WOMEN
AND THEIR WORK
IN UPPER CANADA

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In July 1839, Anne Langton recorded in her journal, "we all joined in a little tirade against Canada this morning." Her mother's "ground of complaint" was "the slovenly nature of its inhabitants." "I grumbled a little at the necessity of storing all your summer provisions in the winter, and at the annoyance of unpacking and repacking barrels of pork, boiling brine etc, etc. Our caterer, I find, instead of a box of candles, has brought us a cask of tallow, much to our disappointment, having already abundance of work on hand." Most of the time, Anne relished the responsibility of running the family home for her elderly parents and aunt. She took pride in her work and she knew that her skills and efforts were appreciated. But in an unusual display of discontent, she concluded her entry for the day, "I have sometimes thought, and I may as well say it, now that it is a grumbling day - woman is a bit of a slave in this country."

Most of the time, Anne's life and her work, and that of the thousands of other women in Upper Canada / Canada West in the first half of the nineteenth century is overlooked or ignored by historians and other scholars. For those primarily concerned with the economic and political development of the colony, "women's work" seems to have had little lasting consequence. Most women did not own farms or businesses; they could not vote or hold office; and, like Anne Langton, their lives and work were rooted in the household and grew out of their relationships and responsibilities to their families. Moreover, in the press and from the pulpit, colonial leaders promoted a social rhetoric of domesticity and extolled the virtues of the "good" woman who was the "angel in the house" and who restricted her attentions to her husband and children. The rhetoric of "separate spheres" dictated that it was men who bore the responsibility for supporting their family and negotiating the "public world" of business and politics. Good women did not have to work; instead they fulfilled their divinely appointed duties as man's help mate and support.
Although women are often invisible in histories of the period, Upper Canadians themselves recognized that what some have called the cult of true womanhood had little to do with the realities of women's lives. Being a wife, mother and good neighbour took skill and had tangible economic as well as social value. A household could not function without its mistress and often other additional female help. Indeed, colonists expected that women would, when the need arose, enter the waged workforce; it was accepted that at least some women ran their own businesses and successful female proprietors were applauded.

The actual work women in Upper Canada did varied enormously. It depended, to a large degree, on the family's economic resources and rank in the community and whether they lived in one of the colony's burgeoning villages or towns, or on a farm. A woman's own expectations and aspirations clearly influenced her work; so too did her age and marital status. Colonial women also rarely worked alone. They often relied on family members and friends, on neighbors and on waged workers to ensure that their families were secure and their work complete. Although individual households were the site of much of Upper Canadian women's work, family homes were usually a community of workers. And one of the best ways to explore colonial women and their work is to situate it in its contemporary context.

It is often difficult, however, to tickle out what working women in Upper Canada actually did and how they did it. Most women (and men, for that matter) did not have the time, the resources, or perhaps the ability to record their experiences. Certainly, some middle class women kept detailed journals and some of their letters have survived. Anne Langton's extensive correspondence with family and friends after she arrived in the colony in 1837, and the letters and journals of Mary Gapper O'Brien, a farmer's wife who lived north of York in the 1830s provide us with invaluable insights into the workings of rural colonial households. The correspondence between various members of the Macaulay family of Kingston and York offer a window into the world of the colonial elite. For the most part, however, such manuscript sources reflect the interests and concerns of colonists who were privileged and relatively well off. The experiences and work of the majority of women in Upper Canada are more difficult to unravel. We do catch glimpses of "the
girl who Mary O'Brien hired as help, of Anne Langton's washerwoman, and of Helen Macaulay's maid, cook, and other servants in their mistresses' diaries. Local newspapers also included notices relating to marital breakdowns, announcements about the opening or closing of a local girls' school or millinery shop, or help wanted or work wanted advertisements placed by and/or for women workers. Piecing together these relatively limited sources allows us to recreate something of working women's lives in Upper Canada in the first half of the nineteenth century. And what, at the most basic level becomes clear is that "women, work and family" were inseparable categories in Upper Canada, as they were in other pre-industrial economies. Moreover, the colony was highly dependent on its wives and mothers and school mistresses and scullery maids.

Wives and Mothers

Almost all women in Upper Canada married, at least once (and some two or three times) and a woman's wedding was her rite of passage into adulthood. Although the law and social custom dictated that the family was a patriarchal institution, as a wife, a woman presided over her own household and she had some limited authority over her children and, if the family could afford it, her waged help. As a wife, a woman, by definition, was also a mother, domestic worker, nurse, teacher, neighbour and deputy husband. One of the fundamental factors that shaped a woman's work was her relationship with her husband.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Upper Canadians supported the idea of a companionate marriage. A woman and man were expected to marry for love and that the ideal relationship rested on mutual respect and affection. "A man gets a wife," one article in a colonial newspaper explained, "first because he loved her" and then "to look after his affairs, to assist him in his journey through life, to educate and prepare his children for proper station in life, and not to dissipate his property." Husbands and wives were deemed to be equally responsible for maintaining a strong and healthy relationship; at the same time, it was assumed that a good wife's "greatest ambition" was to ensure her husband's "welfare and and happiness and that of his children."
When gentlewoman Mary Gapper arrived in Upper Canada in 1828 in the company of her mother to visit two brothers and their families who lived on a farm just north of York, she was still single and had no intention of marrying. She was financially secure and at the age of thirty, she believed that her primary responsibility was to care for her widowed mother and, when she returned home to Britain, to help her sister Lucy with her family. When, almost a year after her arrival, neighbour and half-pay officer, Edward O'Brien asked Mary to marry him, she faced a dilemma. The problem was not that she did not love him. But, as she wrote to her sister, "circumstanced as I am," such a marriage was impossible. "My future life," she explained, "should be determined by what [is] necessary to the comfort of you and my mother." Mary accepted Edward's proposal only after her mother and Lucy had blessed the union. Even then, she knew that marriage would entail certain "sacrifices." By accepting Edward, she would have to give up her independence and "some of my more peculiar associations." And she might never see Lucy again. Mary never seemed to have regretted her decision, however. Her diary indicates that the couple enjoyed a satisfying relationship.

Not all women were so fortunate. The potential for unhappiness, abuse and marriage breakdown were institutionalized in colonial law. On marriage, a woman became a *femme covert* and unless she entered into a prénuptial agreement (which was exceedingly rare), she relinquished both herself and her property to her husband. In the patriarchal family, the husband was "the master" of the house and when a wife was "insensible to the voice of her chief," she could, and many believed, should be "chastised." Periodically, colonial newspapers included reports of husbands charged with beating their wives excessively. Most often, those charged were acquitted; even in the few instances when a man was convicted, it was invariably assumed that the victim was at least in part responsible for her husband's actions.

The remedies available to women caught in an unhappy marriage were very limited. Social and often familial pressure dictated that once married, only death could end the relationship. Divorce took an act of Parliament and was almost impossible to attain. A few couples did work out an amicable separation (even though this was never recognized.
in law). More often, a woman just left her unhappy home and tried to make a life for herself elsewhere. Between 1820 and 1850, colonial newspapers regularly included notices placed by aggrieved husbands notifying the public of their situation. Most stated simply that “whereas my wife has left my bed and board without any cause or provocation, I hereby caution the public not to trust her and I will no longer be responsible for her debts.” Some notices did express a husband’s indignation that his wife had “absconded” or “eloped.” Other men charged that their wives had been “impecunious” or “impudent” or had “stolen” the children, household items, or money. Only a few men pleaded with their wives to return; most were relieved that their wives had left.

Most of the time we never learn the wife’s side of the story. Occasionally, however, a wife decided to publicly challenge her husband’s explanations for the marriage breakdown. For example, in 1829, Sarah Peters was determined “to set the record straight” and in her notice printed in the local newspaper in reply to her husband’s declaration, explained that she had left her home for “fear of her life.” A few years later, Mrs Abbott of York stated emphatically, in reply to her husband’s standard caution, that “the bed and board” was hers and that her husband owed her money! Such responses were very rare; but newspaper editor, William Lyon Mackenzie of the Colonial Advocate was probably not the only one who believed that in many cases of marriage breakdown, “where a wife has been advertised, the husband is a worthless sot and the wife a heartbroken and excellent woman.”

