

## 'Ruffled' Mistresses and 'Discontented' Maids: Respectability and the Case of Domestic Service, 1880-1914

Magda Fahrni

Volume 39, 1997

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt39art03>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Fahrni, M. (1997). 'Ruffled' Mistresses and 'Discontented' Maids: Respectability and the Case of Domestic Service, 1880-1914. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 39, 69–98.

Article abstract

Domestic service was an institution of considerable importance for working-class women and middle-class householders in Canada between 1880 and 1914. Service was instrumental in shaping class relations, in large part because it brought the working class directly into the bourgeois home. It was thus an arena where bourgeois and working-class versions of respectability met, and sometimes clashed. Service was essential to the elaboration of a respectable bourgeois lifestyle, and was considered a suitable occupation for working women, yet the peculiar restrictions of the occupation ensured that domestics would often find the trappings of respectability difficult to maintain. Domestics walked a fine line between 'respectability' and 'deviance'; indeed, in the eyes of many, service was an institution that straddled this line.

# **‘Ruffled’ Mistresses and ‘Discontented’ Maids: Respectability and the Case of Domestic Service, 1880-1914**

**Magda Fahmi**

IN 1887, ELLEN DAY began work as a domestic servant in Brampton, Ontario. Her mistress, Mariette Holtby, described the 21-year-old English immigrant as an “earnest christian girl and will manage my house very nicely.” Holtby “anticipate[d] making a good servant of Ellen. Of course she has very much to learn.” Yet Day, prone to staying “out late at night repeatedly” with the Salvation Army, soon lost her position. She would, Holtby claimed, “have received kindness and watchfull care from me — but she has given ocasion [sic] for us to doubt her respectibility — going with company as she has done.”<sup>1</sup>

Jeannie Caldwell, born in Scotland to “most respectable people,” came to Canada in 1905 at the age of 21. Over the next two years, using the names Jennie Caldwell, Jennie Sinclair, and Dorothy Walker, she worked as a shop-clerk and as a servant in Toronto, Barrie, and Hamilton. On at least three occasions, she was convicted of theft and spent time in the Andrew Mercer Ontario Reformatory for Women and the Barrie Gaol. In June 1907 she was deported to Scotland as an “undesirable immigrant.” As one Canadian declared to the minister of justice, Caldwell was “a dangerous woman, because she poses as a domestic servant, and being capable and of good address, she readily gets employment, when she immediately proceeds to lay her hands on anything of value and decamps.”<sup>2</sup>

The particular fates of Ellen Day and Jeannie Caldwell were not necessarily “typical” of those of most domestic servants in Canada between 1880 and 1914.

<sup>1</sup>National Archives of Canada (NAC), Charlotte A. Alexander Papers (CAAP), MG 29, C 58, Vol. 1, case of Ellen Day, Vol.3, 15.

<sup>2</sup>NAC, Records of the Department of Immigration (DOI), RG 76, Vol.404, File 590006; Public Archives of Ontario (PAO), RG 20, E-13, Mercer Reformatory, *Prison Register*, Vol.2, 1899-1917.

Magda Fahmi, “‘Ruffled’ Mistresses and ‘Discontented’ Maids: Respectability and the Case of Domestic Service, 1880-1914,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 39 (Spring 1997), 69-97.

Their stories, however, do illustrate many of the peculiar tensions of the occupation and of the mistress-servant relationship. They also hint at the complexities of the concept of respectability, and at the range of behaviour considered "disreputable" for young working-class women. An examination of domestic service in turn-of-the-century Canada<sup>3</sup> exposes both the convergences and the disparities between bourgeois and working-class visions of respectability.<sup>4</sup> It highlights, moreover, respectability's gendered nature. Finally, it demonstrates that the dichotomy posited between the respectable and the disreputable was extremely tenuous. On the one hand, service was essential to the elaboration of a respectable bourgeois lifestyle, and was considered a suitable occupation for working women. Yet in a society where dominant notions of respectability largely excluded the poor and often the immigrant, servants were dubious intruders into the bourgeois domain. Unlike other members of the working class, they could not be ignored, deplored, or left at the workplace. The fact that they were crucial to the smooth functioning of propertied respectability necessitated, rather, that they be taken directly into the bourgeois home and hearth. Domestic service, then, was a unique spatial process that transgressed the physical segregation of the classes perceived and defended in late-19th-century Canada.<sup>5</sup> In so doing, it strained an equally rigid ideological

<sup>3</sup> Although the focus of this paper is central Canada, for practical and methodological reasons it at times ranges further afield to include the West and the Maritimes. Turn-of-the-century conceptions of respectability were never strictly regional, while the paucity of sources on (and particularly by) domestic servants necessitated using letters and diaries from elsewhere in the country when available. The study spans a period, 1880-1914, when a significant proportion of wage-earning women worked as servants, but when there were increasingly other forms of employment open to them. The disadvantages of service were therefore under scrutiny: the "servant problem" was much discussed.

<sup>4</sup> Working-class respectability has received much attention from historians of Great Britain. See Robert Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford 1976); Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75* (London 1971); Geoffrey Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society: Kentish London 1840-1880* (London 1978); Peter Bailey, "'Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?' Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working-Class Respectability," *Journal of Social History*, 12 (Spring 1979), 336-53; Ellen Ross, "'Not the Sort that Would Sit on the Doorstep': Respectability in Pre-World War I London Neighbourhoods," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 27 (Spring 1985), 39-59. On North American working-class respectability, see Bruce Laurie, *Artisans Into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York 1989); Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montréal 1979). On bourgeois respectability, see Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London 1987).

<sup>5</sup> On the physical segregation of the classes, and of "respectability" and "vice," perceived in 19th-century North America, see John C. Schneider, "Public Order and the Geography of the City: Crime, Violence, and the Police in Detroit, 1845-1875," *Journal of Urban History*, 4, 2 (February 1978), 183-208; Susan E. Houston, "The Impetus to Reform: Urban Crime,

separation between the respectable and the disreputable. Ultimately, respectability is better seen as a project than as a permanent condition. As a lived state-of-being, respectability, in its various forms, was often elusive.

By the late 19th century, domestic service was primarily female<sup>6</sup> and employed more women than any other wage-earning occupation in Canada.<sup>7</sup> Servants were almost always single; as most "lived in," few employers would hire women with husbands or children. Working-class conceptions of respectability, moreover, discouraged domestics from continuing paid labour after marriage. As the author of "The Scrub Woman" queried in Toronto's *Toiler* in 1903, "I saw the golden circle/ Upon her finger there;/ I wondered where her husband was/ While she worked for her dollar's share."<sup>8</sup> Most domestics were young, often under the age of twenty. Many were immigrants, largely from the British Isles. Almost all were low-paid, earning, in 1901, a national average of \$120 a year. This did, however, include room and board, and wages varied considerably between town and country and between regions. Servants in cities earned more than those in rural areas, and those in western Canada more than those in central Canada, where women seeking employment as domestics were more numerous.<sup>9</sup>

---

Poverty and Ignorance in Ontario, 1850-1875," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1974, especially 77, 80, 213; Joel Best, "Looking Evil in the Face: Being an Examination of Vice and Respectability in St. Paul as Seen in the City's Press, 1865-83," *Minnesota History*, 50, 6 (Summer 1987), 241-51. Best argues that the ostensible physical isolation of respectability and vice was "bolstered by ideological isolation," but that there were in fact numerous interconnections between the two realms.

<sup>6</sup>The focus here is on *household* service and thus excludes a discussion of male "servants" such as hired men on farms. Note, however, that the Molson family in Montréal employed both female housemaids and male grooms in the 1880s. See McCord Museum, Montréal (MM), Molson Family Papers (MFP), XLIV, M19326, Mrs. Jane "Jennie" Butler Molson, "Servants' Wages Book." Chinese men, moreover, were sometimes employed as domestic servants in the late 19th century, particularly in British Columbia. See, for instance, the *Toronto Globe*, 23 April 1901; *Toronto Daily Star*, 3 July 1901; Emily Carr, *The Book of Small* (Toronto 1942), 152; also Anthony B. Chan, *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World* (Vancouver 1982), 72-3.

<sup>7</sup>In 1891 household servants constituted 40.55 per cent of all Canadian women over the age of 10 enumerated as having an occupation; in 1901, this percentage was 34.25. See 1921 *Census of Canada*, Vol.IV, *Population*. It is likely that the actual percentage of women working in service was higher.

<sup>8</sup>*Toiler*, 12 June 1903.

<sup>9</sup>*Census of Canada*, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921. See especially 1901 *Census*: Bulletin I, *Wage-Earners by Occupations*, xviii, 10; Bulletin XI, *Occupations of the People*; and 1921 *Census*, Vol.IV, *Population*. For further information on servants' wages and working conditions, see *The Labour Gazette* (Ottawa), Vol.2, 333; Vol.6, 202; Vol.7, 58-9; Vol.8, 1237; Vol.10, 817; Vol.13, 1076-80, 1209, 1380; Vol.14, 42, 151-2, 266, 553-5; Jean Thomson Scott, *The Conditions of Female Labour in Ontario* (Toronto 1892). See also contemporary classified advertisements for servants' wages, for example, the *Toronto Daily Star*, 23 September 1901, 19 March 1910.

Despite the importance of the occupation for working-class women and middle-class householders, the literature on domestic service in late-19th- and early-20th-century Canada is slim; most of it remains in article form.<sup>10</sup> This article goes beyond discussions of servants' household duties and recruitment campaigns for immigrant domestics to explore the role of service in shaping class relations. For many Canadians, service was a site where bourgeois and working-class conceptions of respectability met. Service was, first of all, crucial to the creation and elaboration of a respectable bourgeois home and lifestyle. The hallmark of a middle-class household was the financial ability to maintain at least one servant; the servant, then, was a status symbol. Servants' labour, moreover, was essential to maintaining the standards of cleanliness and tidiness promoted among the late-19th-century bourgeoisie. Ideally, servants would allow bourgeois matrons to become, not ladies of leisure, but women exempt from the lowlier and more arduous tasks of housekeeping. The latter could then assume the roles of managers and supervisors, as did their husbands with their own employees. In times of temporary crisis middle-class matrons needed to be prepared and able to undertake household duties, for "there may not always be servants or the means with which to command their services; and their incompetence, at best, needs the supervision of a mistress skilled in all their arts ...."<sup>11</sup> For the most part, however, it was mistresses' particular mission to "be competent to direct wisely ...."<sup>12</sup> The bourgeois woman, as manager of her household, was to be at all times conscious of her class obligations; Ontario etiquette manuals reminded her to be courteous to her domestics, and to "never censure the servants at dinner, however things may go wrong."<sup>13</sup> Jane Molson's "Servants' Wages Books" reveal both the extent to which a propertied dowager

<sup>10</sup>See Genevieve Leslie, "Domestic Service in Canada, 1880-1920," in Janice Acton, *et al.*, eds., *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto 1974), 71-125; Helen Lenskyj, "A 'Servant Problem' or a 'Servant-Mistress Problem'? Domestic Service in Canada, 1890-1930," *Atlantis*, 7 (Fall 1981), 3-11; Claudette Lacelle, *Urban Domestic Servants in Nineteenth Century Canada* (Ottawa 1987); Marilyn Barber, "The Servant Problem in Manitoba, 1896-1930," in Mary Kinnear, ed., *First Days, Fighting Days: Women in Manitoba History* (Regina 1987); Barber, "The Women Ontario Welcomed: Immigrant Domestics for Ontario Homes, 1870-1930," in Alison Prentice and Susan Mann Trofimenko, eds., *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History, Volume 2* (Toronto 1985). Servants may also be glimpsed in monographs on other subjects. See, for example, Varpu Lindstrom-Best, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada* (Toronto 1988); Constance Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice: Women and the Law in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto 1991); Judith Fingard, *The Dark Side of Life in Victorian Halifax* (Porters Lake, NS 1989).

