

# Below Stairs: The Domestic Servant\*

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## Résumé / Abstract

*Jusqu'à la Seconde Guerre mondiale, les Canadiennes ont surtout occupé des emplois de domestiques, mais l'importance relative de ces métiers diminua au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle avec l'accroissement d'autres types d'emploi. La demande excédant toujours l'offre, on encouragea l'immigration d'employées de maison venues des Îles Britanniques. Cet article s'appuie sur des entrevues réalisées auprès de domestiques britanniques pour illustrer les conditions de travail et les relations sociales que connaissaient ces femmes dans les maisons des villes et des campagnes, d'Ontario surtout, de 1900 à 1930. Après avoir immigré au Canada pour améliorer leur sort, elles étaient aux prises avec des problèmes d'adaptation et de négociation avec les personnes au service de qui elles étaient. Exception faite de certains cas particuliers, le lieu de travail déterminait en général les conditions d'emploi. À la ville, la domestique fournissait moins d'efforts physiques grâce aux techniques modernes, mais une barrière sociale rigide la séparait de la maîtresse de maison; par contre, à la ferme, cette dernière mettait la main à la pâte, ce qui favorisait une certaine égalité dans les rapports.*

*Domestic service remained a central occupation for women in Canada until World War II, although its relative importance declined in the twentieth century with the expansion of other employment opportunities. Because the demand for domestics always exceeded the available supply, special efforts were made to encourage the immigration of household workers from the British Isles. This paper draws on interviews with British domestic servants to illustrate working conditions and social relations in city, town, and rural homes, primarily in Ontario during the period from 1900 to 1930. The young women who came to Canada to better themselves faced problems of adaptation and negotiation in a personal service relationship. In spite of significant individual variation, the community setting helped to determine employment conditions. In city homes, modern technology reduced physical labour but strong social divisions separated the maid from the mistress; in farm homes, where the employer generally shared the work with the hired help, greater equality of status might prevail.*

Domestic service provided the main possibility of paid employment for women in nineteenth-century Canada. If a girl, or a young woman, had to work to support herself or to contribute to the maintenance of her family, she was more likely to become a maid than to take any other single type of employment. At a time when most positions in the paid work force were held by men, domestic service was pre-eminently a female occupation. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, over 90 per cent of domestic servants in Canada were female. The dominance of women in domestic service continued to increase slightly into the twentieth century, reaching almost 95 per cent by 1931.<sup>1</sup>

Domestic service was acceptable employment for women; it did not challenge the convictions regarding women's proper role deeply held by many Victorians. The employment was in the home, considered to be woman's sphere, and housework, even if physically demanding, was considered to be woman's work. On the other hand, at least from the perspective of the growing urban middle class, domestic service was circumscribed by strong social and class barriers. A young lady did not become a servant. She must know how to manage a home and how to direct servants; if necessary, she might take pride in doing work in her own home. She did not enter as a subordinate into a master-servant relationship in someone else's home. Domestic service was an employment for young women from labouring, working-class, or rural backgrounds, and they too chose to avoid the constraints of domestic service as more opportunities opened for women in factories, shops, and offices. As a result, domestic service, as an occupation for women, reached its peak in the 1890s. Thereafter, as the female work force expanded, the importance of domestic service in providing paid employment for women declined. While domestic servants composed 40 per cent of women gainfully employed in 1891, they were

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only 20 per cent of the female work force in the inter-war period. Nevertheless, the absolute number of women in domestic service did not decline — indeed the number in service increased in 1931 — and domestic service remained one of the most important occupations for women in Canada until World War II.<sup>2</sup>

The popular image now of a domestic servant of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century is probably that of a young woman, attired in a black dress with a white apron and a white cap, working as part of a large staff in a Victorian mansion. Such a servant did exist, but she is definitely not representative of most maids. Even in the cities, only a very small minority of female domestics belonged to a large staff; most worked in isolation as the only servant in the household. For example, in Toronto in 1871, only 3 per cent of households with servants employed a staff of four, five, or more, whereas 90 per cent of households with servants had only one or two employees.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the published census data of later decades does not provide information on the number of servants in households, but all those recruiting or attempting to place domestic servants repeatedly emphasized that the overwhelming demand was for the cook-general who worked alone.