Whether a marriage was “happy” or “unhappy,” it was a defining event in most women’s lives and the institution within which most lived and worked. And becoming a wife in Upper Canada also invariably meant becoming a mother. At a basic economic level, children were an important asset. Colonial families depended on the labour that children could provide for survival, and the colony needed the human resources to grow and prosper. But in Upper Canada, as in other parts of the British Empire, motherhood was also a cultural institution and it was assumed that only a “good” wife could be a “good” mother. Pregnancy and childbirth without the benefit of marriage were clear evidence of a woman’s depravity. Although some sympathized with the plight of young girls who had been “duped” by designing men, having a child
"out of wedlock" could be devastating to a girl's reputation and threatened her chances of marriage or even of gaining employment. Mary O'Brien, for example, refused to hire Betsy Garland who arrived at her door with a babe in arms. Despite the fact that Betsy had been recommended by the Reverend John Strachan and Mary sympathized with her misfortune, the girl had "lost her character" and was "too bad for [Mary's] purpose." Some girls tried to hide their pregnancies (often with surprising success); others abandoned or killed the new-born. A few unwed mothers sued the putative father for support; and an untold number left home and tried to pass themselves off as recent widows in a new community.

When Mary O'Brien discovered she was pregnant for the first time, she and Edward were delighted. Yet, Mary was also apprehensive. She knew all too well how dangerous and difficult becoming a mother could be. Soon after her arrival in the colony, Mary had anxiously watched her sister-in-law, Mary Southby, suffer through two late-term miscarriages. A third, which almost cost Mary Southby her life, occurred while Mary O'Brien was herself pregnant for the first time. As she wrote home, Mary O'Brien could not help but be conscious of "the awful crisis to which I am fast approaching."

Most colonial women did not face this ordeal alone. Edward O'Brien and many other husbands did all they could to assist their wives. Pregnant women also turned to family members and friends for advice, and if available, called on the local midwife when they went into labour. In the backwoods of Upper Canada, finding a midwife was sometimes difficult. Soon after her arrival in the colony, Mary O'Brien and her sister-in-law, Fanny, were called to the bed of a neighbour - a "poor Yorkshire woman who was apparently in want of the assistance of a Granny." Neither Mary or Fanny had any experience in childbirth, but as women, they felt obliged to offer whatever assistance they could. Over the next ten years, Mary attended at least four other women "whose time had come." "Professional" help was more readily available in colonial towns and villages. After 1820, local newspapers included a growing number of notices of usually older women who offered "testimonials" as to their abilities and would, for a small fee, attend to birthing women.
When Helen Macaulay, the wife of John, who was then a member of the Legislative Council and the son of one of the most influential families in the colony was confined for the first time in 1835, the birth was apparently without incident. Her second and subsequent pregnancies were much more difficult. In 1838, Helen took to her bed at seven or eight months and was attended by a professional nurse-midwife and visited regularly by a doctor (a practice that was becoming increasingly common in British North America). After a long labour, the Macaulay's second daughter, young Helen, was born prematurely. Both mother and daughter survived, but it took Helen six months to recover from complications following the birth. During her next pregnancy, Helen was not so fortunate. After a very difficult and lengthy labour, she gave birth to triplets. John immediately engaged a "young, healthy English girl" to wet nurse the babies and a nurse-midwife stayed on to attend Helen. Despite all their ministrations, the triplets died. Helen's slow recovery was in large part possible because she had family and staff who took over much of her domestic work. For most women in the colony, childbirth only briefly interrupted their daily chores or waged work; within days, if not hours, many were up and working again. As obituaries in local newspapers attest, many women died during or after childbirth, from exhaustion.

Bearing children was only the beginning of a mother's work. According to many Upper Canadians, there was no picture "more charming than that of an intelligent, virtuous mother assiduously instructing her infant offspring and using her daily endeavors both to inform their minds and fashion their hearts aright." Although fathers were expected to take some part in training their children, it was up to mothers to instill "the principles of virtue and integrity" and provide the foundation "of their [children's] earthly career." As Mary O'Brien and other women knew, mothering was much more than this. Children had to be clothed and fed and protected. Mothers knew that there was a good chance that at least one of their children would not survive to their teens. As Mary O'Brien confided to her sister when Willie, her first-born was an active two year old, "the impression that I shall live to miss him from my path is always present to me." There was often little she (or other mothers) could do to combat common but no less deadly childhood complaints - colds, influenza, whooping cough, or the measles. Mary was particularly concerned about the children's health when cholera swept through the colony in the mid 1830s.
Mary was also determined that even though they lived in the bush, her children receive the best possible education. As soon as they were old enough, she began to teach them their letters and numbers. She also briefly taught a few local children whose parents offered work in exchange. Anne Langton too organized a “parlour” school for neighborhood children. Neither Anne nor Mary would have considered themselves “teachers.” These two literate, middle class women were just fulfilling one of the central responsibilities of motherhood. Most mothers, who may themselves have had limited ability to read and write, managed to teach their children only their basic letters, often using a Bible as a text. Mary O’Brien was fortunate in that not only was she educated, she also had the tools - books, paper and ink - to give her children a firmer grounding. Families who lived in the colony’s growing centers of settlement often decided to send their children, including their daughters, to a more “regular” school.

By the time she was five or six, Helen and John Macaulay’s eldest daughter, Annie, was quite a handful. Her parents and her grandmother began to despair of her wilful behavior and their inability to teach Annie her numbers and “her book.” For a time, Helen and John engaged a tutor and sent Annie for dancing lessons; eventually she was enrolled full-time in Mrs Blake’s school for girls.

Mrs Blake was one of a growing number of gentlewomen in Upper Canada who were able to parlay what were considered inherently “womanly” skills - teaching children - into a livelihood. Although there was some debate in the colony about the propriety of educating girls beyond the basics of reading and writing and household skills, between 1815 and 1840, dozens of women opened “ladies’ seminaries” or “academies” for the daughters of the rising middle classes. Most of these private schools, that normally took both day students and boarders, offered some formal instruction in reading, writing, geography, French and other academic subjects considered suitable for their charges. Pupils were also taught “the accomplishments” - music, sewing, fancy work, dancing, drawing and others skills needed by any respectable middle class woman.

Initially, some women, like Mrs Goodman, who opened her school in York in 1817, took only a few boarding students; her school was also her
home and she had limited space. When Mrs Goodman retired in 1822 and Mrs Cockburn, a widow from Montreal, assumed the reins, the school began to expand and by the mid 1830s, had forty students and at least four full time teacher-assistants and was recognized as one of the premier academies in the colony. Mrs Goodman and Mrs Cockburn were clearly respectable gentlewomen; and their status was by no means compromised by their business successes. Indeed, by selling their skills as "mother teachers" they were engaging in waged work that was both acceptable and needed in the growing colony. And for a few of these proprietors, their school provided them with personal and economic independence.

In the first half of the century, only a handful of women had the skills, the capital or the reputation needed to open a girls' academy. Fewer still were as successful as Mrs Cockburn. Moreover, most colonial families could not afford the fees of one of the "best" schools. There were other options, however. Between 1800 and 1840, dozens of women opened parlour or "dame" schools and in exchange for a small fee, offered lessons in reading, writing and the womanly arts. Such a school mistress needed no particular expertise, other than her sex, a good reputation and the confidence to begin. Another group of women (and men) offered to teach one or two specialty subjects - painting or dancing, for example - and they would either go to the student's home or hold classes in their own. By the early 1830s, there was also a market for teaching assistants in larger schools - and young women, without experience or capital of their own, joined the faculties of such establishments as Upper Canada Academy in Cobourg. By the 1840s, a growing proportion of women were being engaged in common and local public schools - to teach young children under the supervision of male principals and trustees.

Teaching was rarely an alternative to being a wife and mother, however; rather, it was an extension of this work - one that offered young and older women a way to supplement their families' incomes. Often, female teachers moved in and out of the marketplace as the needs of their families or households required. Mrs Drury of York, for example, ran a small school for a short time next to her husband's carpentry shop; Hannah Hepburn taught hat making while her husband tailored. For other women, accepting work as a teacher was a way to find a home.
After 1820, newspapers frequently included notices from both young and older women who were looking for positions as governesses. In 1838, for example, a "Lady from England" stated that she was competent "to instruct in English, in all its branches, MUSIC SINGING, FRENCH, DRAWING & NEEDLEWORK etc." Her notice was explicit that "salary not so much an object as a comfortable home." She may have hoped that working as a governess would only be temporary; in the meantime, she and many other gentlewomen of reduced circumstances were more comfortable working and living in the "private" sphere and performing those tasks Mary O'Brien did on a day-to-day basis with her own children.