<sup>11</sup>*Globe*, 16 February 1884.

<sup>12</sup>Sylvanus Stall, *What a Young Man Ought to Know* (Toronto 1897), 195.

<sup>13</sup>*Griffith's Ready Reference and Etiquette Book: contains much information useful in everyday life* (Toronto 1899?), 16; John H. Young, *Our Deportment, or, The manners, conduct and dress of the most refined society ...* (Paris, ON 1883), 94.

was expected to keep a detailed account of household expenditures, and the strong sense of paternalism prevalent among certain employers. Servants leaving for good or for a short holiday, for example, were frequently presented with "gifts" ranging from two days' pay to five dollars.<sup>14</sup>

Women's decisions to go into service were in part dictated by the exigencies of working-class visions of respectability. Such visions, which spoke to the realities of daily working life, were neither trickle-down versions of middle-class respectability, nor completely autonomous conceptions. Working-class respectability (which was both a goal in itself and a means of achieving that goal) was by turns accommodating and oppositional; while it included tenets commonly considered "bourgeois" (industry, sobriety, thrift), it also posed, on occasion, a significant challenge to the rigid criteria of middle-class respectability.<sup>15</sup> It also had gendered ramifications. Unmarried working-class girls and women might work for wages — but some occupations were more respectable than others. Despite the stigma of serving others, many working-class parents preferred their daughters to work in private homes rather than in more public locales such as factories or shops. Canadian labour newspapers, likewise, commended "neat, pretty, and well behaved" domestic servants while deploring women's work in hotel bars and laundries.<sup>16</sup> Service offered the strict supervision of a familial setting. In effect, servants were both preparing for their future roles as working-class wives and maintaining

<sup>14</sup>MM, MFP, XLIV, M19106, Mrs. Jane "Jennie" Butler Molson, "Servants' Wages Book"; M19326, "Servants' Wages Book, Accounts, Etc." The *Western Home Monthly*, meanwhile, suggested to employers in December 1904, "For the servants of the family provide gifts which will not in any way suggest work. Where money can be afforded it is almost always the best way of remembering those who have served faithfully; with it may go boxes of candy and pretty boxes of stationery." On servants and bourgeois respectability, see Faye Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, CT 1983), 104-71; Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 33, 286, 389-95; Patricia Branca, *Silent Sisterhood: Middle Class Women in the Victorian Home* (London 1975), 54; John R. Gillis, "Servants, Sexual Relations and the Risk of Illegitimacy in London, 1801-1900," in Judith L. Newton, et al., eds., *Sex and Class in Women's History* (London 1983), 115; Pam Taylor, "Daughters and Mothers — Maids and Mistresses: Domestic Service Between the Wars," in J. Clarke, et al., eds., *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (New York 1979), 124; Theresa M. McBride, *The Domestic Revolution: The Modernisation of Household Service in England and France 1820-1920* (New York 1976), 18; Cissie Fairchild, "Masters and Servants in Eighteenth Century Toulouse," *Journal of Social History*, 12 (Spring 1979), 377.

<sup>15</sup>See Bailey, "Bill Banks," for a nuanced discussion of working-class respectability. Bailey suggests that respectability "was practised in a more limited and situational sense than that of a lived ideal or permanent code of values" and that it was "assumed as a role (or cluster of roles) as much as it was espoused as an ideology," 338.

<sup>16</sup>*Palladium of Labor (POL)*, 24 July 1886; *Industrial Banner (IB)*, December 1901; *IB*, February 1902; *POL*, 27 March 1886. The labour press was wont to speak paternalistically of domestics, referring to them as "Our Servant Girls." See, for instance, *POL*, 24 July 1886.

the role of daughters — industrious and obedient — for a wage.<sup>17</sup> Some young servants, to be sure, must have welcomed the security of a family environment. Sarah Driscoll, for instance, arrived in Canada in 1887 at the age of sixteen and was apprenticed as a servant with a Mrs. Cecilia E. Downes of Toronto. In 1890, she wrote "I would rather work here for five Dollars than any were [sic] else for eight as I have no working clothes to buy and they kindly look after making my Dresses and I feel certain that I can trust Mrs. Downes that she will look after my welfare." Driscoll evidently appreciated the Downes' benevolence, writing in 1888: "I had such nice presents giving me at Christmas My Mistress gave me a nice print dress and my Master gave a little round box The Miss Downes gave me penwipes and a little Bloter and cup and saucer and plate to match and the little children made me a pincushion and to [sic] little woolen mats."<sup>18</sup>

Historians of Europe and the United States have argued that working parents and their daughters saw service as a means of upward mobility.<sup>19</sup> This may have been the case in Canada to some extent: Varpu Lindstrom-Best, for example, asserts that first-generation Finnish immigrants saw service as a perfectly respectable route to socioeconomic improvement.<sup>20</sup> The contemporary labour press fuelled such hopes by printing articles like "A Lucky Servant Girl," about a young servant working in Hamilton who married the brother of her mistress, "a wealthy batchelor [sic]" from Troy, New York. Rejoiced the *Palladium of Labor* about the groom, "he has plenty of the needful, and the poor immigrant girl of a few years ago will soon be the handsome wife of a rich Trojan manufacturer."<sup>21</sup> An adjunct to actual material gain through service was the acquisition of refined habits and manners. Lindstrom-Best, for instance, claims that Finnish-Canadian maids "attentively observed the 'ladies' and were soon acquiring new role models."<sup>22</sup>

Mistresses and maids were not simply concerned with their own respective respectabilities. On the contrary, the respectability of domestics was a constant concern for their employers. Classified advertisements requested "A Respectable

<sup>17</sup> See Leonore Davidoff, "Mastered For Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England," *Journal of Social History*, 7, 4 (Summer 1974), 409, 414; Joan W. Scott and Louise A. Tilly, "Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17, 1 (January 1975), 53; Taylor, "Daughters and Mothers," 123; Leslie, "Domestic Service in Canada, 1880-1920," 85.

<sup>18</sup> NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol.1, case of Sarah Driscoll; and Vol.3, 11.

<sup>19</sup> See Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain*, 125; Sarah Crawford Maza, "Domestic Service in Eighteenth Century France," PhD thesis, Princeton University, 1978, 94; McBride, *Domestic Revolution*, 69; McBride, "Social Mobility For the Lower Classes: Domestic Servants in France," *Journal of Social History*, 8 (Fall 1974), 63-78; David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York 1978), 70.

<sup>20</sup> Lindstrom-Best, *Defiant Sisters*, 93.

<sup>21</sup> *POL*, 24 July 1886.

<sup>22</sup> Lindstrom-Best, *Defiant Sisters*, 93.

Housekeeper," a "Respectable, industrious girl or woman" and "A respectable middle-aged woman — to do the housework on a small farm adjoining the city ...."<sup>23</sup> "Situations Wanted" columns responded in kind with notices such as "Respectable woman wants work as sick nurse" and "Woman — Respectable — wants work by the day."<sup>24</sup> Just what respectability meant became clear when employers specifically delineated the qualities desired in a servant. The Dominion Bureau for the Employment of Women, for instance, asked former employers of servants "Is she temperate, honest, respectable, and truthful?," "Is she neat in her person and about the house?" and "Is she faithful in her work and is she trustworthy?"<sup>25</sup> To a certain extent, the character of the employing household was also under scrutiny. One woman attempting to place immigrant girls in positions in Canada, for instance, was constantly in search of a "respectable situation."<sup>26</sup> Women who did their own job-hunting, however, could not always afford to be as discriminating.

Nowhere was the concern for the respectability of potential servants more obvious than in turn-of-the-century government-sponsored recruitment campaigns. A scarcity of domestic servants in Canada prompted both the state and private organizations to actively recruit domestics from the British Isles and, to a lesser extent, Scandinavia. Canadian organizations such as the National Council of Women of Canada, the YWCA, and the Women's Immigration Society were aided by parallel groups across the Atlantic such as the United British Women's Emigration Association. Since many of the girls and women were recruited from orphanages and workhouses, the campaigns were often promoted as charitable acts. Most of the Canadians involved, however, appeared to be more concerned for the well-being of the employing households than for that of the emigrants themselves.<sup>27</sup> Fear of importing "deviance" was rampant. Not only were these women "foreigners," although white and usually English-speaking, but many of them were clearly trying to escape lives that were materially and emotionally impoverished. In an attempt to allay their own fears and those of future employers, recruiters continually emphasized the fact that they were interested only in a "better class" of women — women who would have to undergo medical, moral, and character inspections. They assured Canadians that the women chosen were "a fine class of servants; sensible, modest and healthy."<sup>28</sup> Conversely, they reassured prospective British applicants of the respectability of service in Canada, promising "High Wages Good Homes Healthy Climate" and asking them to

Imagine a well-educated, well-bred girl from England who goes to, say, Winnipeg, and accepts the office of mother's help in one of the high-class homes ... For a time it may be

<sup>23</sup> *Globe*, 14 August 1886, 21 August 1886, 29 September 1888.

<sup>24</sup> *Globe*, 24 July 1886.

<sup>25</sup> NAC, DOI, RG 76, Vol.421, File 616279.

<sup>26</sup> NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, case of Bridget O'Donnell, Vol.3, 8.

<sup>27</sup> On this point, see Leslie, "Domestic Service in Canada," 101.