Women in towns, villages, and rural areas, as well as in cities, sought to employ help in their homes. In Ontario shortly before World War I, 38 per cent of female domestic servants worked in cities with a population of over 15,000 and the other 62 per cent of female domestic servants were employed in smaller centres and on farms.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is wrong to assume that most people had servants. In major urban centres in 1871, only 10 per cent to 15 per cent of households had servants (Toronto 11 per cent) and in the country as a whole in succeeding decades less than 10 per cent of households had servants.<sup>5</sup> Those in cities and towns employing permanent, live-in, domestic servants generally belonged to the professional or business classes; doctors, dentists, judges, lawyers, ministers, professors, members of parliament, civil servants, mayors, bank managers, store owners, and managers of industry could afford to hire domestic help for their homes. In rural areas, the "better farm homes," rather vaguely defined, hired female help, often on a seasonal basis. In addition, in all communities, a much wider group of people sought domestic help in times of illness or family emergencies — when a baby was expected, or the housewife was ill, or a widower was left with the care of a house and children.

The demand for domestic servants always exceeded the supply of Canadian women able and willing to take the work. Therefore, governments, employers, and women's organizations made a special effort to encourage the immigration of household workers. The majority of immigrant domestic servants before World War II came from the British Isles — 75 per cent in the decade before

World War I and approximately 60 per cent in the 1920s — and the proportion of British women among immigrant domestic servants was higher than the British component of the immigration movement as a whole.<sup>6</sup> Immigrant domestic servants also came from continental Europe, especially from the Scandinavian countries and central Europe, but very few came from the West Indies or other countries outside Europe. Some immigrant domestic servants came to Canada as the daughters of emigrating families, and either entered service immediately or after a few years in Canada. Some were the Home children, sent to Canada by British societies. However, many were single women who emigrated to Canada without their families, coming sometimes entirely on their own, or with friends, with their employer, or with a conducted party of women. These women were nearly all between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five — the maximum age for acceptance in assisted or sponsored programs — and most seem to be concentrated between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, Canadian-born domestic servants outnumbered immigrant domestic servants in the country as a whole. The proportion of immigrant women among domestic servants varied greatly by region, ranging from a high of over half in western Canada to a low of 10 per cent in the Maritimes. In Ontario, from 1900 to 1930, approximately 40 per cent of domestic servants were born outside the country. Before World War I, nearly all immigrant domestic servants in Ontario were from the British Isles, but by 1931 one-quarter of immigrant domestic servants in Ontario were from continental Europe.<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I have focused on the immigrant domestic servants from Britain, and concentrated primarily on their Ontario experiences. I have drawn from my interviews with British domestic servants to illustrate work and social conditions in city, town, and rural employment.<sup>8</sup> It should be remembered that the experiences of British domestic servants would differ in some respects from those of domestics from continental Europe, who had to learn a new language, and from Canadian-born servants who grew up accustomed to Canadian ways.

Canadian employers were most anxious to obtain trained domestic servants from the British Isles. They often expressed approval of the manners and the skills of young women who had been trained in service in Britain. In Britain, domestic service was a common occupation for girls from working-class or rural backgrounds. The day girls reached the school-leaving age of fourteen they were placed in service and expected to contribute to the family income. Nellie grew up in a small coal-mining village in Scotland; her father and step-father worked at the coal mine. Her mother had worked in a Dunfermline linen factory before marriage but Nellie and her mother found that the factory was not hiring women in the 1920s when

Nellie was ready to earn her living. Nellie explains how the only work available to her was domestic service, since the one alternative, working at the pit head of the mine, her mother would not allow:

In Scotland at that time I left school at fourteen. I couldn't wait to leave school. The teachers wanted us to stay on for another year but your family couldn't wait for you to become fourteen so that you could go out to work and make some money and bring it home. They usually have their aprons out for your pay. My mum said, "Well, there's only two choices. Either you work on the pithead, like women, girls, or you go to domestic service." That was all there was, domestic service. So my mum said, "You're not going to work in the pithead. They swear a lot." Fourteen, you know. I didn't know anything about the world. You didn't get told anything in those days. So domestic service I went to.