As Mary O'Brien quickly discovered, teaching required skill and considerable patience. It also took time. Mothers who were determined to "educate their children aright" invariably had other, often competing, responsibilities - to support their husbands, to keep their houses functioning, to ensure that the family was fed and clothed and, when circumstances demanded, to step in and become head of the household when the men were away.

The Colonial Household Community of Work

One new arrival to Upper Canada commented in 1838 that "the only salvation of a man here is to have a wife and children." In the rural, pre-modern economy of Upper Canada, the family was the most basic economic unit and whether one lived on a farm or in town, economic security and sometimes survival depended on the willingness and ability of all members of the family to contribute their work and their wages. Men's and women's work was usually different; it was also always complementary. On farms, men undertook the hard labour of the fields and the forests; in towns and villages, it was almost always men who pursued a particular craft. Female labour was primarily centered on securing the well-being of the family and producing goods and services for the household. Such divisions of labour broke down in emergencies -for example, when either the husband or the wife fell ill or was injured or absent for whatever reason. Then each party pitched in as needs must - and husbands tended sick children and wives managed or worked on the farm.
Even in the optimum circumstances, colonial women found it virtually impossible to do all their work on their own. If possible, they turned to family, friends and neighbours for help. If finances permitted, farmers, shopkeepers, artisans and their wives hired a local man or woman to meet a particular need. The O'Briens and Langtons were fortunate. They could afford to engage domestic workers full-time and their households almost always included non-family members - young girls, a man and his wife and, intermittently, the wife of a local neighbour - who worked together in an often complex exchange of skills and services. Yet even labouring households relied on an informal exchange of services with friends and neighbours. The size and working relationships within colonial households varied considerably. In part, they depended on the size of the home, the number and age of the children, and the family's economic and social status.

In the early part of the century, most colonists lived in a small shanty or cabin - a basic structure with no windows, dirt floors, and with a hole in the roof for a chimney. Even relatively affluent families, like the O'Briens, were initially limited in space and amenities. Mary was quite proud that her first house had a parlour separate from the kitchen; but as Mary reported to her sister Lucy, it only contained "two chairs, a sort of makeshift table, two guns, a whisky and beer barrel, a box of nails & carpenter's tools, besides an ink bottle, a few books and a drawing of Edward's." She was very pleased when the family built a larger home, one with separate bedrooms, a luxury not available to most.

Perhaps the most important feature of all colonial dwellings was the fireplace - which for many was the principal source of heat. Keeping even a small shanty warm was a serious problem. Cutting logs to lengths and splitting wood for the fire was usually men's work but gathering the chips, bringing in the wood and maintaining the fire were housekeeping chores. Anne Langton, who lived in a large, two story house, once judged that "firing is the most troublesome part of housekeeping in (the) country, the drying and the cutting of the wood is endless. It is astonishing to see the piles that disappear in a day." Even though her house had a franklin stove in each room, her family often woke in winter to find frost accumulating on blankets and a pail of water frozen solid in the kitchen.
The central fireplace was also essential for cooking. Next to childcare, colonial housekeepers spent most of their time and energy preparing and serving a seemingly endless round of meals. Farm households in Upper Canada appear to have had two substantial meals a day - breakfast in the mid-morning, after a couple of hours of work had been completed, and dinner in the early-to-mid afternoon. Families then took a light supper or tea at the end of the day. The basic colonial diet consisted of bread, potatoes and salt pork or beef. This varied considerably, however, depending on the particular circumstances of the household and the season of the year. Those who raised livestock periodically had mutton, beef and chicken to add to the larder. If a cow had a calf, they also had various milk products. A number of families supplemented their diet with fish and game. But only households with a variety of cooking pots, which could be raised or lowered over the open fire to adjust the heat could enjoy more than the basic one pot meal; and only those with sufficient eating utensils and space could avoid having more than one sitting at each meal. When Anne Langton first arrived at her brother's, there was "no fire in the house" and "every culinary operation, from baking bread to heating water, was performed on a dilapidated cooking stove, whilst eight or nine meals were regularly served each day."

Making meals palatable and interesting required some ingenuity. In April 1846, Anne Langton recorded that "this is the worst season of the year to provide a good dinner." At present provisions are at their lowest ebb. We are without fresh meat, the pork is done, for as we over-stocked ourselves last year, of course we rather under-stocked ourselves this year. We have no bacon, but what is two years old, and this year's hams are most indifferent, owing either to impure salt or impure molasses, or some other unknown cause... Milk and butter will not be plentiful for a month to come, eggs are our chief luxury and with these we make as much variety as we can." As she observed, "the scarcity of the season is not regarded as much by anybody except the housekeeper, whose ingenuity is tasked to spread a decent table before the family." It was one of Anne's, Mary O'Brien's and other rural women's most important duties, in summer and fall, to ensure that the bounty of summer was available in the winter. Where available, pigs, sheep or cattle were slaughtered and the meat was smoked, salted or cured to preserve it over the winter.
Anne Langton sometimes did her own butchering, for as she explained, "when on a small scale, it was more agreeable to operate ourselves than to stand by and give directions."

Produce from the garden too had to be "put down" for the winter. Harvesting acres of potatoes and gathering squash, pumpkins, carrots, onions, turnips and yams for storage in the root cellar was back-breaking work. Rural women spent days laboring over hot stoves or fires, pickling, jamming, or preserving fruits and berries gathered from the surrounding woods and vegetables from the garden in hopes that the results of their efforts would last until the following summer. In early August 1839, Anne Langton recorded "In the early part [of the week] we were preserving ourselves a good supply of raspberries. It is a fruit we have in plenty and much cheaper than in England. Pickling has also been the order of the day. We consume more in the way of ketchups, sauces, curry powder, etc. than we used to at home, on account of the many months we are without fresh meat." The autumn and early winter occupations of pickling and preserving fruits and vegetables and butchering and processing meat were bracketed in many farm households by the production of maple syrup in late February and early March. Although the running of the sap was one of the first welcome signs of spring, for many farm women it was also a harbinger of long and tedious hours over a sap kettle.

The daily and seasonal culinary duties of colonial wives were periodically increased when guests arrived or, in rural areas, a bee was organized to raise a barn, chop trees, harvest or clear stumps. Mary O'Brien noted in December 1830 that with the help of her hired girl, she had had to make "three breakfasts and three tea parties" to feed their seasonal laborers as the tea kettle was scarcely big enough for the family. When the O'Briens held a bee in July 1832, Mary was particularly worried. It came "at an unlucky moment, seeing that our stock of provisions was getting very low," she wrote. She nonetheless managed to produce a multi-course meal. Mary knew all too well how important this meal was to the development of the farm. As Catherine Wilson has illustrated in a recent article, the bee supper was an essential part of labour relations in the Upper Canadian outback. It was also one of the central symbols of Upper Canadian women's roles as housekeepers and the success of the dinner attested to her abilities.
Urban women did not often have occasion to prepare for a bee. Like their rural sisters, however, many did cook for large households on a regular basis and could expect to receive guests without notice. As historian Bettina Bradbury has illustrated, many urban families also maintained gardens and kept a few chickens and sometimes a pig or a cow. Wives of artisans and laborers shared with their rural sisters the responsibilities of producing, preserving and, if space allowed, storing quantities of food to last the winter. At the same time, housekeepers of village households were increasingly able, or forced, to rely on the proceeds of their families’ wages to buy food. Where rural cousins turned their skills to preserving goods, urban women became skilled at bargaining and bartering. For almost all wives, however, cooking probably took up the largest portion of their day.

Upper Canadian housewives were still expected to find the time and energy to keep their homes clean and neat. After a day scrubbing her brother John's house, Anne Langton commented emphatically, "I came back with a strengthened conviction of the importance of woman." And in a rather cryptic comment on the difference between men's and women's attitudes to housekeeping, she concluded, "[I was] congratulating myself, that though I might be an old maid, I never could be an old bachelor." Keeping even the smallest Upper Canadian home clean was next to impossible, with people moving in and out, dust and dirt leaking in through cracks in the wall or up from the dirt floor, and sparks and soot flying from the open fireplace. Stone, brick or frame houses may have been relatively easier "to keep," but their size and the higher expectations of their middle class residents meant that there was more work to be done.