<sup>28</sup> NAC, DOI, RG 76, Vol.113, File 22787, Part I.

hard and uncomfortable; but never for one single moment is the thought in this girl's mind that she is not needed — is not appreciated — is not accepted for what she is — a lady who accepts pioneer conditions for a purpose — the grand purpose of lifting herself by her own efforts from dependence with its painful and pitiful pangs, to a life of utter independence and gain.<sup>29</sup>

Concern for the respectability of immigrant domestics did not end once suitable candidates had been chosen; the women's voyages to Canada and the period following their arrival were also monitored in order to ensure that the country's future servants were still fully respectable when they arrived in the homes of their employers. "Girls' Homes of Welcome" and "Women's Hostels" were established across the country to greet incoming domestics and to provide them with a safe place to stay while they secured positions.<sup>30</sup> Concern that the carefully selected innocents might fall into the hands of white-slave-traders lurking in railway stations and boarding-houses was widespread. As a representative of Winnipeg's Girls' Home of Welcome explained, "it should be a matter of grave concern to immigration authorities that these women are properly protected en route. We have frequent examples of girls making undesirable acquaintances on the journey ..."<sup>31</sup> The YWCA declared that there was in fact "no more valuable contribution to the life of a nation than the taking hold of this problem of the immigrant girl on a broad, statesmanlike basis."<sup>32</sup> Few would have disagreed with one reformer's assertion that "the task of selecting, encouraging and assisting the desirable and of dissuading the undesirable is a somewhat formidable one."<sup>33</sup>

The best way for bourgeois householders to ensure the respectability of their domestics — foreign or native-born — was to set them a proper example. Just as middle-class matrons attempted to uplift "unfortunate" or "fallen" women of the working class through reform work and voluntary groups,<sup>34</sup> so they perceived it

<sup>29</sup>NAC, DOI, RG 76, Vol.358, File 411788, Part 4; and, Vol.402, File 583758.

<sup>30</sup>NAC, DOI, RG 76, Vol.118, File 22787, Parts 1 and 2; and, Vol.138, File 33136, Parts 1 and 2. See also Ella Sykes, *A Home Help in Canada* (London 1912), 69. On temporary lodging houses for servants in Halifax in an earlier period, see Fingard, *The Dark Side*, 140.

<sup>31</sup>NAC, DOI, RG 76, Vol.138, File 33136, Part 2.

<sup>32</sup>NAC, MG 28, I 198, Vol.13, YWCA *Immigration Committee Minute Book 1912-1916*; see also *City Committee Minute Book 1909-1915*.

<sup>33</sup>Emily P. Weaver, et al., eds., *The Canadian Woman's Annual and Social Service Directory* (Toronto 1915), 27. On this point see also Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto 1991). Valverde notes that the recruiters' concern was not only for the immigrant women but was also a "concern for the dangers posed to Canada by these single women living outside the family," 122, 127. On British female immigration see Barbara Roberts, "A Work of Empire: Canadian Reformers and British Female Immigration," in Linda Kealey, ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto 1979).

<sup>34</sup>See Valverde, *Light, Soap, and Water*, 100, 103, 140.

their responsibility to serve as moral exemplars to their servants.<sup>35</sup> Sarah Cornford, a domestic servant who left England for Canada in 1889, for instance, was described by a concerned reform worker as "an affectionate girl, but hasty in temper and will require a firm kind mistress who will gain her respect; then I hope she may become a useful member of a household." "Patience, forbearance and kindness," this reformer promised, "will I believe be rewarded by faithful service."<sup>36</sup> Jane Collis's employer, however, acknowledged in 1887 that the mistress role was not always one that came naturally, writing of Jane, "She is doing very well, with the children and, I think with training will make a good servant. She does not appear to understand much about housework. I hope I will have patience to teach her. It is always easier for me to do myself than instruct others."<sup>37</sup> Yet most employers accepted the task as their duty. As Agnes Maule Machar, a Kingston author and social reformer, reminded mistresses:

That girls are often greatly trying, even intensely provoking, is not to set us free from this responsibility. We can scarcely look for the highest principle or the most refined feeling from the homes and antecedent training — or lack of it — from which so many of them come into circumstances for which they have had little preparation. But we may do much to raise their tone of thought and feeling, and draw forth all that is good, instead of, as so often happens, fostering the reverse.<sup>38</sup>

By the beginning of the 20th century the task of urban employers was potentially aided by the numerous domestic science classes offered at various institutions. A staff member at the Toronto Technical High School, for instance, insisted that it was "'not an uncommon thing for a mistress and her maid to come together to evening classes.'"<sup>39</sup>

Yet the vast quantity of time and energy devoted to discussions of "the servant problem" suggests that the experience of service for many domestics and their employers was a far cry from this respectable ideal. The "servant problem" was twofold: not enough women were choosing service as an occupation, and those who did were deemed unsatisfactory. The fact that the dissatisfaction was mutual was the major cause of the "problem." Working-class women chose other employment options when they could: as the *Toronto Star* sighed, "They worship the god that has his throne high over the departmental store. They prostrate themselves before the noisy chattering god of the typewriter. Upon the altar of the cruel sewing machine god they shed their blood. But the poor homely little god, whose symbols

<sup>35</sup> Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, 156-9, 171; Dudden, *Serving Women*, 167-8, 197. See also McBride, *Domestic Revolution*, 24.

<sup>36</sup> NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol. 1, cases of Sarah Cornford and Rose Alexander; and Vol. 3, 83.

<sup>37</sup> NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol. 1, case of Jane Collis.

<sup>38</sup> *The Week*, 27 March 1896.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Emily P. Weaver, *Canadian Woman's Annual*, 144.

are the frying pan and the dust brush, goes a-begging for followers."<sup>40</sup> Those women who did settle for service changed positions frequently. Jane Molson's ledger book, for instance, reveals that she went through an astonishing array of domestics in speedy succession.<sup>41</sup> The popular press teemed with articles such as "The Hired Girl Problem," "Servant Girl Problem," "Why the Girls Fight Shy of Domestic Service," and "Why the Factory Girl Does Not Want to be a Servant Girl"; as Alice Klein and Wayne Roberts have pointed out, for many bourgeois householders and social reformers this "scarcity of domestic servants was an indication of social crisis."<sup>42</sup> While the *Labour Gazette* concluded succinctly that "the labour problem that vexes the housewife most is the lack of well-trained general servants," the *Canadian Courier* waxed poetic:

The thousands of Ontario homes where good places and liberal wages await women competent to do housework remain unfilled. Yet the need for such help is literally a crying one. Go where you will in this province, you will hear the lament that capable domestic help is not to be had at any price ... Of the few we get who have really been brought up to these callings the majority come from British cities, and have little fitness for the domestic duties of an Ontario farm house.<sup>43</sup>

Agnes Maule Machar sympathized less with domestics than with the female factory workers for whom she attempted to secure shorter hours and better working conditions. Referring to "the vexed question of domestic service," she commiserated with "the hard-worked and much-tried mistress," who, with her fellow matrons, bore a heavy burden in governing "the raw and inefficient workers in their kitchens, so ready to leave them in the lurch on the shortest notice and the slightest pretext." Machar did admit that the long hours and tedious duties of service were "often very trying, especially to undisciplined natures with few resources within themselves." And yet, she insisted, the servants' "natural incapacity and almost total lack of preliminary training for their work is one cause of the unduly long hours of work which, with greater skill and method on the part of the worker, might be greatly shortened."<sup>44</sup> Much of mistresses' dissatisfaction appeared to stem from

<sup>40</sup>*Star*, 10 January 1899.

<sup>41</sup>MM, MFP, XLIV, M19106, Mrs. Jane "Jennie" Butler Molson, "Servants' Wages Book."

<sup>42</sup>*Star*, 28 September 1901, 1 October 1901, 10 May 1912, 3 July 1912; Alice Klein and Wayne Roberts, "Besieged Innocence: The 'Problem' and Problems of Working Women — Toronto, 1896-1914," in *Women at Work*, 229.

<sup>43</sup>*Labour Gazette*, Vol.13, 1079. See also 1076-7, 1209, 1380; Vol.2, 333; Vol.6, 202; Vol.10, 817; *Canadian Courier*, 8 May 1909.

<sup>44</sup>*The Week*, 6 September 1895; 27 March 1896. Although these two articles were signed "FIDELIS," Constance Backhouse suggests that they were in fact the writings of Machar. See Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice*, 417, n30. On the "servant problem" in an earlier period, see Susanna Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush* (Toronto 1987 [1852]), esp. 140-2.

the tensions between bourgeois and working-class conceptions of respectability. Complaints about the "cheap finery" and ostentatious "mimicry" of servants' dress were widespread.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, mistresses deplored the alleged thriftlessness of their maids. As Jane Collis's mistress noted, "I think if Jane could get in a place where they would look after her money it would be better for her, when she has it she spends it all at once." A reform worker, likewise, hoped that Sarah Cornford's mistress would "encourage her not to spend all her wages as she has had so little previously that she will have little discession [sic] in spending."<sup>46</sup>

Although popular rhetoric pointed to the servant, and not service, as the "problem," there is ample evidence that mistresses were failing to fulfil their part of the respectable ideal. The late-Victorian Canadian press frequently questioned middle-class women's ability to manage a household. "The trouble," declared Toronto's *Star*, was "that the mistress despises the work of her own household, while she recognizes the necessity for its accomplishment."<sup>47</sup> Middle-class women, it was argued, should be properly trained in housekeeping rather than in the abstract sciences of a traditional education. For, as a *Toronto Globe* writer pointed out, "it does nobody any harm for the mistress of a household to know how to calculate an eclipse, but it is disastrous for her to be herself eclipsed by her Bridget."<sup>48</sup> Toronto's *Evening Telegram*, meanwhile, attributed the high turnover of servants to "the fact that the average woman is constitutionally incapable of attending to her own business, and she meddles and interferes and nags at her servants until it gets on their nerves so that they can't stand it."<sup>49</sup> Jane Radford, of the Dominion Bureau for the Employment of Women, likewise explained in 1912 that "girls are placed in situations where mistresses are not always patient or willing to teach them the different modes of living in this country to the Old. The girl then becomes

<sup>45</sup>POL, 17 April 1886; POL, 16 May 1885; Young, *Our Deportment*, 257. A commission established to enquire into Ontario's prison and reformatory system in 1891 in fact concluded that "the love of dress amongst [working] girls" was a cause of crime. See "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire Into the Prison and Reformatory System of Ontario 1891," *Ontario Sessional Papers* (1891), 44. On working-class women and "the love of finery," see Mariana Valverde, "The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse," *Victorian Studies*, 32, 2 (Winter 1989), 169-88. On New York City working women and "putting on style," see Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia 1986), 62-7. Peiss claims that "dress was a particularly potent way to display and play with notions of respectability, allure, independence, and status and to assert a distinctive identity and presence," 63.

