

## **Class, Job and Gender in the Canadian Office**

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## ARTICLES

### Class, Job and Gender in the Canadian Office

Graham S. Lowe

ONE OF THE MOST PERPLEXING issues facing students of capitalist development is the impact of economic change on the class structure of a society. Since the late-nineteenth century, the advancing capitalist division of labour has created new occupations as quickly as it has discarded old ones. This rise and decline of occupational groups has, in turn, recharted the map of class configurations and cleavages with, of course, major political implications. Marx's vision of a dichotomous class system comprised of workers and capitalists has thus not been borne out. What has especially confounded Marx's predictions in this regard is the growth of a huge white-collar labour force occupying a middle terrain between the two principal classes. Where to locate the white-collar masses in the class structure has been a persistent source of debate in twentieth-century political and social theory.<sup>1</sup> The focal point of the debate is clerical employees, whose particularly ambiguous socio-economic status would appear to give them a foot in both working and middle classes. The erosion of the clerks' relative wage position, their growing unionization, and the factory-like conditions in many offices may be taken as proof of their descent into the working class. But at the same time, one can point to the clerks' greater mobility prospects, life style differences, and generally more favourable working environment than blue-collar workers as indicative of middle classness. In short, the question of whether clerks are the new proletarians or members of a white-collar middle class is far from resolved.

<sup>1</sup> For overviews of the pertinent literature, see Adam Przeworski, "Proletariat into A Class: The Process of Class Transformation From Karl Kautsky's *The Class Struggle* to Recent Controversies," *Politics and Society*, 7(1977), 343-401; M.P. Kelly, *White-Collar Proletariat: The Industrial Behaviour of British Civil Servants* (London 1980), 6-24; A. Stewart, K. Prandy and R.M. Blackburn, *Social Stratification and Occupations* (London 1980), 91-113.

Graham Lowe, "Class, Job, and Gender in the Canadian Office," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 10 (Autumn 1982), 11-37.

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The proletarianization thesis represents the most concerted attempt to account for the class position of the clerk. Neo-marxists use the concept of proletarianization to describe the deterioration of white-collar working conditions and relative pay advantages over manual workers.<sup>2</sup> The proletarianization thesis derives its empirical support from historical wage trends and changes in the labour process. Advocates of the thesis posit a direct relationship between the development of rationalized office bureaucracies, a deterioration of clerical wages and working conditions, and the movement of clerical workers as a group into the working class. Income is the most widely used measure of the declining class position of the clerk. The general convergence of clerical and manual earnings since the turn of the century in western capitalist societies is adduced as solid evidence of the destruction of the clerks' once superior socio-economic position.<sup>3</sup> This is usually augmented by a description of the progressive rationalization of administration, such as Braverman's well known account of the degradation of clerical work.<sup>4</sup> According to Braverman, as traditional managerial functions became part of the administrative labour process they were delegated to a growing army of routine clerks and subjected to increasing rationalization, largely through mechanization and scientific management. The deskilling and regimentation of clerical tasks eliminated previous distinctions between mental and manual work. This loss of the job autonomy and skill typical of the nineteenth-century bookkeeper thus constitute the major criteria for classifying clerks as proletarians.<sup>5</sup>

Essentially the proletarianization thesis infers class location of an occupational group from its changing market and work situations. It is precisely

<sup>2</sup> Marx originally used the concept of proletarianization to explain the incorporation of the independent petit bourgeoisie into the expanding capitalist wage labour market. But because this process has now largely run its course, given that the vast majority of individuals are now propertyless employees, it is the neo-marxist version of the concept which predominates. Concise definitions of the term "proletarianization" are found in Przeworski, "Proletariat into A Class," 353-67; and Giorgio Gagliani, "How Many Working Classes?" *American Journal of Sociology*, 87(1981), 261.

<sup>3</sup> This reflects the general reduction of the income gap between white-collar and blue-collar workers in capitalist societies as documented by Colin Clark, *The Conditions of Economic Progress* (London 1940). For more detailed data pertaining to Britain and the United States see respectively, David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker* (London 1966) and R.K. Burns, "The Comparative Economic Position of Manual and White-collar Employees," *Journal of Business*, 27(1954), 257-67.

<sup>4</sup> Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (New York 1974), 293-358.

<sup>5</sup> This line of argument is found in recent contributions to neo-marxist class theory. See especially E.O. Wright, "Class Boundaries in Advanced Capitalist Societies," *New Left Review*, 98(1976), 3-41; and G. Carchedi, *On the Economic Identification of Social Classes* (London 1977). A similar but theoretically less rigorous argument is contained in Glenn and Feldberg's definition of clerical proletarianization as resulting from "changes in the organization of work designed to increase managers' control of the work process." (62) See Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Roslyn L. Feldberg, "Degraded and Deskilled: The Proletarianization of Clerical Work," *Social Problems*, 25(1977), 52-64.

because of this assumed organic link between workers' class location on one hand, and job and labour market conditions on the other that the thesis has been criticized.<sup>6</sup> One must thus bear in mind that "fluctuations in the market and work conditions of particular groups of workers are, of course, a far more common occurrence than any 'radical' shifts in their class situation..."<sup>7</sup> An equally fundamental problem with the proletarianization thesis, yet to be explored, is the tendency to overlook how changing labour market and job characteristics of clerical employees are directly tied to the dramatic shift in the sex composition of the office work force during the early-twentieth century. It is difficult to interpret the broader impact of the administrative revolution which transformed clerical work without carefully analyzing the process of feminization. This lacuna in the proletarianization debate largely reflects the dominant assumption in all forms of stratification theory that the economic and social experiences of males define the class structure.<sup>8</sup> It is thus taken for granted that females, the great majority of whom are married, depend directly on their husbands for their class position. These comments are particularly germane in the case of clerical workers; McNally, for example, observes that because of the male bias in sociological studies of work the female clerk remains something of a mystery.<sup>9</sup>

This blind-spot concerning the centrality of gender in the development of modern office work has led to three serious flaws in the clerical proletarianization thesis. In the first place, the tendency to examine wages for all workers in an occupation, rather than disaggregating data by sex, masks how the rapid influx of cheap female labour into the office depressed average salaries.<sup>10</sup> A

<sup>6</sup> There are some knotty theoretical problems, falling beyond the scope of this paper, involved in determining an individual's class position on the basis of present market situation and job characteristics. As David Lockwood reminds us in *The Blackcoated Worker*, despite the economic decline of once high-status British insurance clerks their jobs continued to offer better security, promotion opportunities, work environment, and benefits thereby socially differentiating them from manual workers. The argument that movement across class boundaries involves considerably more than changing income was first articulated in the British affluent worker studies. See John H. Goldthorpe and David Lockwood, "Affluence and the British Class Structure," *Sociological Review*, 11(1963), 133-63. A forceful elaboration of the basic point is presented by Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn, *Social Stratification and Occupations*, 91-113, as the foundation of their critique of the clerical proletarianization thesis.

<sup>7</sup> John H. Goldthorpe, "Class Mobility in Modern Britain: A Reply to Crompton," *Sociology*, 14 (1980), 122.

<sup>8</sup> For a critical discussion of the effects of this male bias see Joan Acker, "Women and Social Stratification: A Case of Intellectual Sexism," *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(1973), 932-45; and Elizabeth Garnsey, "Women's Work and Theories of Class Stratification," *Sociology*, 12(1978), 223-43.

<sup>9</sup> Fiona McNally, *Women for Hire: A Study of the Female Office Worker* (London 1979), 39.

<sup>10</sup> This point is not a new one — although it seems to have been lost sight of in the proletarianization debate — having first been enunciated by Richard Hamilton in "The Income Differences Between Skilled and White-Collar Workers," *British Journal of Sociology*, 14(1963), 363-73.

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second flaw stems from not explicitly examining the way in which office expansion and re-organization brought about a shift from a male to a female labour supply. Consequently, a defining feature of the administrative revolution is ignored: that the jobs into which women were increasingly being recruited could not be proletarianized to any great extent because most were mechanized, routinized, and generally unrewarding almost from their inception. Both oversights are evident in Braverman's analysis.<sup>11</sup> While acknowledging that declining wages and the entry of women into the office define the new clerical sector of twentieth-century monopoly capitalism, Braverman failed to explore how these two trends are interconnected. Instead, he treated clerks as an undifferentiated group and presented salary data for males and females combined to document the groups' descent into the working class. The third flaw, also found in Braverman, results from viewing clerks as a homogeneous group subjected to the all-encompassing onslaught of work rationalization. Certainly the administrative revolution wrought fundamental, enduring changes in the labour process, but the trend towards more fragmented, standardized, and regulated tasks occurred unevenly. Even within the female clerical sector there can be found pronounced differences in wages and working conditions across industries, within and among firms, and among occupational sub-groups. The proletarianization thesis, in short, does not recognize the importance of gender as a major source of change and variation within the twentieth-century office.