For Mary O'Brien, the "hibdominal house cleaning" that happened once or twice a year was a thankless chore. Curtains, bedding and rugs were taken down, washed or beaten, aired and replaced. Windows were washed and walls and floors scrubbed and in some cases given a coat of whitewash or paint to help keep the dust down and the insects at bay. Few housekeepers could manage this on their own. Anne Langton and Mary O'Brien hired neighbouring women by the day to help. After "peace and quietness" was "at last restored," colonial housekeepers still had to look forward to the more frequent demands of washing clothes.
The basic tools of washing were hard work, water and soap. Farm women made their own soap from wood ash and bones and the entrails from a recently slaughtered hog or sheep. There was then the endless task of hauling and heating water, mixing the soap and scrubbing. Gentlewoman Susanna Moodie, who arrived in the colony in 1832 and would later write of her experiences in *Roughing it in the Bush*, quickly discovered that washing clothes was difficult. "After a making a great preparation," she wrote, "I determined to try my unskilled hand upon the operation. The fact is, I knew nothing of the task ... and in a few minutes rubbed the skin off my wrists without getting the clothes clean." Susanna's maid usually did the washing. Anne Langton hired a local washerwoman and many wives coped with the help of their children. Only a few would have had the time or the inclination of Anne Langton to carefully iron the clean clothes.

The care taken in washing clothes reflected in part the constant problem many Upper Canadians had in acquiring new clothes. Cloth could be expensive and was often difficult to obtain. Anne Langton, Mary O'Brien and many other middle class immigrants relied on parcels from home or local merchants for their supply. Some households grew flax or raised sheep, and wives and daughters cleaned, spun and then wove or knitted the material into clothes for the family and perhaps for sale. The work was labour intensive and when they had the opportunity, women gathered in each other's homes to spin and weave and socialize. But only a family with a number of daughters or other capable women in the household could produce enough cloth to make the effort economically worthwhile.

In most households, it was not making new clothes that occupied a lot of time and energy, but repairing and re-working old ones. Plain sewing was one of the first skills mothers taught their daughters. All of Mary O'Brien's "spare" moments were dedicated to mending and "refurbishing clothes." She commented that "no talent has been so useful or given me so much unmixed satisfaction as the rapidity of my needle now does." Anne Langton and her mother and aunt, who could well afford to hire a seamstress, spent many of their "free" hours making and re-making dresses, corsets and hats "to modern dimensions" in addition to
manufacturing curtains and furniture covers. Obviously at some distance from the nearest seamstress, the Langton women not only “got up” their own muslins (with arrowroot as a substitute for starch) but Anne also made “an attack upon [her] corsets ... and [I] feel a little appalled at the difficulties before me.” Although Anne acknowledged that “I am no mantua-maker,” she nonetheless persisted.

For women who lived in the colony’s growing towns and villages, their skill with a needle could provide some much needed cash. Sewing, like teaching, was a recognized female trade and a skilled seamstress often pursued her craft after she married. In various Upper Canadian communities, many of these women worked from home; others shared their husbands’ shops and often client families. Mrs Isaac Robinson of York, for example, made hats and bonnets from her husband’s tailoring shop. There were a few women needleworkers - milliners, bonnet, dress and mantua-makers and others - who established their own businesses. By the 1830s, residents of Kingston, York and other Upper Canadian villages and towns could buy ready-made or made to measure outfits for the whole family. Some of these establishments, like Mrs Claris’ dressmaking shop in York that offered clients the “latest fashions,” were busy enough to need a number of apprentice-helpers. Mary O’Brien and her rural neighbours usually had to tackle their piles of mending themselves. This often had to wait, however, until inclement weather or dusk brought them indoors.

“Keeping house” in Upper Canada also meant “keeping” outdoors. Although men worked the fields, women regularly assumed much of the work associated with actual food production. Mary O’Brien enjoyed working in her garden. In addition to being an important source of food for the table, it beckoned as a place to relax away from the demands of the kitchen. However, time and again, Mary recorded that she was “too much occupied” with other household affairs to regularly plant or weed vegetables and flowers. Looking after the children, feeding the pigs and the poultry, washing and collecting eggs, and of course, keeping house almost always had to come first. A good deal of Mary’s energy went into her dairy.

One of the first investments many Upper Canadian households made was to buy a cow. This assured the family of milk, butter and other dairy
products and once a small herd had been established, fresh meat for the pantry. In the first half of the nineteenth century, it was usually the farm wife, or her surrogate, who was responsible for managing the dairy. This included feeding and milking the cows, separating the cream and then making butter. Dairy equipment during this period was primitive, and working conditions - churning in the kitchen-parlour or on the porch, frequently interrupted by children - were difficult. Gradually, some farm households, with a number of hands to do the work, found that they had more milk, butter and cheese than they could consume. As historian Marjorie Cohen has persuasively illustrated, dairying was not, on its own, a commercial enterprise in Upper Canada; some wives were nonetheless able to turn their labour into cash by selling or bartering butter and cheese to neighbours, or at the nearest market. Eggs, meat and poultry too found ready markets as the colony grew.

Colonial wives took their work outdoors seriously. As the occasion and season required, even the most gentle farming wife worked beside the men in the fields. Some women found this hard to accept. "I had a hard struggle with my pride," Susanna Moodie wrote "before I would consent to render the least assistance on the farm; but reflection convinced me that I was wrong." In 1835, after three years of struggling, the Moodies' money was exhausted and "it was not only my duty to obey that call, but to exert myself to the utmost to assist my husband and help to maintain my family." Susanna and her maid dug and hoed potatoes and during harvest, and carried sheaves of wheat to the shed. Susanna concluded that "manual toil, however distasteful to those unaccustomed to it, was not after all such a dreadful hardship; ... If we occasionally suffered severe pain, we as often experienced a great pleasure and I have contemplated a well-hoed ridge of potatoes on that bush farm with as much delight as in years long past I had experienced in examining fine paintings in some well-appointed drawing room."

It is somewhat ironic that Susanna Moodie and many other middle class British women considered field work "manual toil" and yet, by implication, would not have described their work as mothers, housekeepers and gardeners in this way. But, to Moodie, the necessity of working in the fields symbolized a fall in class and standing. It went against all her experiences and her expectations of the proper conduct of a
Men in Upper Canada often had to leave their farms for varying lengths of time. Some left to find waged work in the bush, on the roads, or canals or on someone else’s farm. Others went away as part of their service in the militia, and this drew many men away during the War of 1812 and the Rebellions of 1837-38. Beasts still had to be tended and fields planted or harvested. Shortly after her marriage, Mary O’Brien began overseeing the farm work while Edward was away superintending the opening of a new settlement. Mary’s journal makes frequent and matter-of-fact notations of her “various jobs in charge” - including managing a number of male workers. Initially, she was conscious that the workmen resented taking instructions from the mistress of the house. They “look rather disposed to laugh at my interference, so I took care to look as undismayed as possible,” she wrote in July 1831 but she was determined “to establish [her] character of being a good managing body.” By the end of that summer, Mary had not only established her authority but she had gained the workers’ respect.

Even while acting as a surrogate household head, Mary O’Brien had to cope with her “own” work. In an entry in her journal, Mary recorded a typical day while Edward was away. “I was up as soon as the day dawned to give Connally [the hired man] a message.” The first thing she noticed was that it was raining, “so I dispatch another to fetch home a stray pig & go into the barn to see if Hunt is going on right with his job.” She then went to the dairy, “to skim & arrange milk - all this time the baby is in bed awake playing.” Her mother and niece were also in bed, though Mary’s maid, Elora, “is cleaning the house & getting breakfast for both parties.” As the baby was getting restless, Mary dressed him, and took him with her to the barn to check on Hunt again. Then “we have prayers & go to breakfast whilst Flora is gone to milk.” After breakfast, Mary sent the man who had come back without the pig off to try again. Before dinner (the early afternoon meal) Mary, now accompanied by
her infant son, made three more trips to the barn to supervise Hunt and the two thrashers who had arrived. She also helped "Flora to strain the cream into the churn," gave her niece, Mary, a lesson, looked again at the thrashers, and checked on her favorite sow and her new litter. After dinner, she churned butter which would "not come," gave Mary a lesson in geography, made tea, sewed "a little," helped Flora with her evening chores and went to bed.