<sup>46</sup>NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol.1, cases of Jane Collis and Sarah Cornford.

<sup>47</sup>*Star*, 10 January 1899. On similar sentiments in English newspapers, see Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, 54, 31.

<sup>48</sup>*Globe*, 16 February 1884; see also *Globe*, 9 February 1884. Note the stereotype of the Irish maidservant.

<sup>49</sup>*Evening Telegram*, 5 August 1914.

discouraged, and is either sullen or impertinant [sic]."<sup>50</sup> Jean Scott, writing of women's work in Ontario in 1892, claimed that the "indefiniteness with regard to what a girl is expected to do, and what she is not expected to do, is one of the causes of disputes which often end in a notice to leave or a dismissal. The fact that some mistresses require their servants to do too much leads servants very often to try to do as little as possible."<sup>51</sup> That same year, Martha Pritchard, a servant working in western Canada, complained about the amount of work demanded by her mistress in a letter to a fellow servant:

I have to work a great deal harder this summer than last of course Mrs. Humphrys was not here last summer and that makes a great difference she is never happy unless surrounded by visitors theres very often People to luncheon tea or dinner not forgetting the dances there were about 70 people here to a dance in July they look like a lot of fools coming to be fed I quite agree with you on the service question I am tired of it myself and will quit it before long I never was quite done up till this summer...<sup>52</sup>

An Ontario "servant girl," meanwhile, asked *Palladium of Labor* readers "is it necessary, because a girl is working for another woman, that she be insulted, and every effort made to degrade and keep her down?"<sup>53</sup> The *Industrial Banner* advocated a professionalization of domestic service so that "masters and mistresses would find it necessary to change the style of treatment meted out to their servant girls." Moncton's *Eastern Labor News* similarly deplored the long hours and low wages of service, contending that overworked domestics were often driven into prostitution and that "the women who hire this under-paid labor have small reason to sneer at the 'madam' of a bawdy house. They are in the same social boat and the pot need not cast reflections on the color of the kettle."<sup>54</sup>

Certain mistresses willingly admitted that they could not properly govern their servants, and that their own mistress-servant relationships were far from ideal. Sixteen-year-old Amelia Fairbank's employer, for instance, confessed in 1890:

I have done my best to make Millie a useful and a good girl but my patience is about run out — she is not capable of learning very much, but what is worse — she will not try to do any thing as I wish her ... she will not work unless I stand over her and insist that she does it ... but the greatest trouble is her untruthfulness and deceit — you cannot believe three words that she says.

Jane Collis's employer, likewise, wrote in 1887:

<sup>50</sup>NAC, DOI, RG 76, Vol. 421, File 616279.

<sup>51</sup>Jean Thomson Scott, *Conditions of Female Labour*, 19. In a similar vein, see *Saturday Night*, 4 May 1889.

<sup>52</sup>NAC, Martha Morgan Papers (MMP), MG 29, C 85. See letter written 27 August 1893.

<sup>53</sup>*POL*, 24 July 1886. See also the *Globe*, 22 January 1886, for a similar complaint.

<sup>54</sup>*IB*, 18 April 1899; *Eastern Labor News*, 5 July 1913.

I am exceedingly sorry to tell you that Jane has greatly disappointed me. And, I told her when I paid her that unless she made a great change, I could not keep her longer than this month. I have proved her to be quite the reverse of what I expected when last I wrote to you. Most of the time she is utterly useless, wild as a hare, saucy and quite disregarding my wishes.

I have reasoned with her, endeavoring to show her that it was to her own interest to try and remain with me — that I would be very patient if only I could see she wished to do what was right ...

I hope you won't think I am unreasonable and expect too much. I don't I never make many demands but, when I do I wish them attended to.

Three years later another employer admitted that she, too, found it difficult to handle Jane, explaining "she improved very much during the time she was with me and was getting a nice tidy servant but she said she would not stay with me because she could not go out at nights, I could not spare her more than two evenings a week, & I had a lot of trouble about getting her to come in to time so thought it best to let her go ...".<sup>55</sup>

The relationship between those the *Toronto Star* termed "ruffled mistresses and dispirited discontented maid[s]" clearly fell short of the ideal of maternal benevolence and daughterly deference.<sup>56</sup> Equally worrisome was the fact that the ideal division of labour between mistress and maid was not always realized. The paradigms of a labouring servant and a mistress whose role was limited to careful supervision and wise direction were in many cases unfulfilled, particularly in rural areas.<sup>57</sup> Jane Collis's employer, for instance, complained in 1891 that she herself did as much (or more) work around the house as Jane.<sup>58</sup> Martha Pritchard admitted to a fellow servant "I have no fuss if the meals are not ready, one of the family always sets the dining room table." A frequent guest of the family, moreover, an English doctor, was "realy very nice he comes in the kitchen to help to dry up the dishes," while family members occasionally helped with the cleaning. In 1893, for instance, Pritchard wrote "the Eldest daughter and myself in spring cleaning time ... washed all the house upstairs and down and Painted all the wood work it had never been done before There's 13 rooms up stairs and 11 rooms down. beside a very Large Landing and Hall I realy worked my self out till I was got quite weak of course I had the heavy part of it."<sup>59</sup>

It was the servants who bore the principal responsibility for the deviation of service from the respectable norm. Key to this assignation of blame was an obvious paradox: despite the promotion of service as a reputable occupation for respectable women, domestics sometimes came from backgrounds that were perceived to be

<sup>55</sup>NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol.1, cases of Amelia Fairbank and Jane Collis.

<sup>56</sup>*Star*, 10 January 1899.

<sup>57</sup>On the differing experiences of rural and urban servants see Lenskyj, "A 'Servant Problem,'" 9.

<sup>58</sup>NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol.1, case of Jane Collis.

<sup>59</sup>NAC, MMP, MG 29, C 85, 18 December 1892, 22 November 1892, 27 August 1893.

distinctly disreputable. Its particular drawbacks (long hours, low pay, little privacy, the danger of sexual harassment, the lack of co-workers) had long rendered domestic service an occupation of last resort. The fact that a job in service was easily available, provided room and board, and required no qualifications other than domestic skills (which all women were assumed to possess), ensured that it remained a refuge for women with no formal training and for women who lacked the savings to wait for a better position. Servants, then, came from Canada's rural communities and emerging urban working class, but also by way of its institutions. In the mid-19th century, female inmates of Kingston's House of Industry frequently "Left the Institution for Service" or went "to Service With a Woman in the Country."<sup>60</sup> In the late-19th century, the state and employers began making a concerted effort to recruit domestic servants from among women who had "strayed" or who appeared incapable of gaining any other livelihood. Inmates of the various Magdalen Asylums across Ontario, for instance, were trained in domestic skills. Likewise, upon the expiration of their sentences, inmates of the Andrew Mercer Ontario Reformatory for Females were frequently placed in situations that had been secured for them by staff members.<sup>61</sup>

The fact that many servants were recent immigrants to Canada also rendered them suspect, particularly since many of these women came from truly impoverished backgrounds. The United British Women's Emigration Association, for example, occasionally drew emigrants from English workhouses such as the East Grinstead Union.<sup>62</sup> Charlotte A. Alexander, who ran a Girls' Training Home, personally supervised the emigration of dozens of girls and young women from the workhouses and slums of Britain to adopted homes, apprenticeships, and positions in service in Canada. Only those judged morally and physically suitable were permitted to emigrate: girls accused of "pilfering" in the Home, for instance, were pronounced "incapable and unfit for emigration."<sup>63</sup> Alexander made extensive notes on the girls' backgrounds, which were often markedly out of harmony with the demands of Canadian employers for "respectable" servants. Often the girls had lost one or both parents; those parents who were alive were usually destitute or ill.

<sup>60</sup>Queen's University Archives (QUA), A. ARCH 2262, Kingston House of Industry, *Discharge Book, 1857-1867*.

<sup>61</sup>"Annual Report of the Inspector of Prisons and Public Charities Upon the Common Gaols, Prisons and Reformatories of the Province of Ontario," *Ontario Sessional Papers* (1881-1911). Hereafter cited as "Annual Report," *OSP*.

<sup>62</sup>NAC, DOI, RG 76, Vol.45, File 1378.

<sup>63</sup>NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol.3, 4, case of Louisa Shillits. The Alexander Papers are fascinating in that they point to the similarities between the situations of the younger girls placed with adoptive families and those of the older girls and women placed in service jobs. Joy Parr makes reference to a few of Alexander's younger charges in *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924* (Montréal 1980), as does Neil Sutherland in *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth-Century Consensus* (Toronto 1976).

About Lizzie Baker, who emigrated in 1891 at age sixteen, for instance, Alexander noted: "Father dead. Mother bad — drinks — has married again — second husband in jail. She gone off with his brother — has been cruel to children." Alexander clearly saw emigration as necessary not only in order to supply the Canadian bourgeoisie with hired help, but also as a way of salvaging some shred of respectability for the girls themselves. Alice Wews, for example, had a "very bad mother living in Exeter therefore Emigration desirable." Alice (later Jane) Collis was encouraged to emigrate because, as a reform worker explained, "poor Alice has such a bad father and one Sister in a *bad* house but she herself is perfectly steady and innocent, it would be such a blessing for the poor child to be taken away from her relations."<sup>64</sup>

Even leaving aside such personal backgrounds, the peculiar nature of the occupation was itself conducive to actions construed as "deviant." Low wages and inescapable servility meant that the stigma attached to service was virtually unavoidable. As Lucy Maud Montgomery noted in her diary in 1894:

Clara C., by the way, is in Boston now, working out as a domestic servant. It is absurd. Clara herself never had any lofty ideals or ambitions but I simply cannot understand her parents, especially Aunt Annie, permitting such a thing. If she wanted to earn her living they were quite able to afford to educate or train her to some occupation which would not have involved a loss of social caste. The idea of Clara Campbell 'working out'! It would be laughable if it were not so tragic.<sup>65</sup>

Laura Goodman Salverson, born in Winnipeg in 1890, went into service with similar distaste: "Even our leanest days had not prepared me for such an eventuality. I'd rather pick rags and keep my self-respect!"<sup>66</sup> Domestics and contemporary observers alike were keenly sensitive to what Jean Scott called "the social barrier which exists between mistress and maid" and the *Toronto Star* termed "this loss of caste, this social slur ..."<sup>67</sup> "Household service," claimed one journalist in 1912, "is too menial and undignified. A girl may work anywhere else and call herself a lady. She may be a saleslady or hold a position with a firm (even if she works in a factory), but in a household there is only one lady and she the employer. The servant is just a servant."<sup>68</sup> This sense of inferiority was twinned with a sense of exclusion.<sup>69</sup> Alice Chown, for instance, generally a woman of progressive views, nonetheless

<sup>64</sup>NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol.3, 78, case of Lizzie Baker; Vol.3, 47, case of Alice Wews; Vol.1, case of Jane Collis. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>65</sup>Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston, eds., *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery, Vol.I, 1889-1910* (Toronto 1985), 119.