<sup>11</sup> Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 296-8.

In light of these weaknesses, the purpose of this paper is to advance the proletarianization debate by examining the transformation of the clerical labour market and office working conditions from the perspective of the feminization process. Focussing primarily on the administrative revolution in Canadian offices, roughly between 1900 and 1930, we will document how the segmentation of the office work force along gender lines explains many of the characteristics which the proletarianization thesis erroneously interprets as signs of the clerks' declining class position. The discussion begins with an overview of the growth and rationalization of the office during the administrative revolution. We then examine comparative wage trends for the 1901 to 1971 period, highlighting the relative positions of male and female clerks. Next, inter-firm clerical salary differences are documented through a comparison of a bank and an insurance company. Following this, evidence of variations within the office hierarchies of specific organizations is examined. A final section of the paper places wage trends within a broader socio-economic context through an analysis of cost of living data for the first three decades of the century. Concluding comments underline the necessity of incorporating gender into future studies of the class position of clerical employees.

## I

### The Growth and Rationalization of the Office

THE ASCENDANCY OF CORPORATE CAPITALISM in Canada precipitated a revolution in the means of administration.<sup>12</sup> Buoyed by the wheat boom on the western frontier, a growing population, and expanding markets, industrialization accelerated after 1900. By the end of World War I, Canada's modern industrial structure was largely in place. In both manufacturing and services the predominant form of organization became the modern corporation, a vast bureaucratic structure which separated ownership and control, delegating operating authority to specialized managers. Large administrative staffs were hired to handle the mounting flow of paper work. This expansion of the office can be traced to the growing scale and complexity of economic activity, as well as to the extension of managerial control and coordination functions. The office became the managerial nerve centre through which voluminous information vital for controlling all aspects of business was compiled, processed, and stored. Adam Smith's self-regulating market place had been eclipsed; the twentieth-century office emerged as "the 'Unseen Hand' become visible as a row of clerks and a set of IBM equipment. . . ."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See Graham S. Lowe, "The Administrative Revolution in the Canadian Office: An Overview," in Katherine L.P. Lundy and Barbara D. Warne (eds.), *Work in the Canadian Context: Continuity Despite Change* (Toronto 1981), 153-73.

<sup>13</sup> C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York 1956), 189.

TABLE 1  
GROWTH OF THE CLERICAL LABOUR FORCE,  
CANADA, 1891 - 1971\*

	Clerical workers as a percentage of total labour force	Females as a percentage of Clerical	Female clerks as a percentage of total female labour force
1891	2.0	14.3	2.3
1901	3.2	22.1	5.3
1911	3.8	32.6	9.1
1921	6.8	41.8	18.5
1931	6.7	45.1	17.7
1941	7.2	50.1	18.3
1951	10.8	56.7	27.4
1961	12.9	61.5	28.6
1971	15.2	68.9	30.5

\*Data adjusted to 1951 Census occupation classification.

SOURCE: D.B.S., Census Branch, *Occupational Trends in Canada, 1891 - 1931* (Ottawa 1939), Table 5.  
N.M. Meltz, *Manpower in Canada, 1931 - 1961* (Ottawa 1969), Section I, Tables A-1, A-2 and A-3.  
1971 Census of Canada, Volume 3, Part 2, Table 2.

Turning to Table 1 we note that the most immediate impact of the administrative revolution was to expand significantly clerical employment.<sup>14</sup> Clerks now constitute the largest occupational group in the Canadian labour force, having increased their share of total employment from 2 per cent in 1891 to 15.2 per cent in 1971. Perhaps even more important, the data highlight the fact that most of this clerical growth can be accounted for by the rapid influx of women into the office. In 1891 there were 4,710 female clerks holding 14.3 per cent of all clerical positions; by 1971 over 900,000 women filled close to 70 per cent of available jobs. The feminization of the office was well underway by 1931, when 45.1 per cent of all clerks were women. The two decades between 1910 and 1930 marked a period of transition from the old office to the new. As clerical jobs acquired a "female" label they replaced domestic work as the major female job ghetto. This can be seen from the jump in the proportion of employed women in clerical occupations, from 2.3 per cent in 1891 to 17.7 per cent in 1931.

<sup>14</sup> All census data pertaining to clerical employment presented in the paper have been standardized to conform with the 1951 census definition of clerk, thereby facilitating accurate inter-census comparisons.

Women did not simply replace men in existing clerical jobs. Rather, they were recruited into the new bottom layer of routine jobs produced by the administrative revolution. The typical nineteenth-century clerk was a male bookkeeper. A generalist, he practiced a craft acquired through long apprenticeship and often became indispensable to the firm's owner, thereby increasing his chances of some day being made a partner. In stark contrast, the modern clerk is likely to be a young woman operating an office machine, monotonously processing a steady stream of words or figures which hold little meaning for her. The expansion of public education and the proliferation of private business colleges after the turn of the century provided a ready pool of cheap, but reliable, female labour for the burgeoning office bureaucracies.<sup>15</sup> Males would not tolerate the poor conditions and lack of opportunity these subordinate tasks entailed and, furthermore, they were needed to fill the expanding upper clerical and supervisory ranks. Employers therefore began increasingly to recruit women for routine administrative jobs. Reinforcing this shift in labour supply was simple economics; the fact that the vast majority of women in the early twentieth-century saw their jobs as "merely a fill-in before marriage" had the effect of suppressing wages through constant turnover.<sup>16</sup>

A major force in the creation of routine clerical tasks was the rationalization of the administrative labour process which accompanied the rapid expansion of the office. The cutting edge of this rationalization was what Bryan Palmer calls the "thrust for efficiency," a diverse collection of managerial assaults on the design, organization, and execution of work with the goal of increased productivity and lower costs.<sup>17</sup> The popularity which F.W. Taylor's doctrine of scientific management achieved immediately before World War I heralded an "efficiency craze" which became an ideological underpinning of the American progressive era.<sup>18</sup> These ideas spilled into Canada, transmitted by Canadian busi-

<sup>15</sup> For details of the development of commercial education in Canada see Graham S. Lowe, "The Administrative Revolution: The Growth of Clerical Occupations and the Development of the Modern Office in Canada, 1911 to 1931," unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 1979, 145-9. Prior to 1900 vocational training for office workers was mostly limited to private business schools. The first public vocational school in the country opened in Toronto in 1901. Ontario quickly became the leader in the field; by 1917 all but two urban areas with populations over 8,000 had set up vocational schools. In 1910 the federal government appointed a Royal Commission on Industrial Training and Technical Education eventually leading, in 1919, to the Technical Education Act which gave nation-wide impetus for vocational education.

<sup>16</sup> *Blue Bell* [Bell Telephone Company employee magazine] (August 1930), 8. According to Mary Vipond, "The Images of Women in Mass Circulation Magazines in the 1920s," in S.M. Trofimenkoff and A. Prentice (eds.), *The Neglected Majority* (Toronto 1977), 117, approximately 90 per cent of working women were single during this period. Reinforcing dominant sex role norms were the formal barriers erected by many employers, including the federal civil service and the Ontario school system, against employment of married women.

<sup>17</sup> Bryan Palmer, "Class, Conception and Conflict: The Thrust for Efficiency, Managerial Views of Labour and the Working Class Rebellion, 1903-22," *Radical Review of Political Economics*, 7 (1975), 31-49.

<sup>18</sup> See Samuel Haber, *Efficiency and Uplift: Scientific Management in the Progressive Era 1890-1920* (Chicago 1964).



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ness publications and aided by the management practices of United States owned branch plants. *Industrial Canada*, the foremost business journal of the day, published a series of articles by Taylor himself in 1913.<sup>19</sup> The managerial reforms initially devised for the factory were gradually introduced into the office. W.H. Leffingwell, a leading proponent of scientific office management, observed in 1917 that "many businessmen, after analyzing the remarkable results secured by applying Frederick W. Taylor's system of scientific management in factories, have asked whether or not similar betterments could be obtained in offices with the system. Their questions can now be answered, for the main principles of the Taylor system have actually been adapted and applied in office work."<sup>20</sup> While Leffingwell was referring to the United States and, moreover, overstated the diffusion of the Taylor system, there can be little doubt that work rationalization methods were being applied in major Canadian offices by the 1920s.