Mary would have found it next to impossible to run her household, look after the children and take Edward's place as farm manager without help from Flora, a young Scottish woman who had presented herself at Mary's door in January 1831. Other than references in Mary's journal, we know next to nothing of who Flora was or her life before or after she lived with the O'Briens. What we do know is that Flora was young, (probably under twenty-one); she was single; she was a recent immigrant from the Isle of Mull; and her family lived in the area. We also know that for months, Flora was a trusted and treasured member of the O'Brien household. In exchange for board and a small wage, Flora (like many others in her situation) did the domestic work that Mary and other colonial mistresses had not the time, or the inclination, to do themselves, but that was still essential for the continued well-being of the family.

"Helping" was a respectable way for a young girl to supplement her family's income, to relieve her parents of having to support her, and sometimes to learn valuable housekeeping skills before her own marriage. Not all helps were young and single. Older and widowed women too sought domestic waged work, often in exchange for a home and some limited security. And for the wives of newly arrived settlers, small farmers, rural artisans and landless labourers, "helping" on either a full or part time basis was one way to supplement their families' income while maintaining their own homes.

Extant diaries and journals indicate that there was considerable demand for "helps" in Upper Canada. A common complaint throughout the colony was the difficulty in finding "a girl," and getting a "good" girl, like Mary O'Brien's Flora, was next to impossible. "One of the troubles of the backwoods," Anne Langton observed in 1833 was "so much expense and lost time in hunting" for a help. Mistresses and masters would travel for
miles and often spend days, looking for someone to help them at home. Mary O'Brien was frequently frustrated and vexed by the situation. She and other colonial mistresses preferred to engage a local girl - someone whom they knew, they could trust, and was already familiar with the work. This was not always possible, however. Some rural employers placed advertisements in local newspapers; others turned to family members and friends for recommendations.

The apparent paucity of domestic help meant that those looking for such work had some (albeit limited) power to negotiate the terms of their employment. Although many needed a home, or their families needed the extra income, "the girl" also knew that her prospective employer needed her services. Many young women expected to have a number of situations before they married; thus, if, and when, a girl became restless or dissatisfied with her situation, she usually did not hesitate to leave, fairly confident that she would be able to find another position when she wanted to re-enter the workforce. Moreover, these women domestic workers were determined to maintain their status as "helps" and not servants and they expected to work with, and not just for their mistresses. The fact remains, however, that Flora probably had few other employment options other than some form of domestic work. Moreover, helps' wages remained low until at least 1850, and if working full-time, a girl could only expect to receive between three and four dollars a month plus her room and board, or less than a third of what a man could earn.

The work expected of the help depended to a large degree upon the woman's age and her particular skills and ability. Girls, like daughters or sisters, could mind the children, help prepare meals and see that dinner did not end up in the fire prematurely. They also assisted with cleaning the house and washing clothes. A young "damsel" had to be supervised and often taught how to do many tasks, however. For example, when Kitty came to the Langtons in November 1838, she was a "strong and stout" fourteen year old, who, Anne believed was "very capable of being made a good servant." Five months later, Anne was pleased with Kitty's work. "I do not think many girls of fourteen would have done as well for us this winter as she has done." But, Anne continued, "Not that her capabilities are anything very great except in the cleaning way, and she is a capital scrubber, and so stout and strong that one did not feel that
a little hard-working occasionally would do her any harm, as one would have done with most girls."

An industrious and skilled girl, like Mary O'Brien's Flora, was of real assistance to her mistress. Within a week of her arrival, Flora had settled into the routine. She helped cook and Mary recorded "is so active that I am not only obliged to resign to her all my accustomed share of the household duties but to teach her to read lest she should suffer from ennui." As Mary entered the last trimester of her first pregnancy, Flora assumed more and more of the household management. After the birth of Mary's second child, Flora not only helped look after the children, but as Mary explained to her family, did not give her "room to spend time in householdry if I wished it."

Flora and Mary obviously worked well together. When Flora was periodically away visiting her family, Mary either tried to manage on her own or hired the wife of a neighbor to replace her temporarily. Neither arrangement was satisfactory. Over Christmas 1831, for example, Mary stated emphatically, "I wish I had Flora back, the outrageous piece of mortality I have to supply her is a tissue of blunders." When Flora left the O'Briens for good in September 1832, three weeks after Mary's latest confinement, Mary complained that even with the help of a second young girl, Amelia, she was swamped with work.

Flora appears to have been able to turn her hand to anything; many girls were not so versatile. Mistresses tried to capitalize on whatever skills their helps possessed. One of the girls who replaced Flora in 1832 was apparently capable with a needle and Mary willingly relinquished her work basket. If a girl showed facility with livestock, she might become the dairy maid, responsible for tending the cattle, milking and making butter. Yet, in most colonial households, the help's work, like that of the wife, was undifferentiated. Helps were wage-earning home-makers, who could and were expected to turn their attention to any and all tasks normally undertaken by the farm wife or daughter, assuming all the while that the mistress would do her share. Anne Langton recorded in 1840 "we ladies are as busy as the servants rubbing furniture, etc... You lose no respect in such exertions." Comparing the attitudes in Britain and in Upper Canada to such activities, Anne continued, "here one of our domestics would be surprised and perhaps think herself a little ill-used if, in any extra bustle we should be sitting in our drawing room. They are apt to think it quite right that we should be taking our due share."
and are certainly our "helps"... I cannot perceive that anything like disrespect is engendered by the relative position of mistress and maid." This was perhaps the essence of many domestic work relationships particularly in rural Upper Canada. "The girl" was more than hired help. She was also the daughter, sister or wife of a neighbour and, although her pay was meager, her treatment "reflected her status as a member of another family." She and her employer shared much of the housework and often shared whatever leisure time they could steal from the day's activities.

Yet, working with her mistress, being treated to some degree as one of the family and, in some cases, even joining the children at their lessons never completely erased the difference in status and authority between the two. The girl was, after all, an employee and she was subject to the disciplines and rhythms of another's household. Although arrangements were often relatively informal, working for long hours in the restricted space of the colonial house, and under the constant supervision of one's employer inevitably led to periodic friction and resentment. Girls chafed when mistresses "looked over their shoulders" to ensure that the work was done to their satisfaction. Susanna Moodie's maid must have laughed quietly to herself when her mistress had difficulties with the washing or making bread.

Tensions within colonial households were relieved, momentarily at least, when the girl was given or took a few days off. The O'Briens' help were "away" on some Sundays, for part of another day each month and usually for high holidays like Christmas or the New Year. Colonial farm diaries and account books record that the help also received time off as demanded, even if it was not convenient. In August 1831, Flora received word that her brother was ill and as Mary recorded, "I could not but send her off to see him." Although there were occasions when a girl's behavior was considered so outrageous that she was discharged for being "unfit" or "unsuitable," a help's apparent incompetence or inability to do the work were not usually considered sufficient grounds for dismissal. Even a girl like Anne Langton's Bridget, who Anne judged shortly after she was engaged in August 1839 as being "thoroughly useless," was better than no girl. As Anne explained to her brother in Britain, "We continue ... to like her and therefore must consider ourselves comparatively well off."
Bridget stayed with the Langtons until March 1840. When she finally left, of her own accord, Anne recorded that though "her deficiencies were many," she had remained with them "something longer than any other we have had." Moreover, she did have "some good points for which I regret her.

Anne Langton's "girls" themselves sometimes received help. When there was extra work to be done - like spring cleaning or preparations for a large social event - Anne approached the wife of a neighbour to help out. In 1838, Mrs Daniels was prevailed upon to "oblige" the Langton household "for a grand day of scrubbing." "She promises to come," Anne commented, "though she seems a little overwhelmed with business herself as they had killed an ox a day or two before and ... I know well from my own experience how much labour there is in turning head, heels, tallow, etc all to the best account." When Bridget left the Langton's with only a day's notice, neighbour and "friend in need, Mary Scarry" arrived "to see us over our party tonight" and Sally Jordan, one of Anne's neighbour's daughters came part time until a servant could be found. Sally Jordan worked on and off for the Langtons for almost two years. When Sally married, Anne was delighted for her, but acknowledged that "we shall miss her very much. There is no other person near us who can come and lend us a helping hand on every occasion." Anne need not have worried. Sally Jordan, now Mrs Woods, continued to be the Langton's "help in need" for some months after her wedding.