<sup>66</sup>Laura Goodman Salverson, *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* (Toronto 1981 [1939]), 319.

<sup>67</sup>Jean Thomson Scott, *Conditions of Female Labour*, 19; *Star*, 3 July 1912.

<sup>68</sup>*Star*, 10 May 1912.

<sup>69</sup>See Pam Taylor, "Daughters and Mothers," 122, 134; McBride, *Domestic Revolution*, 99.

found it difficult to overcome the gulf between mistress and maid. In her autobiography she mused:

It is amusing to recall my feeling of consternation the first time I sat at the breakfast table with the maid. She was a very nice girl, intelligent, and quiet in her manners. Around the house, I used to talk with her a great deal, and yet, when I had occasion to sit at the table and talk to her, the force of habit was so strong that I felt that I was doing something daring. I had a similar feeling the first time I took a meal with my washerwoman.<sup>70</sup>

The majority of servant-employing households in Canada included only one domestic at a time.<sup>71</sup> Live-in servants were thus isolated; as one contemporary journalist noted (romantically), "girls in factories can sing together sometimes while at work and flock together socially at night, but a servant is always lonesome."<sup>72</sup> Servants working in rural areas were particularly lonely. Martha Pritchard, who had left England for a position in Assiniboia, found her new home depressing because "it is a nice country as far as that goes but there is not many people about no Chaple no sunday school." Once church service was moved from Sunday evening to the afternoon, she found herself "every sunday night in the house moping no where to go." In 1892, she wrote to a fellow domestic:

I am sorry you are miserable. for I know the feeling it is a *peculiar* feeling O realy it is something past describeingly dull. here for sometimes I feel as if could not stop here not a single person i know but worse than all there is so few people round here. sunday is a perfect miserably day I could go where I like but there there is nowhere to go or anything to be seen so I dont see it any use to go out.<sup>73</sup>

Many servants who might have seen it some "use to go out" were not encouraged to do so. Twenty-one-year-old Emily Lever, for instance, was given a good

<sup>70</sup>Alice A. Chown, *The Stairway* (Toronto 1988 [1921]), 110.

<sup>71</sup>Jean Thomson Scott, *Conditions of Female Labour*, 19. This, incidentally, made the unionization of domestics nearly impossible; those domestics' unions that were formed were short-lived. For information on Vancouver's Home and Domestic Employee's Union, see *The Labour Gazette*, Vol.13, 1080; Vol.14, 41, 152, 266. The *Labour Gazette* also alludes to a domestic servants' business association in Winnipeg entitled "The Sunshine Business Girls' Club," Vol.14, 555. For an account of a domestic attempting to organize a union, see the *Toronto Daily Star*, 21 December 1901. Letters from domestics calling for unionization can be found in the *Globe*, 22 January 1886, 8 March 1886. Lindstrom-Best also mentions Domestic Clubs and maids' groups established within the early-20th century Finnish-Canadian community, *Defiant Sisters*, 101-2.

<sup>72</sup>*Star*, 10 May 1912.

<sup>73</sup>NAC, MMP, MG 29, C 85, 17 July 1892; 22 November 1892; 21 August 1892, emphasis in the original.

character reference by her employer because "although somewhat slow, she is much inclined to stay at home and keep proper hours."<sup>74</sup>

Most domestics, isolated in middle-class homes with little leisure time, felt themselves to be, in Leonore Davidoff's words, at a distinct "disadvantage in the marriage market compared to their less restricted working contemporaries."<sup>75</sup> The *Toronto Star*, for instance, observed that "one must allow, too, in dealing with the servant question, for the mating instinct that is inherent in human nature. The girl in the factory has 'bows' in her hair and 'beaux' in her train. The girl in the kitchen is shut away from these lords of creation."<sup>76</sup> Martha Pritchard wrote to fellow servant Martha Morgan: "I do hope to see Johnie before very long just think I have never seen any one I know since leaving Hay every thing & every body round here is got so stale I never [g]o out with any one I feel such a modest young woman." In a subsequent letter she wrote "I assure you I have never been with any fellow since leaving the old country."<sup>77</sup> This dearth of male company was a serious concern for the many domestics who viewed marriage as an escape from service. Elizabeth Crawley, for instance, brought to Canada by Charlotte Alexander in 1888, soon found a "beau" and left service for marriage. Rose Picking obtained a position in Newmarket, Ontario in 1888 at age fifteen and by 1890 had married a "very respectable steady industrious man." Elizabeth Harsley, likewise, arrived in Canada in 1890 at the age of sixteen and obtained a position on an Ontario farm in July. By November, she had eloped with nineteen-year-old Robert Diamond, himself "one of Bernardo's [sic] boys."<sup>78</sup>

Although most servants had little freedom to pursue romantic and sexual liaisons, the private nature of their employment rendered them potentially subject to sexual harassment and assault by employers and employers' family members and guests. C.S. Clark collected (apocryphal?) tales of such occurrences, reporting "one lad of eighteen years informed me that in five years there had not been a domestic in their house with whom he had not had improper relations. Another of sixteen stated that it was a rare thing for them to have a domestic with whom he did not have improper relations."<sup>79</sup> Such harassment fuelled accounts in the

<sup>74</sup>NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol.1, case of Emily Lever.

<sup>75</sup>Davidoff, "Mastered for Life," 418.

<sup>76</sup>*Star*, 3 July 1912.

<sup>77</sup>NAC, MMP, MG 29, C 85, 27 August 1893; final letter, undated.

<sup>78</sup>NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol.3, 45, case of Elizabeth Crawley; Vol.3, 42, case of Rose Picking; Vol.3, 107, case of Elizabeth Harsley; also Vol.3, 109, case of Candace Rendell. Laura Salverson, describing her days in service, likewise claims that "for girls like us the dice were loaded from the start. The ensign of the mop and the dustbin hung over our cradles. No wonder thousands of us married any old fool!" See *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter*, 323.

<sup>79</sup>C.S. Clark, *Of Toronto the Good: The Queen City of Canada As It Is* (Montréal 1898), 104. See also, *Palladium of Labor*, 24 July 1886 for a servant's account of sexual harassment by her employer's son; Salverson, *Confessions*, 336, for an account of sexual overtures made

contemporary labour press of the seduction of innocent working girls by bourgeois libertines. Conversely, as Karen Dubinsky has pointed out, it in fact belied the "prevailing sexual ethos," which "did not recognize families and households as sites of sexual danger."<sup>80</sup>

Clearly, a job in service had numerous drawbacks. Aggravating the instability of such employment was the extent to which it depended upon the nebulous concept of "character." The servant could not use her domestic skills and training as leverage with her employer, as these were assumed to be inherent in all proper women. Rather, she was hired, and often fired, because of supposed character attributes or flaws. Emily Hyde Holland, for instance, was dismissed by Jane Molson in 1883 six days after being hired. Beside Holland's name in her "Servants' Wages Book," Molson wrote simply "Paid off — bad character."<sup>81</sup> Domestic servants relied upon character references from former employers in order to obtain new situations: as Geoffrey Best has noted, "life was just as hard or soft as the employer wished to make it; and the prudent girl had to take what she was given, because of the dread consequences of being sacked without a reference."<sup>82</sup>

In an occupation, then, where respectability was essential, the slightest sign of defiance or departure from the norm could be construed as dangerous and "devi-

---

by her mistress's son; and Carolyn Strange, "Wounded Womanhood and Dead Men: Chivalry and the Trials of Clara Ford and Carrie Davies," in Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* (Toronto 1992), on Carrie Davies, a young English servant working in Toronto who shot her employer, Charles Massey, in 1915 because he sexually harassed her. Davies was acquitted of murder, Strange claims, because she was not "a 'care-free' working girl but an old-fashioned, trustworthy servant whose primary concerns were to preserve her chastity and obey her mistress," 175.

<sup>80</sup>Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago 1993), 54. Dubinsky finds that "those institutions most revered as centers of safety and moral authority — the family, the rural household, church picnics and 'respectable' employments such as domestic service — were in fact the sites of the most pervasive instances of sexual abuse," 8. On the stereotype of the bourgeois libertine, see also Anna Clark, *Women's Silence, Men's Violence: Sexual Assault in England 1770-1845* (London 1987), 89-91.

<sup>81</sup>MM, MFP, XLIV, M19326, Mrs. "Jennie" Butler Molson, "Servants' Wages Book, Accounts, Etc."

<sup>82</sup>Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain*, 126; see also Leslie, "Domestic Service in Canada,"

83. It is possible, however, that references were not as essential to securing a job in service in Canada (where the shortage of servants was marked) as they were in Great Britain. Lady Dufferin, for instance, newly arrived in Canada, wrote in 1872: "I have been looking for a scullery-maid, and find women-servants very scarce. I have only seen one young lady in search of the place: she spoke with a real Irish brogue, and appeared in a smart hat and feathers. She was extremely surprised at my wishing to have a character. She had one, but had left it at home, not supposing I should care to see it: of course she could fetch it directly. Next morning she brought me three lines, on very common paper, which, in very bad writing, certified her to be honest and 'obedient.'" See *My Canadian Journal 1872-8* (London 1891), 19.

ant." Such defiance was often an expression of youthful restlessness or frustration with the restrictions of service, and ran the gamut of possible reactions ranging from sulking and slowness on the job to actions defined as illegal.<sup>83</sup> Rose Manning, for instance, was taken to Canada by Charlotte Alexander in 1888, at age sixteen. She was apparently "very fast and behaved very badly on board [ship]." She did not retain her first position long; her mistress insisted that she "would not work, was upsetting the other servants and must leave." Rose Alexander, age fourteen, obtained a situation in Gananoque in 1887 at eight dollars a month. She, too, was let go; apparently "she had been pilfering, untruthful, constantly in stable with groom, generally unsatisfactory." Often, domestics dissatisfied with their positions took the initiative and changed situations in the hope of improving their lot. Jane Collis, for instance, came to Canada in May 1887 at the age of seventeen. By 1892, she had been in eleven different situations. She left one position "because she could not go out at nights"; in fact, Collis claimed, she "was not allowed out at all except when she went out with the baby." Other girls and women, instead of giving notice, simply defied their employers' orders. Eliza Joiner, for example, arrived in Canada in 1888 at the age of thirteen. Her first mistress, a Mrs. Sampson of Toronto, complained that Joiner "gave herself airs and was troublesome and discontented at first." Her next employer, a Mrs. Lennox of Barrie, Ontario, asked her to leave in 1890 because she was "independent and self-willed, bold with young men. Instead of going to Church had been to Salvation Army and got in with undesirable set."<sup>84</sup>

Such defiance on the part of domestics was a frequent topic of conversation among the Canadian middle class, for whom the "servant problem" appeared to be of mammoth proportions. Yet impressions of servants' recalcitrance cannot simply be dismissed as middle-class myth. Many servants, by virtue of their backgrounds and straitened occupational circumstances, walked a truly fine line between, not only respectability and deviance, but deviance and illegality. In turn-of-the-century Canada, perceptions of class backgrounds, gender norms, immigrant status, and respectability intermeshed to ensure that many servants would come before the eye of the law, and that their defiance would sometimes be construed as criminal.