Office working conditions were dramatically altered as tasks were standardized, machines were introduced, the division of labour grew more specialized, and a rigid chain of command emerged. This combination of changes added a stratum to the bottom of the administrative hierarchy into which women were hired. The spread of office mechanization provides clear evidence of this. Machine-related job titles, such as stenographer and office appliance operator, first appeared in the census in 1921. By this time such jobs had a "female only" label firmly affixed to them. For example, Sun Life Insurance Company of Montreal hired its first female clerk in 1894; by 1914 many departments had "an army of typewriters," and there was a central typing pool with dictating machines — all operated by women.<sup>21</sup> According to the same report, many of the machines in the actuarial department seemed "capable of thinking," indicating the supplanting of mental by manual labour. Generally, the feminization of machine-related clerical jobs was completed by the end of the 1920s. The 1931 census shows, for instance, that women comprised 95 per cent of all stenographers and typists and 86.3 per cent of all office machine operators.<sup>22</sup>

One of the standard ways managers achieved greater over-all efficiency was by carefully controlling cost through cost accounting systems. Perusing the pages of *Industrial Canada* after 1900, one is impressed by the growing number of articles describing various cost accounting procedures and proclaim-

<sup>19</sup> "Principles of Scientific Management," (March 1913), 1105-6; "What is Scientific Management," (April 1913), 1224-5; "How Scientific Management Works," (May 1913), 1349-50. For details of the applications of American managerial innovations by Canadian businessmen see Paul Craven, *'An Impartial Empire': Industrial Relations and the Canadian State* (Toronto 1980), 90-110; Craig Heron and Bryan Palmer, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1910-14," *Canadian Historical Review*, 58(1977), 431-4; Graham S. Lowe, "The Rise of Modern Management in Canada," *Canadian Dimension*, 14, 3(1979), 32-8.

<sup>20</sup> William H. Leffingwell, *Scientific Office Management* (Chicago 1917), 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Sunshine* [Sun Life Insurance Company employee magazine] (November 1911), 142.

<sup>22</sup> Lowe, "The Administrative Revolution," 280.

ing their advantages.<sup>23</sup> Often these schemes entailed an intensification of clerical operations, demanding that a greater volume of data be processed with increased speed and accuracy. This in turn accelerated the introduction of machines and encouraged the creation of separate accounting departments. When the Bell Telephone Company of Montreal set up a central accounting department in the early 1920s, key punch equipment was continually operated to record all expenses.<sup>24</sup> While the typewriter launched the first wave of office mechanization, the proliferation of menial accounting tasks precipitated a second wave in the form of Hollerith punch card equipment. Data pertaining to production costs, customer accounts, expenses, and so on, were punched onto an 80-column card and then processed in a variety of ways by ancillary machines. The women operating the Hollerith equipment fitted Marx's notion of the machine-minder. It is significant to note that this primitive computer technology was fairly widespread in Canada, with at least 105 major offices having adopted it by the early 1930s.<sup>25</sup>

Insurance is the prototype of a white-collar service industry. A successful insurance company resembles a finely-tuned clerical machine, given the heavy reliance on efficient paper processing. Not surprisingly, insurance managers were at the forefront of office reform. Major Canadian and American life insurance companies organized the Life Office Management Association (LOMA) in 1924 with the explicit goal of solving the problem of "correct organization and administration of . . . clerical activities."<sup>26</sup> Discussions of office organization and clerical methods were infused with the ideology of scientific management, and efficiency experts such as W.H. Leffingwell regularly addressed annual conferences. A clear outline of the central trends in insurance office management was presented by a London Life official (London, Ontario) in his 1927 presidential address to LOMA: 1) scientific training, selection, placement, and promotion; 2) a scientific basis for remuneration; 3) caring for the physical and social welfare of workers; 4) supplying adequate supervision over workers; 5) motivating workers; 6) mechanizing work and humanizing work relations; and 7) improving the caliber of management.<sup>27</sup> Some of these aims are seemingly contradictory, mixing elements of

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Kenneth Falconer, "Practical Value of Cost Accounting," (August 1903), 26; E.J. Hathaway, "Ascertaining the Cost of Production," (February 1905), 432-3; H.L.C. Hall, "Economy in Manufacturing," (February 1906), 430-1; L.E. Bowerman, "What a Cost System Will Accomplish," (May 1908), 774-5; C.S. Walters, "The Practical Cost System — Its Relation to the Office," (March 1909), 666-8; John C. Kirkwood's three-part series "A Standard Cost System for Manufacturers," (September 1918), 83-7; "Outlines of a Standard Cost System," (December 1918), 83-9; "A Cost System of Universal Application," (January 1919), 221-3, 226; G.M. Pelton, "Organization of An Efficient Cost System," (June 1924), 85-7 and (July 1924), 189-91.

<sup>24</sup> *Blue Bell*, (March 1923), 8-9.

<sup>25</sup> For a full listing of these organizations see Lowe, "The Administrative Revolution," 379-81.

<sup>26</sup> LOMA, *Proceedings* (1924), 8.

<sup>27</sup> LOMA, *Proceedings* (1927), 6.

scientific management with the human relations emphasis of the early personnel movement. But taken together, these policies constituted the broad "thrust for efficiency" in the office which underlay the administrative revolution.

We have sketched the growth and rationalization of the early-twentieth century office in rather general terms. The new routine clerical jobs created by the development of the administrative apparatus of corporate capitalism constituted an expanding area of women's work. That these jobs were regimented, often mechanized, fragmented, low paying, and dead-end suggests the spread of factory-like working conditions. But to conclude further that the incumbents of such jobs were proletarianized in the process is erroneous. In fact, the shift in the sex composition of office staffs would indicate that neither males nor females were proletarianized in the neo-marxian sense of descending into the working class. On one hand, male clerks occupied the better clerical positions and some experienced upward mobility as the ranks of management expanded. On the other hand, very few women actually experienced the proletarianization of office working conditions simply because their recruitment was directly linked to the proliferation of these menial administrative tasks which, as we have seen, became labelled as "women's work." Admittedly the onslaught of managerial work rationalization strategies did introduce factory-like conditions into some areas of the office. But evidence presented below shows that the feminization of the office did not entail the creation of a homogeneous mass of unskilled, low wage tasks. Granted that the basic structure of inequality in the modern office, revolving around the male manager-female clerk dichotomy, was forged during the administrative revolution. The experience of women clerks, however, was far from uniform considering that the pay and working conditions for some female clerks was substantially better than for others.

In sum, the process of work degradation within the office proceeded unevenly across firms and industries, as well as within the clerical occupational structure itself. Braverman's model of the modern office — a paper-processing factory staffed by a uniform administrative underclass — does not bear up under careful empirical investigation. Pronounced inter-industry differences and salary variations within the offices of large organizations reveal stratification within the clerical labour market beyond the basic male-female division.

## II

### Clerical Earning Patterns, 1901-71

THE ADMINISTRATIVE REVOLUTION, by creating a more complex office hierarchy with a greater proportion of simplified tasks, precipitated a decline in clerical earnings. But to what extent did this represent a marked departure from the relative labour market position of the nineteenth-century clerk? Unfortunately, lack of reliable data make it difficult to estimate any consistent white-collar wage trends for late-nineteenth century Canada. Available evidence portrays the clerks of this period as a small group of males who came from middle class backgrounds, possessed considerable skills, and had good advancement opportunities. A junior clerk hired by Consumer's Gas Company

in Toronto started at \$300 annually in 1855, rising to \$600 after four years; chief clerks earned over \$1,000. In contrast, the company paid the stokers in its gas works \$364 and lamplighters received \$260 annually.<sup>28</sup> It is difficult, however, to generalize on the basis of a single firm considering that Lockwood's research reveals significant salary variations among British clerks in the latter half of the nineteenth-century.<sup>29</sup> He identifies essentially two groups of clerks, both better paid than artisans. Only the select group of financial, civil service, and mercantile clerks could support a middle class life-style, the majority suffering a "respectable poverty."<sup>30</sup> Lockwood raises an important point, to which we will return in a later section of the paper, regarding the connection between salary and life-style. Comparing the earnings of various groups of employees ascertains their economic positions relative to each other, but says little about the actual standard of living, and therefore life-style differences, provided by these earnings.