Beginning at fourteen, girls usually learned skills in employment near home and then moved to a better position. Emigration across the Atlantic to Canada was an extension of this process of moving to better themselves, although it involved a much more radical break with home and family.

Unfortunately for Canadian employers, good trained domestic servants were in high demand in Britain too, so Canada could never induce as many to come as were desired. Therefore, domestic servants were also selected from among young women engaged in other work, usually in factories, who were willing to enter service in order to go to Canada. Joan, who emigrated in 1913 at age eighteen to work in a small Ontario community, was one of the "untrained servants." She was employed in a carpet factory where she had begun work at age twelve as a part-timer, going to school half the day and working in the factory half the day. She recalls: "At that time there were great ads about going to Canada, the land flowing with milk and honey and everything was beautiful. And there was another girl and I, we worked together in the carpet factory, and I said, 'You know I'd love to go to Canada.'" Therefore, when an ad seeking domestic servants for Canada appeared in the local newspaper, she eagerly showed up at Mackie Bros., the steamship agent, to be interviewed by the woman from Canada who was selecting the servants. Joan, like most applicants for domestic service, could not have afforded to pay the third-class ocean fare to a Canadian port plus the additional and often more expensive train fare to her final destination. Before World War I, unlike the 1920s, there were no special reduced fares for domestics. Therefore, as was commonly the case, Joan had her fare advanced. She was engaged for a particular position at the interview in Scotland, her employer paid her fare, and she repaid the money from her wages in Canada.

You got out here for about \$30 and you had a job before you came. Then you paid back the \$30 and you were paid, or you were supposed to be paid, \$10 a month.... She [the agent at Mackie Brothers] had of course a number of ads and she read over a few. She said, "I think here's one that would suit you," I was only eighteen. But after we got it all talked over, she said, "Does your mother know you're going?" I said, "No, I have never mentioned it to mother." She said, "I'm afraid you'll have to get your mother's consent before I could sign you up." So I thought, "Well, I won't be going." But anyway, I went home and talked it over with mother and she said, "If you think you're going to better yourself by going out to Canada I'll no keep you back."

To the young women in factories, as well as to the domestic servants in Britain, attracted by emigration, Canada meant extended horizons, a chance to see more of the world, and an opportunity to better oneself, financially and socially.

Canada accepted as domestic servants women who had never been in service provided they had learned housework at home — provided they were, as the Salvation Army called its parties, "domesticated women." In spite of the emphasis in the early twentieth century on housework as domestic science, as a scientific skill to be acquired, Canadian selection practices did not exclude young women because they lacked formal training and experience. Indeed, one overly optimistic immigration pamphlet indicated that almost any working-class girl could qualify as a servant.<sup>9</sup> "Untrained servants: Among the working classes it is very rare in England to find a girl who, though she may be earning her living outside of domestic service, is not proficient in the art of housekeeping, and when this sort of girl goes to Canada she is a most apt pupil in the Canadian school of domestic science." The approach in the 1920s was generally more cautious, and in the latter part of the twenties, women whose home background was not considered satisfactory were required to attend a training school before they were accepted for domestic service in Canada. Margaret, who came from Northern Ireland with the first party of Empire Settlement girls in 1923, was one whose home background would have been considered eminently satisfactory. When Margaret began work in the linen factory at age thirteen, she had to attend night school two nights a week where she received domestic training. The course seems to have been very thorough; she never received her diploma because she was unable to fulfil the final requirement which was to kill a chicken, as well as to pluck, clean, and cook it. For Margaret, formal training was the icing on the cake; her basic training was received at home. She remembers well her mother's housekeeping in County Armagh, Northern Ireland:

I've never known anyone keep house like my mother. My mother washed the feathers of the

pillows. Opened up the pillows and dumped out the feathers and washed them in suds and then in clear water and we put them out on a sheet on a sunny day when no wind to dry. She carried the mattresses and put them on chairs and used a whisk broom. You see we didn't have — there was no vacuums. I thought it was great when I came to Canada and there was vacuums. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. We squeezed tea leaves or coffee grounds out on the carpet and used a whisk broom.... You couldn't go to bed in our house in the dark because you didn't know where the bed would be. My mother kept moving the furniture around. She said that it's the only way to keep the corners clean.... You'd be sitting reading, my mother would hand you the candlestick and the brasso and a rag. She should have been a Minister of Labour, you know. She could keep everybody working.

Young women who chose to emigrate to Canada as domestic servants seldom had much real knowledge of conditions of life in their new country. Some had only the haziest notion of Canadian geography and no notion at all of distances in Canada; a number chose their destination by selecting a place which stood out for them on the map. Even those going to where they knew friends or relatives were not necessarily better informed. Generally, all were most aware of the desire and need to earn money. An immigrant domestic servant seldom had much money on arrival in Canada; instead, she generally had the burden of debt for her passage fare which she had to repay to a relative, an employer, or a government agency. In addition, she frequently felt a responsibility to send money to assist her mother or family at home. And she required money for her own living expenses. The great advantage of domestic service, especially for a young woman away from home, was that room and board, and sometimes uniforms as well, were provided. Yet many personal expenses remained to consume a servant's monthly wage. Warmer clothing had to be bought for winter; clothing which wore out or became shabby had to be replaced; money was required for church or for the occasional pleasure of a show or tea with friends essential to revive the spirits on the afternoon off. All of these needs had to be met before any money could be put aside as savings to build on for future improvement.

Even for the immigrant who did not share exaggerated expectations arising from the popular notion of Canada as the land of milk and honey, money was a major concern and often a primary source of conflict with employers. In the period before World War I, wages remained relatively stable. According to government literature, a domestic servant in Ontario earned from a low of about \$5 or \$6 in rural districts to a high of \$20 per month in the best-paid positions in cities and towns. In the 1920s, when the cost of living had risen, wages were supposed to range from

\$15 in rural districts or for those without experience to \$35 or \$40 per month.<sup>10</sup> Of course, a first-class cook where a large staff was kept could always earn more. Sometimes problems arose because an immigrant domestic, not trained in housework or accustomed to Canadian methods, expected to receive the highest wage rather than the lowest. On the other hand, parsimonious employers who pinched pennies when paying their domestic staff also existed. Twin sisters from Shropshire in Scotland, who came together to Canada in 1913 because they wanted to help their mother, tell their experience with a millionaire Owen Sound employer who had agreed to pay their train fare from Toronto to Owen Sound:

We travelled back with him on the train and we got off at Orangeville and he got us a lunch — a piece of pie and a cup of coffee. So, our first payment came and it wasn't anything like what he had promised to give us. So I went to the old gardener and I said, "There's something wrong here. He's taken quite a bit off our cheque." "Well, Miss Margaret, if you get anything out of him, you'll be the first that ever did." "Well," I said, "I'll have a good try." So I went to him and I said, "Would you explain about this cheque. You've quite a bit taken off." There was out train fare and our lunch at Orangeville. Could you imagine that from a millionaire! I said to him, "We'll use what you have given us now and we'll get back down to Toronto where we can get the same money and be amongst friends." "Oh, no, no, no, no, no! no, no, no!" Never had no trouble from then on.