<sup>83</sup> An interesting comparison can be made here between servants' on-the-job defiance (slowness, selective deafness, pilfering) and what James C. Scott describes as "the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on." See Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven 1985), xv-xvi, 33-4. Isolated in private homes, such individual forms of resistance were generally the only ones available to Canadian servants.

<sup>84</sup> NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol.3, 44, case of Rose Manning; Vol.3, 17, case of Rose Alexander; Vol.1, case of Jane Collis; Vol.3, 9-10, case of Jane Collis; Vol.3, 59, case of Eliza Joiner. On domestic servants and the Salvation Army, see also Lynne Marks, "Working-Class Femininity and the Salvation Army: Hallelujah Lasses in English Canada, 1882-1892," in Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds., *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto 1991).

The preponderance of domestic servants among convicted female offenders in this period is striking. For every year between 1880 and 1914 in which Kingston's Dominion Penitentiary recorded its female inmates' occupations, servants and housekeepers were the most numerous.<sup>85</sup> Upon its opening in 1880, the Andrew Mercer Ontario Reformatory for Females welcomed 1 nurse, 1 tailoress, 1 seamstress, 2 "labouring women," 3 prostitutes, and 22 servants. Of the 142 women admitted to the Reformatory 5 years later, 80 were servants or housekeepers. Twenty-five years later little had changed: 74 of the 131 women who entered the Reformatory in 1910 were servants or housekeepers.<sup>86</sup> The Toronto Jail register reveals a similar pattern at the municipal level: in 1885-86, the most common occupations of the women committed to the jail were, in descending order: Prostitute (332 women); Servant/ Charwoman (178); No Occupation (157); Cook (8 women).<sup>87</sup>

Drawing conclusions from such numbers is, to be sure, problematic. It is difficult to ascertain the extent of servants' overrepresentation among contemporary "criminals" given that census figures surely underestimated the number of women employed in service and that crime rates are inevitably partial figures. It is also virtually impossible to know how recently, or for how long, or even whether, a woman calling herself a servant had been employed as such. Nonetheless, it is a link that begs exploration. Those historians who have noted that servants constituted a significant proportion of contemporary female criminals have depicted a descent from the world of respectability to the world of deviance, from honesty to crime, due to poverty and the particular restrictions of the occupation. It is a descent portrayed as unfortunate but understandable, even natural, given the structural constraints in domestics' lives. Thus Judith Fingard, for instance, claims that Halifax working-class women, "without prospects and often destitute, resorted to

<sup>85</sup>"Annual Report of the Minister of Justice as to Penitentiaries in Canada," *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada* (1880-1914).

<sup>86</sup>See "Annual Report," *OSP*, 1881, 1886, 1911. The large number of servants sent to the Reformatory may have been related to the fact that servants were seen to be more "reformatable" than other women, as they were presumably already trained in subservience and obedience. As Carolyn Strange points out, the Mercer "was a unique institution, specially constructed and administered to reform only those women deemed capable of improvement." See Strange, "The Criminal and Fallen of Their Sex: The Establishment of Canada's First Women's Prison, 1874-1901," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 1, 1 (1985), 86.

<sup>87</sup>PAO, RG 20, F 43, A 20, *Toronto Jail Register, 1885-1886*. See entries from 1 October 1885 to 30 September 1886. Alice Kessler-Harris, writing of American domestic servants, has found that a 1909-10 US government survey "reported that 77.52 percent of the offenders in one sample of female criminals were in domestic or personal service — a ratio nearly twice as high as their proportion in the wage labor force in the area studied." See *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York 1982), 103.

prostitution as naturally as their brothers turned to stealing."<sup>88</sup> I would argue, however, that there was more at work here than individual servants, in moments of crisis, crossing the boundary between respectability and deviance. Rather, in the eyes of many, domestic service was an institution that straddled this boundary.

The large number of servants among female criminals in the years between 1880 and 1914 should be seen as rooted in two parallel, but not entirely separate, phenomena. First, the particular restrictions of service (low wages, little freedom, no independent residence, mandatory celibacy, and the near-certain loss of job in case of pregnancy) meant that domestics could find themselves in circumscribed situations where theft, prostitution, and infanticide might be perceived as the only viable options for resolving a serious crisis. Generally single and self-supporting, and often far from family members, domestics had flimsier safety-nets than other women. These crimes, however, were but extreme examples of a second, larger process whereby many elements of working-class life had already been constructed as "deviant." Servants figured prominently, for instance, in turn-of-the-century arrests for drunkenness, "disorderly" behaviour and vagrancy.<sup>89</sup> Such charges may have resulted from servants attempting to escape the tedium and isolation of their occupation. Yet these were "crimes" that had already been defined according to state perceptions of respectable uses of leisure time and public space. Similarly, while numerous servants no doubt committed larceny out of simple need or temptation, one cannot ignore the possibility of the criminalization of domestics' perquisites. Cast-off clothing and surplus food had traditionally been perquisites of a job that involved long hours and constant duties. Such "gifts" reminded mistress and servant of their respective roles and of their twin bonds of obligation and dependence. As industrialization ostensibly transformed service into a less personal relationship between employer and employee, it is possible that servants' appropriation of their "due" became, in the eyes of their mistresses, theft.<sup>90</sup> Prostitution, meanwhile, a "crime" committed by many poor women, may also have been a charge levelled by authorities at young servants seeking pleasure in amusement parks and public spaces on an evening off.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>88</sup>Fingard, *Dark Side*, 95, 100. See also Lori Rotenberg, "The Wayward Worker: Toronto's Prostitute at the Turn of the Century," in *Women at Work*, 39-41; Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice*, 232, 239, 242-3.

<sup>89</sup>See, for example, PAO, RG 20, F 43, A 20, *Toronto Jail Register, 1885-1886*; PAO, RG 20, E-13, Andrew Mercer Ontario Reformatory for Women, *Prison Register*, Volume 1, 1880-1898; Volume 2, 1899-1917.

<sup>90</sup>See Maza, "Domestic Service in Eighteenth Century France," 68, 74, 87; Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London 1991), 250-1. For examples of servants' theft from employers, see the Toronto Police Department (TPD) *Criminal Register, Detective Department*, 26 July 1887-14 December 1894. The *Criminal Register* is located at Toronto Police Headquarters.

<sup>91</sup>Writing of young working-class women attempting to meet men in dance halls, amusement resorts, and other public locales, Kathy Peiss has observed that "the single woman alone

Servants were frequently brought before the courts for "drunkenness," or "drunk and disorderly" behaviour.<sup>92</sup> Those caught drinking in public were surely but a small proportion of those who imbibed: some servants who never encountered the law nonetheless lost their jobs for drinking.<sup>93</sup> Drunkenness was often perceived, not as an isolated incident or an occasional transgression, but as an ingrained character flaw. Some repeat offenders were sent to the Mercer Reformatory to have the evil weeded out through the instillation of "proper" values.<sup>94</sup> Ironically, Mercer inmates were trained in housekeeping and were often secured positions in service upon their release.<sup>95</sup> As Faye Dudden has pointed out in a study of 19th-century American servants, "the road to rehabilitation was mapped across the same occupation through which so many women and girls moved in downward paths."<sup>96</sup>

Larceny was another crime of which servants were frequently convicted; service afforded both the temptation and the opportunity to steal from the employing household.<sup>97</sup> Yet servants, often the first to be suspected, were also easily caught and easily framed. Colonel Denison, the notorious Toronto Police Magistrate, recounted the story of "a respectable looking young woman, a housemaid in a gentleman's family" who had been charged with "the theft from her mistress of a quantity of lace." In fact, the theft had been committed by another servant in the household, who "pleaded guilty, and admitted having placed a portion of the lace

---

might be taken for a prostitute, but hunting in pairs permitted women to maintain their respectability in the aggressive pursuit of pleasure." See *Cheap Amusements*, 114. Christine Stansell has also noted that "in a culture where women 'on the town' retained deep associations to prostitution, the working girl who made known her independence or even her aloneness could still be interpreted as issuing a sexual invitation." See *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York 1986), 97.

<sup>92</sup>PAO, RG 20, F 43, A 20, Toronto Jail Register, 1885-1886; *Annual Report of the Chief Constable of the City of Toronto, 1886*. On servants and drunkenness, see McBride, *Domestic Revolution*, 99-100, 106; Claudette Lacelle, *Urban Domestic Servants*, 121.

<sup>93</sup>MM, MFP, XLIV, M 19326, Mrs. Jane "Jennie" Butler Molson, "Servants' Wages Book, Accounts, etc.," which indicates that Hester Saunders lost her position as nurse-maid in 1881, six months after being hired, because she drank.

<sup>94</sup>See Mercer Reformatory, *Prison Register*, Vol.1, 1880-1898; Vol.2, 1899-1917.

<sup>95</sup>"Annual Report," *OSP*, (1901), 83; (1911), 62; Mercer Reformatory, *Prison Register*, Volume 1, 1880-1898 for inmates' occupations prior to committal.

<sup>96</sup>Dudden, *Serving Women*, 219.