TABLE 2

AVERAGE ANNUAL EARNINGS FOR LABOUR FORCE AND CLERICAL WORKERS, BY SEX, AND PRODUCTION WORKERS IN MANUFACTURING, CANADA, 1901-1971\*

	LABOUR FORCE			CLERICAL WORKERS			7 PRODUCTION WORKERS IN MANUFACTURING
	1 TOTAL	2 MALE	3 FEMALE	4 TOTAL	5 MALE	6 FEMALE	
1901	\$ 384.53	\$ 387.16	\$ 181.96	\$ 446.72	\$ 406.49	\$ 264.37	\$ 375.00 <sup>†</sup>
1911	542.17	593.31	305.71	611.91	757.02	449.50	417.00
1921	844.26	1,056.92	572.82	1,056.20	1,248.77	785.10	999.00
1931	847.00	925.00	559.00	1,007.00	1,153.00	830.00	950.00
1941	867.00	993.00	490.00	922.00	1,113.00	791.00	1,220.00
1951 <sup>‡</sup>	1,850.00	2,131.00	1,220.00	1,771.00	2,156.00	1,546.00	2,434.00
1961	3,170.00	3,660.00	1,993.00	2,743.00	3,381.00	2,339.00	3,762.00
1971	5,391.00	6,574.00	3,199.00	4,139.15	5,868.70	3,402.60	6,695.00

\* Data for clerical occupations adjusted to the 1951 Census occupation classification

<sup>†</sup> Median income, columns 1 through 6

<sup>‡</sup> For the year 1905.

SOURCE: Columns 1 through 6 computed from the following:

1901 Census of Canada, Census and Statistics, Bulletin 1, *Wage Earners by Occupations*, Table II

1911 Census of Canada, Unpublished working tables for wage earners, Statistics Canada microfilm roll #11002

1931 Census of Canada, Volume 5, Table 13

Media: *Manpower in Canada*, Section V, Table A-1

1971 Census of Canada, Volume III, Part 6 (Bulletin 3-67), Table 14

Column 7 compiled from the following:

M. C. Urquhart and K. A. H. Buckley (eds), *Historical Statistics of Canada*, (Toronto 1965), 99 (to 1951).

D. B. S., *Manufacturing Industries of Canada*, Section A, Summary for Canada, (1961), 16 (for 1961)

Statistics Canada, 1971 *Annual Census of Manufacturers*, Summary Statistics, Preliminary, (July 1973), 5 (for 1971)

Beginning with the census of 1901 we can trace wage patterns in Canada with reasonable accuracy. According to Table 2, the typical clerical employee earned more than the labour force average until 1941, and more than the average production wage until 1931. Through the depression and World War II, however, these clerical wage advantages disappeared. In 1941 clerks had an average salary of \$922, considerably less than the \$1,220 earned by production workers. And in 1951 clerks earned only \$1,771 compared to the labour force

<sup>28</sup> David Coombs, "The Emergence of a White-Collar Work Force in Toronto, 1895-1911," unpublished doctoral thesis, York University, 1978, 114.

<sup>29</sup> Lockwood, *Blackcoated Worker*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

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average of \$1,860. Over the following two decades clerks continued to lose economic ground, especially relative to production workers. Table 3 furnishes a concise summary: clerical earnings ranged from 13 to 29 per cent above the labour force average from 1901 to 1921, then steadily declined to only 74 per cent of the average wage in 1971.<sup>31</sup>

TABLE 3

AVERAGE CLERICAL EARNINGS EXPRESSED AS A PERCENTAGE OF  
AVERAGE LABOUR FORCE EARNINGS, BY SEX, CANADA,  
1901 - 1971\*

	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971
TOTAL	117	113	127	129	107	95	85	74
MALE	116	129	119	126	107	102	92	89
FEMALE	149	154	150	166	168	141	126	109

\* Average labour force earnings exclude clerical earnings

SOURCE: Computed from Table 2

TABLE 4

AVERAGE CLERICAL EARNINGS, BY SEX, EXPRESSED AS A  
PERCENTAGE OF AVERAGE EARNINGS OF PRODUCTION WORKERS  
IN MANUFACTURING, CANADA, 1901 - 1971

	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971
MALE	1.32	1.82	1.25	1.21	.91	.89	.90	.88
FEMALE	.70	1.08	.79	.87	.59	.64	.62	.51

SOURCE: Computed from Table 2

This precipitous drop in clerical earnings may be attributed to a number of factors. The expansion of public education enlarged the supply of suitably trained workers for office jobs. Equally decisive was the reduction of skill and educational requirements with the proliferation of routinized and mechanized clerical tasks. Gains in blue-collar wages, because of the mounting strength of unions and a dwindling supply of cheap rural labour with the slowing of immigration after 1914, helped to narrow the wage gap with white-collar employees. But the central reason for the decline in clerical earnings was the recruitment of females into the lower ranks of administrative bureaucracies.

<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that in computing Table 3 clerical earnings were excluded from the labour force totals to ensure that average labour force trends are not confounded by changes occurring in clerical occupations.

Two distinct labour markets emerged: one for males in more skilled and highly rewarding jobs, another for women in low-paying routine jobs. Discriminatory hiring and promotion practices became institutionalized as the economic advantages of hiring female clerks eroded the traditional social sanctions against employing women in business. In order to assess fully the impact of feminization on clerical wage trends we must separately examine male and female earnings.

There can be little doubt that a distinct labour market for female clerical employees has existed since the turn of the century. This is evident from comparing the male and female clerical earnings presented in Table 2. Female clerks earned 53 per cent of the average male clerical salary, inching up to 58 per cent by 1971. This persistently lower female wage accounts for the overall decline in clerical earnings, as women comprised a steadily growing proportion of the office work force. Given that women are balkanized into subordinate sectors of the labour market, competing amongst themselves for jobs and not with men, it is noteworthy that during the first four decades of this century female clerks earned 49 to 68 per cent more than the average female worker (Table 3). But this wage superiority diminished after 1941 as thousands of young women who previously would have remained at home acquired sufficient education to meet the minimal requirements for the booming white-collar sector.<sup>32</sup> The growing abundance of qualified female labour interacted with a reduction of skill requirements in many office jobs to depress clerical salaries to within 9 per cent of the female labour force average by 1971. Nonetheless, other than the female professionals, clerical work has been one of the most attractive areas of employment — at least from the point of view of wages and working conditions — for women in this century.

Looking now at male clerks, we note a sharp decline in earnings relative to both production workers and the labour force average. Table 3 documents that male clerks began to lose economic ground after 1911, regaining slightly in 1931, then sliding below the labour force average by 1961. When compared with production workers, in Table 4, male clerks could claim to be economically better off only up to the 1930s, after which time the situation was reversed. In the prosperity at the end of the wheat boom the scarcity of clerical labour was registered in relatively high wages for both males and females. But a steady decline then set in and from 1941 to 1971 the average male clerk earned around 10 per cent less than his blue-collar counterpart. This alone is insufficient grounds for concluding that a levelling of class differences had occurred. To be sure, a good number of individuals recorded as clerks in the censuses were embarking on careers that would elevate them into management. This issue requires further attention, for as we noted above little is known about the historical mobility patterns of male clerks in Canada. Scattered evidence raises the possibility that in some early-twentieth-century organizations avenues of clerical promotion were fairly restrictive.

<sup>32</sup> N.M. Meltz, *Changes in the Occupational Composition of the Canadian Labour Force, 1931-1961* (Ottawa 1965), 66.

For example, the British-style job hierarchy introduced into the federal civil service in 1882 inhibited promotion opportunities from the lower ranks.<sup>33</sup> Besides facing low starting salaries and meagre annual increments, junior clerks had little hope of ascending through the ranks. The basic departmental organization was built around one chief clerk, two first class clerks, four in the second class, and eight or more in the third and lowest class. The result, according to one observer, was that "nothing short of the chief clerks being stricken by paralysis every three or four years could create any hope for the scores who are submerged in the lower classes."<sup>34</sup> Even with regular promotions it would have taken 20 years of steady progress for a male clerk to reach the maximum salary of \$1,400.<sup>35</sup> The junior positions became less attractive for aspiring young men, in part resulting in a shift toward a female labour supply. It is difficult to say how widespread this bureaucratic problem was, although we should hasten to add that rapid business expansion after 1900 provided mobility opportunities by creating new positions. For example, after examining census data pertaining to the Toronto banking industry in 1911 and 1921 Coombs estimates that the creation of new management positions during the decade could have provided upward mobility for over one quarter of the 1911 pool of Toronto-based bank clerks.<sup>36</sup> Whether this reflects conditions in a particular industry or the general economic climate of the war remains an open research question.