While Sally Jordan's and Mary Scarry's willingness to help Anne Langton was probably, in part at least, a result of that sense of community which prevailed among rural women, they also expected to be paid for their work. So too did the unnamed wives of Edward O'Brien's labourers, who periodically obliged Mary and relieved her "from some of my usual associations." In their mistresses' diaries, these women were almost always referred to formally by their married names, reflecting their status as married women, with their own households. Moreover, neighbourhood women who were engaged to perform specific household tasks received a wage commensurate with their age, their skills and the length of their contracts. A woman who cleaned for a week could receive as much as two dollars and her board, more than twice the rate of a live-in girl. A woman hired especially to sew, or to act as a nurse or mid-wife.
received even higher wages. Even those doing heavy domestic work - washing or cleaning house on a daily or part-time basis - were better paid than the girl. They also had the advantage of living in their own homes or shanties and retaining a crucial element of privacy and independence not available to live-in help. Some women were engaged as part of a couple on the understanding that while their husbands worked in the fields, they would help with whatever else needed to be done. Such arrangements worked well for both the employer and the employees. For slightly more than the wages of a single man, farmers gained the services of two adults. For a young couple, working for a year or two on someone else's farm allowed them to accumulate the capital necessary to purchase or lease land of their own.

As the American historian Faye Dudden has concluded, "although money changed hands, helping" in Upper Canada, as in the United States, "was not primarily a market transaction," nor was it restricted to rural parts of the colony. It was a personal arrangement between neighbours and sometimes friends, whether in towns and villages or on the farm, that was an integral part of that network of community support that was so important in women's lives. Helping was also a transaction whose terms and parameters were fundamentally shaped by the life-cycle of both parties. Wives, mothers and housekeepers needed help. When daughters were too young, and sisters, mothers or other family members not available, women turned to other women, either unpaid or paid, for assistance. For their part, girls considered joining another household when their labour was not needed at home or they needed to support themselves. Wives worked for wages as the financial needs of their families demanded and the domestic work of their own households permitted.

Not all colonial households wanted helps; and not all working women were willing to accept such undifferentiated, and most often poorly paid domestic work. In Upper Canada's principal communities, a small but highly influential group of households aspired to a standard of living that was well beyond the imagination of most colonists. Although Helen Macaulay and Mary O'Brien came from similar backgrounds and both were wives and mothers, their lives and their work were often markedly different. Mary was a farmer's wife; Helen was a society matron.
The Society Matron and Her Household

When Helen Macaulay married John, she became a member of one of the first families of Upper Canada. And when the family moved from Kingston to York in the fall of 1837, Helen entered the rarified world of Upper Canada's "high" society. As a society wife, Helen was expected to entertain John's colleagues and associates and dress and comport herself in such a way as to maintain his status as a gentleman of property and standing. Within days or her arrival, Helen was receiving guests and making calls; within weeks, she was fully involved in a host of social activities.

We do not know how Helen viewed the upper class world in York. Anna Jameson who arrived in Upper Canada a few months earlier to join her husband, Robert, the Attorney General, told something of her experiences in her published travel account, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*. Although the couple had been separated for seven years, Anna had come to the colony to provide her husband with the appearance of respectability which the small, self-conscious society of Upper Canada demanded of its leading members. It was very important for Robert Jameson, who in February 1837 was promoted to the position of Vice Chancellor of Upper Canada, to have his wife running his home and publicly by his side. Anna Jameson had not really known what to expect when she came to the colony. "But I will tell you what I did not expect," she wrote. "I did not expect to find here in this new capital of a new country, with the boundless forest within half a mile of us on almost every side - concentrated as it were the worst evils of our old and most artificial social system at home." York, she wrote, was "like a fourth or fifth provincial town with the pretensions of a Capital. We have here a petty colonial oligarchy, a self-constituted aristocracy, based on nothing real, or even upon anything imaginary." Imaginary or not, society matrons, like Anna and Helen were expected to play their part in maintaining York's upper-class "society."

The first order of business after a society matron had arrived in York was the official "calls." Anna Jameson undoubtedly called on the wife of the Lieutenant Governor almost immediately. But as befitted a person of her rank, "all the other official gentlemen" and their ladies, who were Anna's
social equals or inferiors first called on her and as she recorded "have properly and politely left their cards." Although Anna returned each ceremonial call promptly, she found the rituals of arrival a nuisance. She, and later Helen knew, however, that it was a duty that could not be avoided. Calling established a woman's place in the social order and set the parameters of her public life that would prevail for as long as the family lived in York. Many influential women enjoyed the rituals and some enforced the rules of society zealously.

Once initial visits were made and returned, the wives of the elite settled into their work of entertaining, attending public events and doing good works. Official Upper Canadian society prided itself on its public functions. At least once each year, the Lieutenant Governor and his wife hosted a formal ball. There was also the annual New Year's levee, at which all dressed in their best; and of course there was a round of dances and formal dinners. Such formal events were opportunities for friends and associates to meet and to share their concerns and delights. Invitations were coveted; attendance was expected. These were more than social occasions. Formal protocol was carefully preserved by, among other things, the seating arrangements, the lengths of conversations and who dance with whom.

Hosting a ball, a levee, dance or a formal at-home required considerable preparation and hard work on the part of all members of the household. While staying with the Macaulays early in 1838 to help Helen after her second confinement, Helen's sister-in-law, Anne, attended a party at Mrs Sherwood's. In a letter to her mother-in-law, Anne reported that "Mrs Sherwood was a very good hostess." There were a large crowd of people at the event. "A receiving room had been established and there were two dancing rooms, a card room and a supper room." Anne concluded that "a great deal of trouble" had gone into preparing for the event. Even small dinners and soirees required careful preparation. Food had to be purchased and cooked; wine and other beverages made ready; musicians had to be hired; and the house had to be thoroughly cleaned. Even for those who only attended such events, the continual round of entertainment must have been exhausting. It was also expensive. John Macaulay noted in 1840 that being at least five months pregnant, "Helen cannot at present think of every amusement, but must take
care of herself." John explained to his mother that he and Helen had given up serious entertaining anyway. "My salary will not admit of it & I shall not run into the follies of some of my neighbors." For all of John's determination not to run into debt and to preserve Helen's health, neither he nor Helen could avoid all social activities. As he told his mother, he and Helen had given at least two formal dinner parties in the previous three weeks. They had also "received" a number of John's colleagues, who had been served tea and wine in the parlour. Helen always had to be ready to receive and entertain various members of York society. Her "private" world of hearth and home was also very much a public space.

To her less well-heeled neighbors, Helen might have appeared a woman of leisure. She could afford to, and did, buy household goods from local merchants, and from agents in Montreal or New York. Although the family kept a garden, Helen's cook regularly went to the local market for food stuffs. Helen did not scrub her own floors, prepare meals or tend livestock and sometimes, she did not even have to look after her own children. She and her family lived in a big house, specially built and equipped to meet her family's many needs. In addition to a dining room and a drawing room, on the main floor there was a well equipped kitchen, a convenient pantry and a small utility room for storing and cleaning boots and shoes. Upstairs, in addition to the family's bedrooms, there were separate quarters for the servants.

Yet, Helen Macaulay was still a wife and mother and her "big house" was also a family home. It was Helen's responsibility, as wife and household manager, to ensure that the family was fed, the house kept clean and the children cared for. Running an upper class household in Upper Canada required considerable skill and endless patience. It also required sufficient income to dress well, to entertain John's colleagues (as well as family friends) and to pay the wages of servants who were needed to make the household function properly. Balancing her public duties, as society matron, with her responsibilities to family was, at the best of times, difficult and Helen certainly would not have considered her life carefree and frivolous.