<sup>97</sup>On the extent to which the association of theft with servants had become common currency, see "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire Into the Prison and Reformatory System of Ontario 1891," *Ontario Sessional Papers* (1891), 278, 317. The occasional reference to "a thieving servant" could also be found in the labour press: see *POL*, 13 December 1886. On servants and theft, see Stansell, *City of Women*, 86; Dudden, *Serving Women*, 212-3; Lacelle, *Urban Domestic Servants*, 121; McBride, *Domestic Revolution*, 99, 106-7; Maza, "Domestic Service," 230-1; J.M. Beattie, "The Criminality of Women in Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of Social History*, 8 (Summer 1975), 92-3.

in her fellow servant's trunk, to create suspicion and relieve herself."<sup>98</sup> Thefts from the employer's household were generally articles of clothing or small items of value. Emily Paradine, for instance, a 21-year-old servant born in England, was given 18 months in the Mercer in 1887 for stealing "fancy goods" and a gold ring and pin from her mistress, as well as "similar articles from several houses in Hamilton where she had been at service."<sup>99</sup> Annie Diamond, a nineteen-year-old Scottish-born servant committed to the Reformatory for six months in 1888, had stolen furs and jewellery from her employer, a Mrs. Morrison of Belleville.<sup>100</sup> Sarah Baxter, age sixteen, was brought before the courts twice in one year: in August 1887 for stealing a gold locket and chain, and in February 1888 for taking silk handkerchiefs, scarves, and a gold pin from her employer.<sup>101</sup> Many other servants were sentenced to 30 days in jail for the theft of less expensive items such as a blanket, dress, or small sum of cash. By the early 20th century, a number of domestics had been caught stealing from Toronto's T. Eaton Company: Winnifred Pankhurst, for instance, attempted to walk out of Eaton's on 6 October 1910 with two undershirts, four pairs of drawers, four pounds of chocolate bonbons, one tin of cocoa, two pounds of pork, half a pound of tongue, and a silk blouse.<sup>102</sup> While Eaton's clearly laid charges against some shoplifters, many employers may simply have dismissed servants found stealing without involving the police or the courts. Twenty-three-year-old Mary Williams, for instance, gave notice at her situation in Toronto in 1890 after some "unpleasantnesses arose." She had been suspected of theft by her employer, Mrs. Williamson, because "money had been missed and jewellery."<sup>103</sup> Mary Lovelace, likewise, worked only eight days for Jane Molson in 1883 before Molson noted in her ledger book next to Lovelace's name, "Paid off — Thief."<sup>104</sup> The incidence of larceny among domestics, then, was no doubt underreported; also likely, however, is the possibility that some domestics dismissed for theft were falsely accused.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>98</sup>Colonel George T. Denison, *Recollections of a Police Magistrate* (Toronto 1920), 53.

<sup>99</sup>TPD, *Criminal Register*, 1887-1894; Mercer Reformatory, *Prison Register*, Vol.1, 1880-1898.

<sup>100</sup>TPD, *Criminal Register*, 1887-1894; Mercer Reformatory, *Prison Register*, Vol.1, 1880-1898.

<sup>101</sup>TPD, *Criminal Register*, 1887-1894.

<sup>102</sup>TPD, *Criminal Register*, 1909-1912.

<sup>103</sup>NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol.3, 81, case of Mary Williams.

<sup>104</sup>MM, MFP, XLIV, M 19326, Mrs. Jane "Jennie" Butler Molson, "Servants' Wages Books, Accounts, Etc."

<sup>105</sup>See, for example, Salverson, *Confessions*. Salverson was falsely accused of stealing a cheque from her employer's son's bedroom. The incident, she claims, made her "see very clearly what the poor really look like to the respectable people who save the heathen and pack such lovely Christmas hampers," 338.

Infanticide and attempted abortions were a bleak testimony to servants' determination to assert control over their lives despite limited options.<sup>106</sup> To a (usually unwed) servant, a child would be socially stigmatizing and would almost certainly mean the loss of her job.<sup>107</sup> Many servants nonetheless carried the pregnancy to term. In 1891, for instance, Charlotte Alexander noted that 24-year-old parlourmaid Mary Harvey "had gone astray. Had been with infant in Infants' Home."<sup>108</sup> Andr  e L  vesque's work shows that as late as the interwar years, 47 per cent of the single, pregnant women admitted to Montr  al's H  pital de la Mis  ricorde claimed to be domestic servants.<sup>109</sup> For some domestics, however, motherhood was simply not an option. Abortion and infanticide rates, evidently, refer only to those women who were caught. The fact that relatively few servants were actually charged with infanticide, however, does suggest two things. Not only did many women successfully conceal pregnancies, but perhaps, as Constance Backhouse argues, infanticide by a servant was not perceived to be a particularly serious crime.<sup>110</sup>

Nevertheless, some servants were charged with and convicted of attempting to remain childless. Twenty-four-year-old Ellen Day was tried in Hamilton in 1890 for the "murder of her infant."<sup>111</sup> Lucy Nadgwan, a sixteen-year-old unmarried Native domestic from Walkerton, was sentenced to two years in Kingston Penitentiary for "neglecting to obtain assistance in childbirth." Another servant, 21-year-old Maggie McCarthy, was sentenced to 3 years in Kingston Penitentiary for the same crime beginning in 1905.<sup>112</sup> Annie Henry, an unmarried servant, was admitted to the Mercer Reformatory in December 1880 for "concealment of birth," while Lena Goodman, a 24-year-old married domestic and tailoress, was charged in

<sup>106</sup>On servants and infanticide, see Constance Backhouse, "Desperate Women and Compassionate Courts: Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century Canada," *University of Toronto Law Journal*, 34 (1984), 447-78; Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice*, 113-4; Fingard, *Dark Side*, 124; McBride, *Domestic Revolution*, 99, 105-7; Maza, "Domestic Service," 232; Beattie, "Criminality of Women," 84; R.W. Malcolmson, "Infanticide in the Eighteenth Century," in J.S. Cockburn, ed., *Crime in England 1550-1800* (Princeton 1977), 192, 200-5.

<sup>107</sup>For an English example, see Margaret Powell's account of a fellow servant losing her job because of pregnancy in *Below Stairs* (London 1968), 95-6.

<sup>108</sup>NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol.3, 77, case of Mary Harvey. See also Salverson, *Confessions*, for an account of a domestic servant who concealed her pregnancy for nine months, gave birth, and then attempted unsuccessfully to strangle the child, 370-3.

<sup>109</sup>Andr  e L  vesque, *La norme et les d  viantes: Des femmes au Qu  bec pendant l'entre-deux-guerres* (Montr  al 1989), 109.

<sup>110</sup>Backhouse, "Desperate Women," 477. Malcolmson, writing of the punishment of infanticide in 18th-century England, similarly concludes that "leniency appears to have been more the norm than the exception." See "Infanticide," 197.

<sup>111</sup>NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol.3, 15, case of Ellen Day.

<sup>112</sup>Correctional Services of Canada Museum, Kingston Penitentiary *Convict Register and Description Book 1900-1914*.

February 1910 with abandoning her child in the Toronto American Hotel.<sup>113</sup> Fannie Smith, a kitchen servant at Toronto's Albion Hotel, strangled her infant daughter and hid her in a trunk in her room despite the fact that various members of the hotel staff had been aware of her pregnancy. She was convicted of "concealing the birth of a small child" and of murder; her sister Carrie was named as an accomplice.<sup>114</sup>

Some turn-of-the-century Canadians observed a palpable link between service and prostitution. The sensationalist author C.S. Clark, for instance, professed to "know of many instances where girls have been employed as domestic servants and seduced by their male friends, which eventually leads them to take up this life [prostitution] to hide their shame in some cases, and in others to be better able to receive the guilty attentions of a lover." Furthermore, he claimed in 1898, Toronto domestics often "furnish the subject for the procuresses who periodically visit the country from Chicago and elsewhere."<sup>115</sup> Fifteen years later, the Toronto Social Survey Commission found that 36 of 75 prostitutes surveyed had at one time worked as domestics.<sup>116</sup>

This close relationship has not gone unnoticed by historians. Most have argued for a move from service to prostitution because of material need, a personal crisis (such as pregnancy) that caused the servant the loss of her job, or a desire for greater personal autonomy.<sup>117</sup> Judith Fingard, writing of Halifax women, captures more precisely the ambiguities involved. She states that "the same woman was sometimes identified as a servant, sometimes as a prostitute, sometimes as 'no trade,' categories which reflect the combination of women's restricted opportunities."<sup>118</sup> The overlap in these categories also reflected profoundly ambivalent perceptions of working women's character — an ambivalence that in fact helps to explain the link, real or perceived, between service and prostitution in turn-of-the-century Canada. Many of the domestics committed to the Mercer Reformatory had been charged with prostitution, "frequenting a disorderly house," or being an "inmate of a house of ill-fame." Margaret Walsh, for example, was a 40-year-old servant — Irish-born, widowed, illiterate, and "intemperate" — living in Gananoque. In September of 1880 she was convicted of being "a common Prostitute and a loose idle and disorderly person and a Vagrant within the meaning of the act" and committed to the Reformatory. Many women were listed in the Reformatory's

<sup>113</sup>PAO, Mercer Reformatory Case Files, RG 20, D-13, 1-1842, Reel 1; TPD, *Criminal Register*, 1909-1912.

<sup>114</sup>PAO, Ontario Provincial Court Records, RG 22, Appendix P, Series 392, Criminal Indictment Case Files — Female Defendants, York County, 1887.

<sup>115</sup>Clark, *Of Toronto to the Good*, 89, 97.

<sup>116</sup>Cited in Rotenberg, "Wayward Worker," 38-9.

<sup>117</sup>See Rotenberg, "Wayward Worker," 38-41; Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice*, 239; Dudden, *Serving Women*, 213-8; Stansell, *City of Women*, 167, 178; Maza, "Domestic Service," 222, 234; McBride, *Domestic Revolution*, 104; Lacelle, *Urban Domestic Servants*, 121.

<sup>118</sup>Fingard, *Dark Side*, 36.

Register as "Prostitute/Servant"; others were listed as "Prostitute" in the Register but as "Servant" in the police warrant, or vice versa.<sup>119</sup>

It appears, then, that there was not necessarily a direct one-way path from one occupation to the other. Many prostitutes may have engaged in service sporadically, perhaps in periodic attempts to lead more "respectable" lives. Others, grasping at a veneer of respectability (and legality), may have claimed, when asked, to be domestic servants. Conversely, actual domestic servants may have moonlighted as prostitutes, occasionally exchanging sex for money in order to supplement meagre earnings.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, contemporary definitions of prostitution themselves varied. There may have been a very fine line for working women between exchanging sexual "favours" for "treats," and outright prostitution.<sup>121</sup> There may also have been significant differences between the way in which prostitution was defined by working-class women and the way in which it was interpreted and prosecuted by the state. As Kathy Peiss notes, "clearly the middle-class distinction between respectable working-class women and prostitutes polarized a more complex social reality."<sup>122</sup> Finally, the questionable nature of domestic service itself is highlighted by the fact that its practitioners were so often and so easily confused with prostitutes. Both prostitutes and domestics earned their living by others' ability to purchase service; both were, in many respects and in many eyes, "others."