Our overview of clerical wage trends between 1901 and 1971 provides the foundation for an understanding of major transformations in the clerical labour market precipitated by the administrative revolution. The most dramatic change was the creation of non-competing and unequal male and female labour market segments. Females formed an expanding pool of cheap labour for routine office jobs, thereby depressing average clerical earnings. But when each segment is examined separately a somewhat more complex picture emerges. Male clerks experienced an erosion of their relative wage position after 1911, at the same time as mobility prospects were improving. While female clerks lost some economic ground over the seven decades, most office jobs open to women offered above average wages and working conditions. In short, the clerical labour market cannot be viewed as a homogeneous entity. The next two sections of the paper will advance this gender-based analysis, examining even finer variations in working conditions within specific organizations.

<sup>33</sup> R.M. Dawson, *The Civil Service of Canada* (London 1929); J.L. Payne, "The Civil Servant," *University Magazine*, 6(1907), 507-13.

<sup>34</sup> Payne, "The Civil Servant," 508-9.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 508.

<sup>36</sup> Coombs, "Emergence of a White-Collar Work Force," 166.

## III

## A Comparison of Earnings in a Bank and an Insurance Company

THE CLERICAL LABOUR MARKET is far from homogeneous, even within the major male and female segments. As with most occupational groups, clerical salaries vary regionally, by firm and industry, and by the specific task performed. Regional differences, reflecting the specific inter-play of supply and demand forces in local labour markets, will not concern us here.<sup>37</sup> Our primary interest is in salaries paid within individual firms and for specific tasks. This level of analysis, absent in most discussions of clerical proletarianization, is essential for determining how changes in office working conditions affected the clerical labour market.

There have been few attempts to establish earning patterns for individual firms, mainly because these types of historical data are often unobtainable. We are fortunate that two major employers of clerical workers, the Bank of Nova Scotia and Manufacturers Life Insurance Company, have maintained salary records from around the turn of the century.<sup>38</sup> Some of these data are presented in Table 5 for the 1911 to 1931 period when both organizations initiated major changes in the clerical labour process. Salary data for the bank include Toronto head office and branches throughout Ontario. In 1911 this encompassed a workforce of 151, of which 38 were in head office; by 1931 this had swelled to 1,102 employees with 219 in head office. The share of clerical positions held by women increased from 8.6 per cent to 30.4 per cent over this period, the majority being concentrated in head office. The Manufacturers Life salary data pertain to Toronto head office, which grew from a staff of 93 in 1911 to 445 by 1931. The proportion of all clerical jobs held by women was high in comparison to the bank, standing at 41.8 per cent and 55.2 per cent in 1911 and 1931 respectively. This alone attests to the uneven impact of the feminization process across firms.

Male clerical earnings in each firm roughly follow the male labour force trend (Table 2), except for insurance clerks in 1931. The earnings of these particular bank and insurance clerks were not significantly better than the wages received by production workers in manufacturing during the 1911 to 1931 period. Canadian bank and insurance clerks hardly constituted an "aristocracy of clerkdom," the term Lockwood applies to similar employees in Britain.<sup>39</sup>

A number of salient observations emerge from a comparison of male salaries in the bank and the insurance company. First, clerks and juniors in insurance appear to have been better off than their counterparts in banking throughout the period. This inter-firm wage spread is even greater in the man-

<sup>37</sup> In 1921, for example, weekly wages of male clerks in Canada's seven largest cities varied from \$22.93 in Quebec to \$28.23 in Vancouver; and for female clerks from \$12.60 in Quebec to \$19.02 in Winnipeg. See *Canada Year Book* (Ottawa 1928), 778-9.

<sup>38</sup> The cooperation of the officials of both these companies in making the salary records available is greatly appreciated.

<sup>39</sup> Lockwood, *Blackout Worker*, 67.



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TABLE 5

AVERAGE ANNUAL EARNINGS<sup>1</sup> OF MALE AND FEMALE EMPLOYEES, SELECTED OCCUPATIONS, BANK OF NOVA SCOTIA (ONTARIO) AND MANUFACTURERS LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY (TORONTO HEAD OFFICE), 1911-1931

	1911		1916		1921		1926		1931	
	BNS	MLI	BNS	MLI	BNS	MLI	BNS	MLI	BNS	MLI
<b>MALES</b>										
Clerks <sup>2</sup>	\$ 529.69	\$ 630.62	\$ 596.36	\$ 985.95	\$ 918.29	\$ 1,063.23	\$ 907.41	\$ 1,128.10	\$ 1,085.60	\$ 1,328.66
Junior clerks <sup>3</sup>	336.54	369.87	348.11	462.00	507.58	890.37	478.23	757.24	657.14	1,033.53
Stenographers and typists	—	540.00 <sup>4</sup>	1,000.00 <sup>4</sup>	—	950.00 <sup>4</sup>	—	—	1,295.33	—	1,550.00 <sup>4</sup>
Junior stenographers and typists <sup>5</sup>	—	540.00 <sup>4</sup>	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Managers and Professionals <sup>6</sup>	2,601.25	3,850.00	2,211.50	3,687.50	3,008.37	5,056.43	3,153.79	5,557.50	3,458.27	6,411.94
<b>FEMALES</b>										
Clerks <sup>2</sup>	\$ 603.50	\$ 530.63	\$ 456.27	\$ 587.35	\$ 865.41	\$ 840.62	\$ 917.54	\$ 871.81	\$ 943.83	\$ 923.32
Junior clerks <sup>3</sup>	598.00	412.52	419.70	457.78	900.00 <sup>4</sup>	742.73	563.69	729.00	646.00	793.50
Stenographers and typists	610.00	562.36	615.29	660.56	1,001.79	998.53	950.27	915.00	1,025.49	1,403.13
Junior stenographers and typists <sup>5</sup>	560.00	486.00	489.25	520.00	906.17	—	672.11	797.14	730.00	—
Managers and Professionals <sup>6</sup>	—	—	1,400.00 <sup>4</sup>	865.00 <sup>4</sup>	—	—	—	1,300.00 <sup>4</sup>	—	1,550.00 <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Includes average annual salaries, plus bonuses and living allowances, as of December 31 of each year. Earnings of temporary or part-time employees excluded.

<sup>2</sup> Includes all non-supervisory clerical employees (below the rank of assistant managers in the bank, below the rank of department head in the insurance company) excluding stenographers and typists. The 1931 Census definition of clerks was used as a guide for classification.

<sup>3</sup> The term "junior" simply denotes those employees with less than one year of service. It provides an approximation of starting salaries, although raises granted to some employees at the end of their probationary period are included.

<sup>4</sup> For the bank this includes branch managers, assistant managers, accountants, inspectors and general office executives. For the insurance company this includes executives, department heads, cashiers, actuaries, accountants, translators, medical doctors, and registered nurses.

<sup>5</sup> One employee only.

SOURCE: Branch Staff Lists for 1911-1931, Bank of Nova Scotia Archives, Toronto; Head Office Salary Books for 1911-1931, Manufacturers Life Insurance Company Archives, Toronto.

agerial and professional category. Second, fluctuations in salaries follow a different pattern in each organization, suggesting that they may have been drawing upon different pools of labour. Canadian banks used apprenticeship systems which required young recruits to toil at subsistence wages for several years in order to prove themselves worthy of a banking career. Because low starting salaries failed to attract sufficient numbers of Canadian men with the type of solid middle class background desired, banks were forced to recruit in England and Scotland before eventually turning towards women as a source of labour. Life insurance, by contrast, placed greater emphasis on formal education and consequently paid higher salaries. University commerce or mathematics graduates were considered ideal recruits because of the actuarial expertise required in many of the higher positions. Third, part of the salary differential may reflect the fact that the bank's salary data included many branches in small towns and rural areas where wage levels were lower than in Toronto.

The two firms were much closer together on female salaries in all clerical categories. Female employees in both organizations, except for new recruits, earned notably more than the average female clerk throughout the period (see Table 2). In fact, starting salaries in both institutions were close to the average clerical salary for the whole labour force. We should also mention that the gap between male and female clerical salaries was greater in insurance, mainly because of the higher male salaries paid by Manufacturers Life.