Helen Macaulay's York home was, like Mary O'Brien's farm house, a domestic workplace. But Helen Macaulay did not want, or need, "help;"
she needed servants. A well run upper class household in Upper Canada had a cook, at least one other woman to help with the housework and perhaps serve as a maid and, if there were young children in the house, an additional nurse maid or governess. Usually, the family also employed a man servant to act as butler and if they could afford it, a second man to look after the garden and do other outside work. As finances allowed and their households' political and social commitments increased, affluent women supplemented their "parlour" staff with additional workers. At the time of her confinement in 1840, Helen Macaulay had a cook and at least two housemaids, a nurse-governess for the children and at least one man servant. Helen's mother-in-law who lived "alone" in Kingston kept two maids and a full time gardener.

Finding suitable servants caused society matrons considerable anxiety. In the earliest years of settlement, what was termed "the servant problem" was partly resolved by the availability of slave labour - African-American women and men who had arrived with Loyalist families and who, even after the first Lieutenant Governor, John Graves Simcoe, abolished slavery in the colony, remained the property of their masters. But by 1800, most elite households relied on "free" labour to meet their domestic needs. A growing number of immigrants seemed eager to go into service after 1820, but colonial mistresses continued to complain about "the want of good servants." When she was first setting up house in York, Helen was fortunate that she had a choice of cooks. John reported that there were two candidates: Elizabeth Haye who had two years experience with Colonel Foster and excellent character references; Catharine Purcell who had experience with the Drapers and though she would not do washing, John commented that "I like her appearance." Sometimes, there was no one who met the family's requirements. Helen then turned to family members for a recommendation. In 1839, she went so far as to ask her mother-in-law to give up her own personal maid, Flora, although she reassured her mother-in-law that "I have no wish to get her without you would rather give than keep her." Ann must have been rather startled. Flora did not go to York and Helen was forced to look elsewhere.

Helen could have looked in the local newspapers for possible candidates. Particularly after the War of 1812, there were a growing number of
women of apparently good character and with varying degrees of experience looking for domestic work. Young, unattached women sought situations as "a cook or House Maid," or "a general indoor servant." Others wanted a more elevated position as a lady's maid, a children's maid or a general nurse. There were also notices from older, often widowed women seeking positions as cooks, cook-housekeepers or governesses. These women obviously did not consider themselves common servants. And they were clearly hoping to gain situations where their skills would be appreciated or their age and experience recognized. Some, according to their advertisements were "ladies" who had fallen on hard times and they were looking for personal security and a home. In 1832, for example, Mrs Lyons, a widow "without any encumbrance" wanted "a situation to superintend the management of a small family or assist in Needlework or make herself generally useful." Two years later, a widow "capable of acting as a Housekeeper, or to take charge of a nursery," was most direct in her objectives. "Has no objection to Town or Country," the notice stated; "a respectable and permanent situation being the principle object of the Advertiser," salary was also of secondary consideration.

But responding to a notice of a hopeful employee, or even placing a "servant wanted" notice herself would have been unseemly for someone of Helen Macaulay's elevated social status. So too would have been approaching one of the growing number of "employment agencies" that existed in all colonial centers by the 1830s. Many colonists did carefully peruse the lists of new immigrants who had registered at an "intelligence office for servants," however. While others placed "help wanted" notices in local newspapers. Some offered liberal wages to respectable women who would, for example, work as "a maid of all work in a family of moderate size", or undertake to cook. A number explicitly stated that only English or Scottish girls should reply; others were more concerned about a woman's willingness to work. The tenor of these advertisements suggests that they were placed by small families who required, or could only afford, one servant. This was not the type of servant that the Macaulays needed. Moreover, the Macaulay correspondence indicates that Helen always wanted to engage someone who came personally recommended, in addition to having a particular skill.
Hiring staff was only the beginning of Helen's responsibilities. Servants had to be managed and supervised and sometimes trained to work at their appointed tasks. Local newspapers and "household guides," published in Great Britain and the United States offered some advice on this. A short excerpt reprinted in one York newspaper from *The English Housekeeper* told colonial mistresses that "servants, like children and indeed like all dependents may be made good or bad; you may, by your management, cause them to be nearly what you please." The reader was reminded that servants were from the laboring classes. Not only would they have different and usually somewhat lower moral standards than their employers, but they were almost always lazy, vexatious and dishonest. The mistress had to forestall maids' apparently inherent "temptations to be dishonest" and insist on the highest standards of work and behavior. And mistresses were constantly reminded that though they resided in the same house, servants were employees who worked for, and not with, their mistresses. From the time they first took up their positions, maids and cooks were left in little doubt about this.

While the family worked and played in the parlour and the dining room and had spacious and well-lit and heated bedrooms, the servants lived and worked in the kitchen or at the back of the house or in the garret. The distance between the society matron and her domestic employees was accentuated by servants' dress. In 1830, Mary O'Brien told of calling at a "very handsome house" just outside York. She was met at the door by "a not very smart maid servant." Mary noted that "this ... was perhaps [an] accident, as I believe the establishment of the house includes men in livery." Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, it is likely that only a few of the most affluent colonial households required their staff to be in uniform. A servant's appearance was important, nevertheless, for it made a statement not only about the relative affluence and importance of the family for whom they worked but also the mistress's ability as a household manager. When Helen paid and received formal calls in the infinite social routines of York or Kingston, it was the maid who first opened the door to receive visitors or, on her mistress's instructions, took their cards. It was the maid and perhaps the butler who formally served guests often elaborately prepared meals. Servants often were the first public face of an upper class household and their appearance and demeanor were important. As Faye Dudden has
written, servants in affluent colonial households were "buffers, transmitters and facilitators" of their employers' social status. They gave their mistresses a crucial element of control over their lives; they also enabled elite women to participate fully in society outside of the household.

Domestic servants were much more than symbols. They were first and foremost workers. Even within a relatively large staff, the days were long and onerous. In 1840, the Macaulay's house maid, Sarah, worked from morning until nine o'clock each night. The cook and the children's nurse, Elinore, undoubtedly kept similar hours. The cook (who Helen never named), Sarah and Elinore appear to have had relatively well defined responsibilities. Cook prepared meals, kept the kitchen clean and may have been responsible for the marketing. She undoubtedly had the most up-to-date equipment, including a new stove; but she was also expected to produce intricate and varied multi-course meals for an indeterminate number of guests or elaborate teas and confections for visiting ladies. Sarah was the housemaid; in addition to answering the door, she did much of the general cleaning, helped serve meals and generally made herself useful. Elinore's primary responsibility was looking after Annie and little Helen; in her "spare time," she also helped with dusting and other cleaning.

To the outside world, a "good" servant was an anonymous, impersonal household fixture - efficient, characterless and often faceless. Elite mistresses knew all too well that a good servant was a valuable asset, however, and they went to some trouble to keep them. Helen Macaulay ensured that her servants had proper bedding and clothes, enough to eat at meals and medical attention, when needed. When the cook or maid became restless or unhappy, the mistress often made special arrangements to entice her to stay. She might offer her a higher wage or time off. In 1840, Helen Macaulay began to look for an additional maid when Sarah complained that she had too much to do.

For Helen Macaulay and other elite mistresses, the benefits of a good servant did not offset the frustration and, at times, serious distress that a bad servant could evoke. A maid or cook's deficiencies could not only make life very uncomfortable for residents of the big house, but they also impinged on their mistresses' ability to entertain or to perform her
other duties. For example, while Helen was confined in the spring of 1840 after the birth of the triplets, her sister-in-law, Anne, reported to the family in Kingston that, "Helen's cook & a stout woman Rose I think, as two regular thieves ... took advantage of their mistress's illness to purloin all they could while they had not even the grace to cook John a good dinner." The two servant women were subsequently discharged; sister-in-law, Anne, and Helen's sister temporarily filled the breach.

What to employers was a servant problem was to many domestic waged workers a problem with the mistress. Maids or cooks resented taking instructions from a mistress who they believed was "no better than themselves" or did not know how particular tasks should best be performed. Helen Macaulay's Sarah, the cook and other servants in elite homes must also have "often resented their use in status competition" so endemic to York society. Moreover, they were undoubtedly frustrated that guests meant more work with no extra pay and often no acknowledgment of their performance. Aware of their employers' latent distrust and perhaps, even more, of the wide economic and social gulf that separated the elite mistress and her maids, it is not surprising that servants attempted to take whatever advantage of the situation they could. As in the country, servants in town avoided certain tasks and "stole" time for themselves. Many also undoubtedly tried to work at their own pace. Indeed, diaries and letters of exasperated upper class women suggest that domestic workers continually resisted the implications of being "in service."

