence, would find their lifetimes too short to counter such ingrained prejudice. And yet these decades represented a political advance. For the first time, women were in a position to judge the practical advantages of formal political equality. While the world was far from being transformed by female participation, it was still possible to believe that women were making progress.

At the same time, the collapse of the international order and the world economy in the 1930’s encouraged a tendency to put women’s issues aside. Old and young women, feminists included, were increasingly preoccupied with the very terms of survival. For most, women’s rights had lesser priority than what seemed the more urgent problems of unemployment and peace. But the impulse that inspired Mary Ellen Smith of B.C., the first female cabinet minister in the British Empire, to desire to “render much greater service to my sex” was never lost. Women in their forties and beyond might not be the favoured children of the youth culture, but they remained the custodians of an activist tradition.

Conclusion

The 1920’s and 1930’s tested Canadians’ commitment to equality. Women had to make their way in a world that remained committed to their sex’s primary responsibility for the maintenance of family and home. Discrimination, especially that based on race and class, additionally disadvantaged large numbers. Yet, while systemic discrimination
handicapped them from birth, women were far from being without resources. Female networks nurtured self-worth, empowering women in the search for individual expression. The adventurous, the brave, and the lucky forged a long list of firsts in everything from aeronautical engineering to undertaking.

In these decades, anti-feminism, misogyny, and fascism — closely related sets of prejudices — posed a terrible danger to free women everywhere, as progressive activists like Violet McNaughton, Nellie McLung, Agnes Macphail, and Thérèse Casgrain appreciated full well. By World War Two, feminists had reason to fear that the achievements of modern women might be consigned to oblivion, just had those of so many of their predecessors in the struggle for social justice. That possibility haunted them as they struggled to counter the various ideological and economic attacks in the 1930's.

By 1939, some twenty years of experience with the franchise provided a more than adequate demonstration of female competence, but also an equally instructive reminder of the depth of resistance to meaningful equality. Canada remained a long way off, as the president of the United Farm Women of Manitoba observed earlier, from granting “a square deal (something we have never had), and a fair field, and no special favour to anyone.” Of necessity, Canadian women had to cope as best they could with a world that made substantial demands on their talent and energy, while simultaneously limiting their capacity to meet the challenges of modern living. Eventually, the contradictions between the egalitarian promise embodied in the democratic franchise and the reality of patriarchal prejudices would force another generation of women to rethink the equality they had supposedly gained in the 1920's and the 1930's. As the feminists of those two decades appreciated full well, equality for Canadian women lay in some future day.
SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING


Study of women workers should begin with Janice Acton, *et al.*, eds.,


The women of Atlantic Canada are movingly portrayed in Margaret Conrad, Toni Laidlaw, and Donna Smyth, eds., No Place Like Home:

The meaning of the 1920's and the 1930's for women is brilliantly evoked in the survey by Alison Prentice, et al., Canadian Women: A History (Toronto, 1988). Other useful discussions are found in Beth Light and Ruth Roach Pierson, eds., No Easy Road: Women in Canada, 1920's to 1960's (Toronto, 1990); and Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds., Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women’s History (Toronto, 1992).