The difference between salaries for general clerks and stenographer-typists buttresses the argument that the female clerical labour market is internally stratified. Of all the office jobs available to women, stenography held out the greatest rewards. The special skills and greater responsibilities of stenographers placed them in a distinct labour pool. Stenographers tended to be more career minded, having greater seniority than other female clerks in both firms. Indeed, the early-twentieth-century stenographer was the craft worker of the office.<sup>40</sup> This accounts for the rather anomalous situation in the Bank of Nova Scotia where stenographers were the highest paid clerks of either sex throughout the 1911 to 1926 period. The accelerating drive for greater office efficiency, however, did fragment and deskill the stenographer's work. Specialized jobs such as clerk typist, dictaphone typist, receptionist, and file clerk were carved out of the stenographer's general domain. Thus while the stenographer remained the administrative accoutrement of the manager in smaller branches, the banks had installed typing pools in their larger urban branches and head offices by the late 1920s. Until the 1920s, the Bank of Nova Scotia hired only stenographers, replacing them with the lower-grade clerk typist as the work became increasingly sub-divided and routine. The stenographer, although losing ground by 1930, was clearly at the top of the female office hierarchy. This position marked the limit of female advancement within the office given that women were virtually excluded from managerial and professional jobs.<sup>41</sup>

Our case studies of two major clerical employers underline the importance of shifting the focus of analysis away from the entire clerical labour force toward the division of labour within specific firms. Our research must be supplemented with case studies of other firms located in different industrial sectors before generalizations about the relationship between work and market conditions can be offered with any certainty. Nonetheless, it is possible to draw from our case studies some tentative conclusions about the general employment patterns of stenographers. From its origins in the late-nineteenth-century stenography was labelled as "women's work," attracting young women with the lure of relatively high salaries and the prestige of an office job. But the explosion of paper work increased repetitive typing tasks, thereby spawning the position of clerk typist. So widespread was the use of the typewriter that in 1912 the federal civil service began to hire only women with typing skills.<sup>42</sup> The market for stenographers became flooded by World War I with graduates from commercial courses in high schools and private business colleges.<sup>43</sup> Yet the potential for high salaries remained good for competent and experienced

<sup>40</sup> See Graham S. Lowe, "Women, Work and the Office: The Feminization of Clerical Occupations in Canada, 1901-1931," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 5(1980), 376-8.

<sup>41</sup> The exceptions included a woman manager in the Bank of Nova Scotia stationery department, a non-banking service unit, and a nurse and a translator in Manufacturers Life (see Table 5).

<sup>42</sup> Civil Service Commission of Canada, *Fourth Annual Report*, House of Commons Sessional Papers, No. 31 (1913), xi. Also see *Report of the Ontario Commission on Unemployment* (Toronto 1916), 181-4.

<sup>43</sup> By 1915 Toronto had 28 schools and business colleges turning out an estimated 2,000

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workers. For example, during the war the "exceptional stenographer" with "managing abilities" could command a salary in the \$1,500 to \$2,000 range annually.<sup>44</sup> This group must have appeared financially privileged in the eyes of women employees in other occupations. Just before World War I the earnings of female retail clerks fell considerably below those of office workers.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, nurses and teachers commanded salaries roughly on a par with those of female stenographers and bookkeepers. Even in 1921 the female office clerk earned more than 22 other female occupations. Only telegraph operators in Montreal and tailoresses, teachers, as well as telegraph operators in Toronto earned more.<sup>46</sup>

### IV

#### Internal Job Hierarchies

MODERN CORPORATIONS AND GOVERNMENTS are bureaucratic organizations based on a hierarchical arrangement of specialized tasks. We have documented the existence of distinct groups of clerical workers in banking and insurance, defined by different functions and remuneration level. The gradual erosion of employee control over the execution of work which paralleled office rationalization no doubt exacerbated these trends. The administrative revolution degraded some tasks, but the fact that not all jobs were directly affected contributed to the development of elaborate clerical hierarchies within organizations. In addition, the bureaucratization of corporations employing both white- and blue-collar workers tended to accentuate the differences between these groups.

We have shown (Table 4) that the typical male clerk was economically better off than production workers until 1941. This broad trend, however, does not accurately reflect the experience of many clerks employed in large corporations. Table 6 clearly documents that the early-twentieth century male clerk's salary lagged behind other major wage earning groups in the Canadian Pacific Railway. Of six major occupational groups in the railway, general office clerks (mainly males) received the lowest daily wage. And it is unlikely that the clerk's slightly better employment security would significantly alter this disparity on an annual basis. In 1911 clerks earned \$2.17 daily compared with \$4.40 for engineers and \$3.76 for machinists. While these data only cover the 1909 to 1916 period, there is little indication that the situation changed appreciably in later years considering the general trends for clerical and manual earnings outlined above. It was not that the CPR unduly exploited its clerical employees; the railway clerks' 1911 salary was only slightly below the clerical labour force average. More plausible is that the powerful running trades and craft unions

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stenographers annually, many of whom were poorly trained. This over-supply situation undoubtedly contributed to the 25 per cent unemployment rate among female stenographers in Toronto at this time reported in the *Labour Gazette* (February 1915), 924.

<sup>44</sup> *Report of the Ontario Commission on Unemployment*, 184.

<sup>45</sup> *Labour Gazette* (April 1913), 1078-9.

<sup>46</sup> *Canada Year Book* (Ottawa 1928), 799.

TABLE 6

## DAILY EARNINGS OF SELECTED OCCUPATIONS, CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY COMPANY, 1907, 1911 and 1916

	1907	1911	1916
General office clerks	\$1.83	\$2.17	\$2.19 <sup>1</sup>
Station agents	2.23	2.91	3.32
Telegraph operators and dispatchers	1.84	2.28	N/A
Locomotive Engineers	4.03	4.40	4.37 <sup>2</sup>
Machinists	2.94	3.76	4.54
Carpenters	2.24	2.76	3.12

<sup>1</sup> Chief clerks earned \$4.81 and stenographers and typists earned \$2.10.

<sup>2</sup> Includes motormen.

SOURCE: *Annual Report of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company to the Minister of Railways and Canals of Canada*, for the years 1907, 1911, and 1916.

greatly increased the bargaining power of the blue-collar employees. It thus seems that in the CPR, one of the nation's largest employers at the time, it was the colour of the clerk's collar and not their economic status which separated them from manual workers. This underlines the general point that within-industry market conditions are a more fruitful level of analysis than aggregate labour force trends, especially considering that employees would tend to assess their economic standing relative to other groups within their immediate firm or industry.

The second example comes from the insurance industry, where we will examine the typical hierarchy of head offices in Canada and the United States. The white-collar job structure presented in Table 7 reflects the division of labour after extensive rationalization of the office. The table is largely self-explanatory, but we should emphasize that the majority of the jobs up to the position of stenographer were performed almost exclusively by women. Interestingly, ten of the twelve are machine-related. Even so, there is a salary range of \$900 to \$1,200 annually, well above the average female clerical salary of \$830 in 1931 (Table 2). The jump in the salary scale between stenographer and lab technician, and again between clerk on special actuarial computations and legally trained clerk, demarcate three job clusters: routine female jobs, intermediate level jobs performed by either sex but usually by males, and exclusively male jobs at the top level. The income disparity between the first and third groups is great, as exemplified by comparing the salaries of any of the machine operators with that of the security analyst.

A third and final example extends the above analysis a step further, examining the job classification system for female employees introduced in 1929 in the head office of the Sun Life Insurance Company. With a Montreal head office staff of over 2,800, the company's personnel experts were constantly striving to streamline clerical operations through the introduction of "scientific methods for the selection of the staff and to promote the competence of its

TABLE 7

**AVERAGE ANNUAL SALARY RANGES FOR VARIOUS HEAD  
OFFICE CLERICAL JOBS, MAJOR CANADIAN AND  
AMERICAN INSURANCE COMPANIES, 1930**

Key punch operator	\$ 900 - \$1,100
M.I.B. file clerk	900 - 1,200
Addressograph operator	900 - 1,200
Typist	900 - 1,300
Calculating machine operator — routine	1,000 - 1,300
Policy writer	1,000 - 1,400
Photostat operator	1,040 - 1,600
Premium posting clerk	1,040 - 1,600
Dictaphone operator	1,100 - 1,500
Telephone operator	1,100 - 1,600
Hollerith machine operator	1,200 - 1,500
Stenographer	1,200 - 1,600
Laboratory technician	1,750 - 2,500
Secretary to office	1,750 - 2,500
Clerk on special actuarial computations	1,800 - 2,600
Legally trained clerk	2,400 - 3,200
Travelling auditor	2,400 - 3,600
Lay underwriter — major responsibilities	2,500 - 4,500
Security analyst	3,000 - 4,750

SOURCE: Life Office Management Association, *Proceedings* (1932), 276.

members."<sup>47</sup> The more immediate effect, however, was to specialize and standardize clerical tasks further.