Many of Canada's domestic servants strayed, then, from the respectable ideal portrayed in etiquette manuals and sought by their mistresses. Even carefully orchestrated campaigns to recruit immigrant domestics failed to prevent "a few black sheep" from "creep[ing] in."<sup>123</sup> Louisa Crossley, a domestic servant brought to Canada in May 1904 by the United British Women's Emigration Association, was discovered using morphine on the voyage to Canada and drinking whiskey while employed as a servant in Montréal.<sup>124</sup> Elizabeth Waterson, recruited by the Women's Domestic Guild, was deported in February 1909 as a "Charge on Charities" for her "drug addiction." Domestic Eleanor Almond was deported less than a week after her arrival in 1909 because of her addiction "to cocaine or some

<sup>119</sup> Mercer Reformatory, *Prison Register*, Vol. 1, 1880-1898; PAO, Mercer Reformatory Case Files, RG 20, D-13, 1-1842, Reel 1.

<sup>120</sup> C.S. Clark, for instance, claimed that servants spending their leisure hours in downtown Toronto were in fact engaging in "casual" and "occasional" prostitution. See *Of Toronto the Good*, 97, 135.

<sup>121</sup> As Kathy Peiss has found, some working-class American women "fully bought into the culture of treating, trading sexual favours of varying degrees for male attention, gifts, and a good time. These women were known in underworld slang as 'charity girls,' a term that differentiated them from prostitutes because they would not accept money in their sexual encounters with men." See *Cheap Amusements*, 110.

<sup>122</sup> Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 98-9; Stansell, *City of Women*, 175.

<sup>123</sup> NAC, DOI, RG 76, Vol. 113, File 22787, Part I. See also Valverde, 122, 127.

<sup>124</sup> NAC, DOI, RG 76, Vol. 45, File 1378, Part II.

such drug" — this despite the fact that "her references were good and she seemed an exceptionally nice woman ... ." Annie Smith, a 20-year-old servant, was deported only months after her arrival in 1910 — one of numerous women exiled for drunkenness.<sup>125</sup>

That many female offenders in late-19th- and early-20th-century Canada were domestics does not imply that most domestics were criminals; it is important that this link between domestic service and crime not be exaggerated.<sup>126</sup> Yet it is significant enough to belie the contemporary insistence on the respectability of service, and to help explain why this insistence was so often coupled with a fear of "deviance" among domestics. The crimes committed by some servants took on a particular resonance given that service traversed class boundaries: it brought the working-class world directly into the bourgeois home and hearth.<sup>127</sup> Servants, unlike other members of the working class, could not be avoided or left at the workplace. Rather, they were an element of the working-class world with which the bourgeoisie dealt on a daily basis in private as well as in public. Although part of that "other" world, domestics were necessary interlopers into, and crucial for the operation of, the bourgeois sphere of respectability. Such close contact may have led in some cases to amicable relationships — even friendships — between mistresses and maids, particularly in rural areas where loneliness was a large part of many women's lives.<sup>128</sup> Some middle-class women, moreover, appear to have taken an almost maternal interest in shaping the character and habits of their young employees. Yet overall, the impression that emerges from turn-of-the-century sources is one of mistresses frustrated, uncomfortable, and uneasy with their servants. Differences of class and age, and the spatial and ideological restrictions

<sup>125</sup>NAC, DOI, RG 76, Vol.291, File 266957. See also Barbara Roberts, *Whence They Came. Deportation from Canada 1900-1935* (Ottawa 1988), 56-7. Roberts argues that domestic servants were particularly vulnerable to deportation, since their entire livelihood was dependent upon their "character." As single immigrant working women, their reputation could easily be besmirched and hence their ability to earn a living lost, rendering them public charges.

<sup>126</sup>As Lacelle notes, "we can conclude that servants, especially women, were perhaps more prone than other social groups to commit crimes, but that does not mean that the majority were of doubtful morals. ... No doubt the difficult conditions under which many lived induced them to seek better lives, but only a minority turned to reprehensive methods despite what their contemporaries might have thought." See *Urban Domestic Servants*, 124.

<sup>127</sup>Peter Stallybrass and Allen White make a related point; they claim that "it was the maid who, 'belonging' both to the bourgeois family and to 'the nether world,' mediated between the home and the lure of the city." See Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London 1986), 150.

<sup>128</sup>See Beth Light and Joy Parr, eds., *Canadian Women on the Move* (Toronto 1983), 68-71, for an account of the friendship between Mabel Whitney Morrison and her servant, Mamie.

of the household, ensured that this very personal, immediate relationship between mistresses and maids was frequently antagonistic.<sup>129</sup>

The touting of service as a safe and respectable occupation was, in part, the effort of working-class women themselves and of their families to defend the reputation of an essential avenue of employment. It was also an attempt by the bourgeoisie to rectify its shortage of domestics by encouraging young working women to take up the job. At the same time, the impoverished and immigrant backgrounds of many servants and the numerous incidences of crime associated with the occupation called into question bourgeois claims. The promotion of service as a respectable calling, then, was also an attempt at middle-class mutual reassurance — an effort by employers to convince themselves of their own safety in the face of an occupation that sometimes involved theft, prostitution, unwed motherhood, and drunkenness. The irony of this paradox, however, remained the fact that servants' "deviance" was partly a product of bourgeois conceptions of class. Late-19th-century domestic servants did not become the "other" solely by committing illegal acts. In a society where dominant conceptions of respectability largely excluded poor women, immigrant women, and often, even single women, servants were already marginalized.<sup>130</sup> In a sense, then, historians are correct to perceive a "natural" link between domestic service and crime. This "naturalness," however, did not lie in servants' ability to cross easily from the world of respectability to the world of vice. Rather, because bourgeois ideals of "respectability" were narrowly construed, and criminality had been constructed so as to encompass and embody the world of poverty, domestics already walked a fine line between the two realms. Indeed, in middle-class eyes, domestic service was an institution that straddled this line.

The difficulty of service lay in reconciling its ostensible respectability with its inescapable stigma of inferiority. Service illustrates both the tension between working-class and bourgeois conceptions of respectability, and the ambiguity of the distinction between respectability and deviance. Respectability and vice were clearly not strictly segregated; service was but one example of the numerous links between them. Moreover, within a system that ascribed to certain people the power of naming behaviour "respectable" or "deviant," respectability was a tenuous state.

<sup>129</sup>On employers' uneasiness about their servants, see NAC, CAAP, MG 29, C 58, Vol. 1, case of Ellen Day, letter from Etta Holtby, 5 October 1887; also Fairchilds, "Masters and Servants," 380; Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge 1980), 34; Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics*, 138; Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 389; McBride, *Domestic Revolution*, 107; Maza, "Domestic Service," 428.

<sup>130</sup>On this point see Sarah Eisenstein, *Give Us Bread But Give Us Roses*, 49-50, 108. Eisenstein asserts that in the early-20th-century United States, "the image of acceptable womanhood remained one which excluded the experience of the majority of working-class women of the period."

In the case of domestic servants, "disreputable" activity reflected both an inability, and often a patent unwillingness, to conform to norms created by others. Ultimately, respectability was a goal that remained more elusive for some than for others.

*I would like to thank Bryan Palmer for supervising the thesis from which this article was drawn and Karen Dubinsky, Roberta Hamilton, Ian McKay, and Shirley Tillotson for helpful comments on that thesis. More recently, Bettina Bradbury and three anonymous reviewers have made useful suggestions for this article. The writing of the article was assisted financially by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.*

---

over 150

**CANADIAN**  
scholarly journals  
on your computer

Visit the CALJ Website

<http://www.ccsp.sfu.ca/calj>

Canadian Association of Learned Journals

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CANADIAN STUDIES REVUE INTERNATIONALE D'ÉTUDES CANADIENNES

## SUBSCRIPTION/ABONNEMENT

Rates per year (for subscriptions in Canada, please add 7 % GST)/Tarif par année (au Canada, prière d'ajouter 7 p. 100 de TPS):

- \$40 Institutions (\$45 outside Canada/à l'extérieur du Canada)
- \$30 Regular subscription/abonnement régulier (\$35 outside Canada/à l'extérieur du Canada)
- \$25 Members of associations affiliated with the Learned Societies/membres des associations affiliées aux Sociétés savantes (\$30 outside Canada/à l'extérieur du Canada)
- \$20 Members of ICCS Associations, retirees or students, include proof/membres des associations du CIBC, retraités ou étudiants, joindre une preuve (\$25 outside Canada/à l'extérieur du Canada)

Please indicate year of subscription/Veuillez indiquer l'année d'abonnement désirée :

- ☐ 1990 N° 1-2 Research on Canada/La recherche sur le Canada
- ☐ 1991 N° 3 The Changing Dimensions of Ethnicity in Canada/Les nouvelles dimensions du phénomène ethnique au Canada
- ☐ 1992 N° 4 The Evolving Canadian Landscape/Le paysage canadien en évolution
- ☐ 1992 N° 5 European Contacts with Canada/Les contacts entre l'Europe et le Canada
- ☐ 1992 N° 6 Arts and Literature in Canada: Views from Abroad/Les arts et la littérature au Canada : regards de l'extérieur
- ☐ 1993 N° 7-8 The Charter, Federalism and the Constitution/La Charte, le fédéralisme et la Constitution
- ☐ 1993 *Winter Special Issue/Numéro hors série (Hiver)*  
Generations in Canadian Society/Le phénomène des générations et la société canadienne
- ☐ 1994 N° 9 Canada and the USSR/CIS: Northern Neighbours/Partenaires du Nord : le Canada et l'URSS/CEI
- ☐ 1994 N° 10 Identities and Marginalities/Les identités et les marginalités
- ☐ 1995 N° 11 Women in Canadian Society/Les femmes et la société canadienne
- ☐ 1995 N° 12 Aboriginal Peoples and Canada/Les peuples autochtones et le Canada
- ☐ 1996 N° 13 Canada in the Americas/Le Canada dans les Amériques
- ☐ 1996 N° 14 Citizenship and Rights/La citoyenneté et les droits
- ☐ 1997 N° 15 Time, Space and Place/Le temps, l'espace et le lieu
- ☐ 1997 N° 16 Nationalism and Globalization/Nationalisme et mondialisation

Name/Nom .....

Address/Adresse .....

Credit card #/N° de carte de crédit : .....

MasterCard ☐ Visa ☐

Expiry Date/Date d'expiration .....

Signature .....

Please return coupon and payment to/S.v.p., retourner ce coupon accompagné du paiement au :

IJCS/RIEC

325 Dalhousie, S-800, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 7G2, Canada