Given the mistress's dependence on her servants and the difficulty of finding good ones, a servant in an elite household did have some bargaining power. Servants complained and some refused to do certain kinds of work. When the domestic situation became too difficult or onerous, servants could and did leave, often without explanation. Upper class women never really became resigned to this and they clearly resented what they considered a servant's lack of loyalty. The only consolation was that they were not alone in this dilemma. Moreover, periodic difficulties within the household did not stop elite women from being actively involved in the world outside their homes -supporting and promoting the interests of their husbands and, as befitted persons of their class, doing good works.
One of the traditional roles of all good wives in Upper Canada was to be a Christian neighbour. Throughout the nineteenth century colonial women were encouraged to promote, both at home and abroad, the lessons of the scriptures and an acceptance of God’s divine purpose. Those who could afford to, like the Macaulays, were also expected to give to the poor and succour the unfortunate. As the colony grew after the War of 1812, increasing numbers of immigrants began to arrive, private charity was not enough. Many immigrants were arriving destitute and helpless; a growing proportion of the population faced seasonal unemployment; and there were an increasing number of reports of women and children being abandoned or abused by drunken and dissipated men. Local churches and various ethnic societies - like the St Andrew's and St George's Societies - did what they could to alleviate the distress. Concerned citizens and community and church leaders also began to establish various organizations to address the growing and potentially threatening social problems. Society matrons and middle class women quickly became engaged in what came to be considered the moral and social crusade to reform their communities.

Initially, as befitted persons of their sex, prominent women worked silently and in the shadows of their husbands and fathers who organized Bible, missionary, emigrant aid and benevolent societies. Yet the same ideology which promoted “separate spheres” also asserted that mothers had a duty to safeguard and promote social morality, to care for the infirm, to nurse the sick and to comfort the distressed. By the early 1820s, the wives, mothers and daughters of some of the best families in the colony began to establish their own benevolent societies. Helen Macaulay's mother-in-law, Ann, was a founding member of the Female Benevolent Society of Kingston, which raised funds and distributed goods to poor families; within a year of its establishment, the women of Kingston had opened a hospital to care for those who had no other place to go.

The women of Kingston (and soon those in other communities) who were actively involved in these societies took their work very seriously. The members of the Female Benevolent Society held regular formal meetings in each others' homes; they elected an executive from within their own ranks; they appealed to the public for donations; and made annual,
public reports of their activities. To ensure that the donations they so assiduously collected and administered were used wisely, they also visited the poor in their homes and only provided clothes and food to those who were "deserving" and most in need. In addition to organizing bazaars and teas and lectures to raise money, by the 1840s, they began to appeal to the colonial legislature for public funds. On the face of it, these activities challenged the prescriptions of domesticity that called for women to live and work in the private sphere; yet this was work that was "fitting" and indeed required of a "good" wife and mother. Individual and organized benevolence was an extension of the work that women performed on behalf of their own families. Charitable societies also helped to create a new community of women, one that was separate from their households and that rested on common understandings of their social responsibility and shared concerns for others. This community was not egalitarian, however; with society matrons as members of the executive or honorary patrons, organized women's benevolence reinforced differences of class and status.

Without the financial resources to hire servants to look after their children, or to cook and keep their houses, most women in Upper Canada did not have the time to devote to such work. Many women, including Mary O'Brien did teach Sunday School and contributed items to be sold at benefit bazaars in York. And in the 1830s and 1840s, women of various classes supported local temperance societies, subscribed to missionary or benevolent associations, and supported various other causes. But, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, most women were preoccupied with looking after their own households. Being a wife, mother and housekeeper was a full time occupation. This was particularly the case for working class women - the wives of artisans, mechanics, poor farmers, and laborers - who were periodically obliged, or chose, to take on waged work to help support their families.

Women and the Economy

When Helen Macaulay moved to York, the bustling capital was the home of hundreds of women who were not just consumers, but also producers of both goods and services. While they waited for their new home to be renovated, the Macaulay's may have stayed at Mr and Mrs Grieg's Hotel.
Not far away were Mrs Owen's boarding house and the York Hotel, which was owned and operated by widow Jane Jordan and had been a local landmark for better than a decade. There was also a number of skilled craftswomen who ran, and sometimes owned their own businesses. Helen had no problem finding a suitable girl's school for Annie; if she chose, she could have outfitted herself and the children at one of any number of dress, bonnet and millinery shops.

From the beginning of settlement, women in Upper Canada were an integral part of the formal as well as the informal economy. Both in the country and in towns and villages, wives were working partners in their husbands' businesses; daughters often served as assistants; and a number of widows tried to carry on the family business on their own. Working class wives also frequently took in boarders; as has been discussed, some sold their motherly skills and became teachers, or marketed housekeeping skills and mended, washed clothes or sewed for paying customers. At some point in their lives, thousands of working class women went into domestic service in someone else's home. There was also a small group of women (who usually only appeared in the court records) who took to the streets, or opened bawdy houses or houses of ill-repute, and offered their sexual services to willing male patrons. As one British historian has noted, in pre-industrial economies, like that of Upper Canada, "any task was suitable" for a woman "as long as it furthered the good of the family" and if she was married, it "was accepted by her husband." And Upper Canadian women moved into and out of the waged labour force as their needs or the needs of their families demanded.

Jane Jordan, Mrs Owen, women school teachers, milliners and dozens of other skilled craftswomen provided goods and services that residents of York and other colonial centers wanted and needed. Jane Jordan, for example, who ran her hotel under various names from 1817 to the early 1840s, provided residents and travelers with meals, lodging and drink. Itinerant businessmen used her parlour as a temporary shop; locals joined visitors in the bar to read the newspaper and to discuss local affairs. It is clear that although Jane Jordan seemed to be just selling her skills as a homemaker, she must also have been an accomplished manager and businesswoman. She supervised a small staff, bought
supplies at the local market and oversaw the work of builders who undertook the various renovations of the hotel. And Jane was but one of many women who knew how to negotiate the public world of the marketplace.

Only a relatively few women had the financial resources, skills and the personal confidence to both embark on what could be a risky enterprise and be so successful. Advertisements and notices in local newspapers suggest that most women's businesses were short-lived. Some merchants, craftsmen and female proprietors clearly intended to run their business or pursue their craft only until they remarried, or the family business was more financially secure. Other women seeking to sell their skills as homemakers never advertised, but gained their custom from contacts they made on the streets or as a result of their reputations. We know of them through comments in their customers' diaries or notices of the dissolution of their businesses. But their services were obviously needed and their skills appreciated. And together with their competitors, they were involved in the common commerce of the colony.

Given the small size of York in the late 1830s, it would not be surprising if Jane Jordan, school mistress Mrs Cockburn and Helen Macaulay had at least a nodding acquaintance. Mary O'Brien would certainly have known of Helen Macaulay, even if she had never called on her, and in her infrequent visits to the capital, Mary may have bought a bonnet from the Misses Rankin and Chestnut or considered staying at the York Hotel. But even if these women were complete strangers, they would have had some appreciation of the others' lives and work. At the most basic level, they shared the concerns and expectations of the work that accompanied being wife and mother. Even Anne Langton, who never married, knew the problems and the satisfaction of running a house and teaching children. She also understood the work that went into bonnet making and later in life, she would have appreciated Helen Macaulay's concerns with her servants.

Although women's experiences and their work varied, often significantly, depending on where they lived, their financial situation and their marital status, all colonial women were part of communities whose memberships were determined, in part at least, by their sex and the expectations of those about them. For most women, the most basic community was their
immediate family. Then came communities that linked neighboring households, or whose membership rested on class or religion or shared concerns and interests. These different communities of women were almost always interdependent. Mistresses depended on their helps or servants, and domestic workers needed their wages and often a home. Bonnet and dress makers and midwives depended on the custom of middle and upper class women to ply their trade. But these women also shared a common understanding of their place in the social and economic order and whether as wife, mother, school mistress or scullery maid, their work was, and was recognized, as being essential to the survival of not only their families but of the colony itself.
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