Briefly, the plan classified clerks into five grades of permanent staff and a probationary grade.<sup>48</sup> The starting salary of \$600 (rising to \$720 after six months of good performance) was below that paid to juniors in the bank and insurance company examined above (Table 5). Senior grade clerks earned a maximum of \$1,500 and those in a special grade could earn even more. Salaries were tied to the skill and responsibility requirements of the jobs, as well as to experience. Junior grade clerks performed "simple mechanical or clerical work requiring little previous training or experience," including routine typing. The middle level of the hierarchy consisted of clerks with "considerable experience operating bookkeeping machines; who are competent to perform more advanced stenographic work; or who can supervise more

<sup>47</sup> G.H. Harris, *The President's Book: The Story of the Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada* (Montreal 1928), 252.

<sup>48</sup> The following details of the salary plan are found in two documents at the Sun Life Archives, Montreal: "Announcement to Women Employees Regarding Salary Grading," from E.E. Duckworth, 1 July 1929; "Renumeration of Female Employees," Head Office Circular from T.B MacCauley, President and Managing-Director, 1 July 1929.

difficult office routine." And the special grade was comprised of "experienced clerks who can perform secretarial work requiring the exercise of independent judgement and a complete knowledge of office procedures; or who by reason of special training can supervise or undertake very advanced work." The numbers of staff thinned out as one proceeded up the hierarchy, and the top two grades covered supervisory duties that, if performed by males, would bring a higher rank and salary. Nonetheless, it is clear that not all office jobs involving women were routinized and deskilled. A significant minority still demanded considerable expertise and judgement and therefore can in no way be considered proletarianized.



## V

### Living Conditions of the Canadian Clerk

MUCH OF OUR DISCUSSION HAS FOCUSED on comparisons between various groups of clerks, or between clerks and blue-collar workers. But this type of wage trend analysis remains somewhat abstract unless placed within the broader context of the minimum standard of living deemed acceptable in a society. It is one thing to trace the historical relationship between manual and clerical earnings, but quite another matter to determine whether the salaries of either group were capable of maintaining a family above the poverty line. The debate on clerical proletarianization has thus far lacked this crucial dimension. We will now attempt to examine this issue by providing cost of living data against which earnings of various groups of workers can be measured. This approach is admittedly static in so far as changes in the living standards of

individuals during their working lives are not measured. It augments the proletarianization debate, however, by documenting how specific jobs limited the ability of their occupants to achieve anything resembling a middle class life-style. In brief, it is a major step towards evaluating the social significance and individual consequences of earning a particular income.

Table 8 presents the federal Department of Labour's annual budget for a "workingman's family of five," a fairly accurate estimate of a basic level of subsistence. Included were the average cost in sixty Canadian cities of 29 basic food items, laundry starch, coal, coal oil, wood, and rent. The cost of clothing, medical care, transportation, and other necessities were not included. Nor were provisions made for alcohol, tobacco, entertainment, and other "luxury" items. The budget would provide a basic working class life-style, perhaps marginally better if the family was smaller. But a middle class life-style, especially for a family, was simply out of reach on the budget allotted.

The stark economic reality facing the average male worker, according to Figure 1, was a chronic struggle to support a family at an acceptable subsistence level between 1900 and 1931. Production workers in manufacturing — the industrial proletariat — were even more disadvantaged during all but the end of the period. Only male clerks earned sufficient incomes to boost them above this official poverty line. Some groups of clerks, such as those in insurance, likely could afford the comfort and status of a middle class life-style. Yet for the majority this probably remained an elusive ideal.

TABLE 8

ANNUAL FAMILY BUDGET IN SIXTY  
CANADIAN CITIES, 1900 - 1931<sup>1</sup>

1900	1910	1916	1921	1926	1931
\$487.24	\$640.64	\$849.16	\$1,117.48	\$1,116.44	\$970.32

<sup>1</sup> Based on weekly costs of 29 food items, laundry starch, coal, wood, coal oil and rent for the month of December, 1900, 1910, and 1921. Data for 1921, 1926, and 1931 cover the entire year. The budget was compiled by the federal Department of Labour and was regularly published in the *Labour Gazette*. It was based on estimates of the weekly consumption of a "workingman's family of five." Rental costs were for "a representative workingman's dwelling of the better class" with "sanitary conveniences."

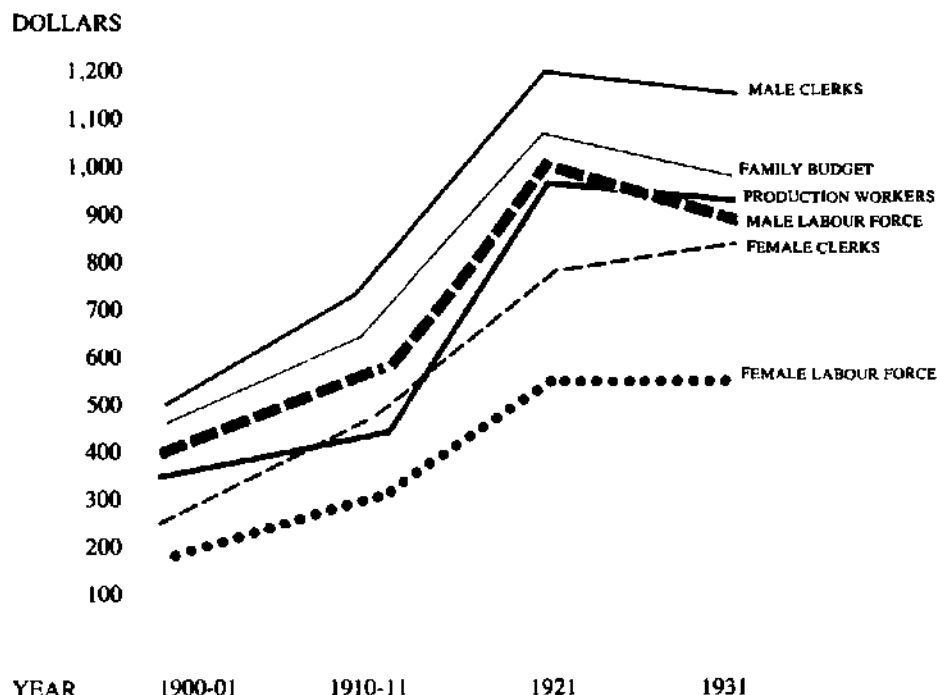
SOURCE: *Canada Year Book*, 1921 (Ottawa 1922), 649.

*Canada Year Book*, 1932 (Ottawa 1932), 692

This conclusion is confirmed by contemporary reports of actual living conditions. J.P. Buschlen, a bank clerk turned novelist, gave the following account of the Canadian white-collar workers' life-style at the start of World War I: "Conditions in the modern business world continue to make it more and more difficult for the 'man without means' to live. He may *exist* — earn enough to pay for clothes, food and other bare necessities of life — but he

FIGURE I

CHANGES IN ANNUAL AVERAGE EARNINGS, LABOUR FORCE,  
CLERICAL WORKERS AND PRODUCTION WORKERS IN  
MANUFACTURING, SHOWING ANNUAL FAMILY BUDGET, CANADA,  
1900 - 1931



SOURCE: Compiled from Tables 1 and 6.

cannot invest in a home, marry, and build for the future."<sup>40</sup> Buschlen's reference to marriage was a barb aimed directly at the banks' rule, in force until the late 1940s, forbidding employees earning below a specified salary from marrying. The salary requirement was set at \$1,000 in 1911, or about 32 per cent higher than the average male clerk's salary and almost double that earned by the typical male Bank of Nova Scotia clerk. This notorious edict, enforced by threat of dismissal, ostensibly guarded against embezzlement but it indirectly justified low salaries. Even the staid *Monetary Times* found Draconian overtones in the marriage regulation, proclaiming that it "smacks of the dark

<sup>40</sup> J.P. Buschlen, *Behind the Wicket* (Toronto 1914), 256.



ages" and urging the banks to raise clerical salaries in order to stem the growing employee dissatisfaction.<sup>50</sup>

Clerks employed in other industries also encountered economic hardships. When the Civil Service Association petitioned the federal government for higher salaries in 1907, it presented personal expense statements showing individual clerks facing deficits ranging from \$9.42 to \$31 monthly.<sup>51</sup> The association argued that a male clerk could support himself and his family only "by the exercise of prudence and, sometimes, rigid self-denial. Under existing conditions, having regard to the continuous increase in the cost of living, he finds the struggle growing harder and harder."<sup>52</sup> This situation apparently did not improve over the next few decades.<sup>53</sup>

As for female clerks, one might discount the fact that their earnings fell well below the subsistence level by arguing that the vast majority were young, single women gaining worldly experience before retreating into domesticity after marriage. Figure 1 suggests, however, that unless such employees boarded at home they would have faced economic difficulties. Indeed, the circumstances of widows, women with dependents, and others who were self-supporting were nothing short of tragic.<sup>54</sup> The Ontario Civil Service Association documented that female clerks were just as severely affected as men by the pincer-like squeeze of post-World War I inflation and lagging salaries.<sup>55</sup> The association lobbied the government at the end of World War I for a minimum annual salary of \$1,000 for female civil servants. Budgets prepared by single, self-supporting women showed that even this substantial increase — about 25 per cent more than the 1921 female clerical average — would leave "very little for saving" after necessary expenses had been met.<sup>56</sup> The popular notion at the time of the office girl who worked merely for "pin money" thus served as an ideological screen which masked the economic hardships endured by many office women.

<sup>50</sup> *Monetary Times* (20 May 1911), 2021.

<sup>51</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service*, House of Commons Sessional Papers, No. 29A (1907-1908), 805.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 1339.

<sup>53</sup> Dawson, *Civil Service of Canada*, 189.

<sup>54</sup> In June 1931 there were 256 married women employed in eleven major departments of the over 10,000-strong Ontario Public Service, of whom 1 was divorced, 46 were separated, and others were undoubtedly supporting disabled husbands or children. See Ontario Provincial Archives, RG25, Administrative Service Branch, Statistical Files, 1919-1968, "Report on Married Women in the Public Service as of June 1931."

<sup>55</sup> Ontario Provincial Archives, Ontario Civil Service Association, "Statement Presented to the Government of Ontario," (Toronto 1919), 8. In 1918 the Ontario government established a Civil Service Commission in a move to rationalize the expanding bureaucracy in the interests of efficiency. J.M. McCutcheon, the first Commissioner, pressed for a standardized job classification system based on merit, recognizing that low salaries undermine morale and efficiency. His second annual report documented the problem facing most white-collar workers as a result of the War: "As a general rule, the compensation of salaried workers responds tardily to changing conditions in the cost of living, a fact which makes such employees in a peculiar measure the victims of the



## VI Conclusion

TO SUMMARIZE OUR DISCUSSION, this paper has presented a re-examination of the clerical proletarianization debate from the vantage point of the feminization process which took root during the administrative revolution in the office. The model of proletarianization predominant in the literature equates declining relative wages and diminished control over administration with the clerks' descent into the working class. We have challenged the accuracy of this general interpretation of the twentieth-century transformation of clerical occupations by documenting its major weaknesses. First and most crucial is the preoccupation with aggregate clerical wage trends. This has obscured what is perhaps the most remarkable change in the office since 1900, namely, the shift from a male to a female work force. Advocates of the proletarianization thesis consequently miss the rather obvious point that the increasing recruitment of women as low-priced administrative functionaries largely accounted for declining average clerical salaries.

Second, the degradation of clerical labour cited by Braverman and others as evidence of the spread of factory-like conditions requires careful qualification.

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present rule of high prices. This is true of employees in the Public Service whose salaries have not kept pace with the high cost of living." See *Second Annual Report*, Civil Service Commissioner for Ontario (Toronto 1920), 10. Arguing in his next report that the state should be a model employer, McCutcheon asserts the principle that "salaries should be adequate, fair, and equitable . . . at least sufficient to enable the employee to maintain a proper standard of living." See *Third Annual Report*, Civil Service Commissioner for Ontario (Toronto 1921), 10.

<sup>56</sup> Ontario Civil Service Association, "Statement," 8.

Admittedly some office jobs became part of a paper processing assembly-line, their incumbents experiencing the labour process as would any factory operative. Central typing pools and Hollerith machine rooms quickly come to mind here. Our evidence shows, however, that concerns with this mental-manual division tends not to be extended to the male-female cleavage within the office resulting from labour market segmentation. Yet even for male clerks, economic distance from the upper ranks of manual workers was never great during the early-twentieth century. The extent and nature of their middle classness thus remains at issue. The growing importance of management functions within modern bureaucracies certainly offered a sizeable minority of aspiring clerks opportunities to improve their socio-economic status. While our evidence is tentative with respect to the life-style and mobility experiences of the male clerk, it does provide a fruitful working hypothesis for future research: that despite clerks' declining market position relative to manual workers, their better work environment, job security, and greater mobility prospects inhibited the formation of a new white-collar segment of the working class.

Related to this is the fact that males occupy positions of superiority in the modern office. Because women were relegated to the subordinate jobs, it is here that one would expect to encounter signs of proletarianization. Our research presents a somewhat different picture, however, highlighting substantial variation within female clerical occupations. This heterogeneity of work and market conditions in fact placed some white-collar women in advantaged positions, even when compared with male clerks. And in relation to other female job ghettos clerical occupations had obvious social and economic attractions.

The third and final weakness in the proletarianization thesis revolves around the social consequences of a specific wage. Far too little attention has been paid to the actual living standards of manual and white-collar workers. The existence of a clerical middle class is ultimately a matter of life-style, broadly defined to include social relations, politics, and culture. But as our cost of living analysis revealed, the male clerk would have encountered difficulty supporting himself and a family at a living standard discernably better than the upper reaches of the working class. Whether this economic reality was mirrored in residential and consumption patterns or political attitudes and behaviour can only be determined through further investigation.

The above discussion underlines the need to rethink our approach to studying the relationship between changing working conditions and class structuration. The sex segregation of the office work force demands that the experiences of male and female workers be examined separately but within a single theoretical framework focussing on structural factors in the work place.<sup>57</sup> For example, the superior positions male clerks have occupied in the clerical hierarchy bears directly on their future career prospects. A recent British study suggests that male clerks have diverse origins and destinations, rendering meaningless

<sup>57</sup> See Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York 1977) for an excellent analysis of how gender differences in occupational experiences and behaviour are linked to position in the organization.

any blanket class label.<sup>58</sup> Stratification arrangements, the researchers conclude, are more fluid than static. Consequently, one must analyse career paths rather than inferring class position from the job an individual holds at one time. In other words, if an individual's career involves changes in life-style, social relationships, and other social experiences, then movement in the class structure may be taking place.

These arguments are much less applicable to the female clerk, largely because opportunities seldom exist for them. How, then, might we determine the class position of women in clerical jobs? A first step would be to highlight the connections between the sex structure of work arrangements, the family system and the subordinate position of women within it, and the persistence of class-based inequalities in the larger society. Heeding the caveat against "equating people with jobs," we must distinguish between changes in clerical jobs and the social position of those women who, at a given time, happen to be employed as clerks.<sup>59</sup> According to Braverman the most common occupational combination in the working-class family is a manual operative husband whose wife works as a clerk.<sup>60</sup> The presence of working-class women in the office may constitute the only real form of proletarianization. The fact that the majority of working wives typically have middle class backgrounds lends a certain implausibility to the claim that when performing routine clerical work such women are transformed into proletarians. In short, the crux of the issue is how researchers can most accurately identify the class position of women. There are three basic approaches: focus solely on women and their work; use the family as the unit of analysis examining the economic activities of both spouses; or define women's class location in terms of their fathers or husbands. The extent to which each of these approaches reflects the realities of gender-based inequality is a contentious issue in class theory.<sup>61</sup> Any major advances in our understanding of the class-gender relationship require a creative interplay between theory and data. In this respect the office provides an ideal research laboratory.

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<sup>58</sup> Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn, *Social Stratification and Occupations*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>60</sup> Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, 354.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Acker, "Women and Social Stratification;" Garnsey, "Women's Work and Theories of Class Stratification;" Max Haller, "Marriage, Women and Social Stratification: A Theoretical Critique," *American Journal of Sociology*, 86 (1981), 766-95; Heidi Hartmann, "The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework," *Signs*, 6(1981), 366-94; Nancy Halstrom, "'Women's Work', The Family and Capitalism," *Science and Society*, 45 (1981), 186-211.

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