Not all domestics had the spunk or the negotiating skill of the Scottish twins. Moving was an easier solution. The desire to obtain better wages lay behind much of the frequent movement of domestics from one position to another.

Domestic service linked the maid with the mistress in a personal relationship, the nature of which depended to a large extent on the individuals involved. Work in the home was not regulated as in a factory or an office — in spite of all the talk by reformers about making domestic service more attractive by standardizing and controlling the hours and the work required. There were vast differences in the conditions of work from one family to another in the same community; consequently, choosing a situation had many of the attributes of entering a lottery. Yet, in spite of individual variation, the community setting did help to determine the conditions of work. In particular, employment in service in the city contrasted sharply with employment on a farm.

In Ontario, as across Canada, a much higher proportion of domestic servants in urban areas than in rural areas were born outside Canada. In 1911, the one published census which shows the birthplace of domestic servants by city,

half the domestic servants in Ontario cities over 15,000 population were born outside Canada, compared with only 30 per cent of domestic servants in smaller centres and rural districts. Not surprisingly, the concentration of

immigrant domestic servants was greatest in those cities with a large immigrant population — Toronto, Hamilton, Fort William — and much lower in cities such as Ottawa and Kingston where the immigrant proportion of the general population was low.<sup>11</sup> Toronto, especially, became the mecca for immigrant domestic servants, much to the regret and expressed disapproval of other centres such as Ottawa. In Toronto, immigrant domestic servants often knew relatives or friends who could provide social support. As the Scots twins told their Owen Sound employer, “in Toronto, we could be among friends.” In addition, in Toronto, where one-fifth of the domestics in the province were employed, there was more opportunity to better oneself by changing positions. Immigration practices confirmed the dominance of Toronto. The presence there of the main Ontario distribution centre for immigrant domestics, the Women’s Welcome Hostel, served to channel British domestics into that city, and, once there, the domestics were reluctant to leave.

Housework in urban homes, though it demanded steady and alert workers, was generally considered less arduous than in rural homes. The recruiting literature repeatedly emphasized that the architectural design and central heating of Canadian city homes simplified women’s work. A pre-war pamphlet, *Woman’s Work in Canada*, stated that “as the houses are all arranged with the idea of saving the housekeeper’s foot-steps, the work is much more easily done.”<sup>12</sup> A post-war Canadian Pacific Railway pamphlet, *Openings for British Women in Canada*, was more explicit:<sup>13</sup>

English women settled in Canada are agreed that the Canadian home in the cities is far more easily run than at home. The houses are mostly two-storeyed, and there is no basement except for the furnace. The kitchen is generally built next to the dining-room, with which it communicates, thus facilitating the maid’s work at meal times. The furnace, which heats the whole house by means of pipes or gratings in the different rooms and passages, does away with the open fire and consequently much dirt and considerable labour. The stoking of the furnace is considered a man’s job in the cities; it is often done by an outside stoker, who comes in regularly three times a day to attend to it.

By the early twentieth century, municipal waterworks and sewage disposal systems made indoor plumbing and hot and cold running water available to the urban middle-class homes where servants were employed. Similarly, in such homes, electricity replaced gas as a source of light.

The purchase of labour-saving appliances powered by electricity followed much more slowly. Such equipment was very expensive and not always satisfactory. The fuel for the stove, the most indispensable appliance in the kitchen, during the first three decades of the twentieth



Fig. 1. This collage of pictures is from the pamphlet *Woman’s Work in Canada: Wages, Conditions and Opportunities for Household Workers in the Dominion*, issued by the Department of Immigration and Colonization in 1924 (p. 16). It was designed to convey a sense of the efficiency and comfort of an ordinary Canadian home in the 1920s. Note the electric iron combined with the use of the ice box for refrigeration. In spite of greater commercial preparation of food, home canning continued to provide much of the winter’s food supply. (Photo: Public Archives of Canada, C9897.)

century gradually changed from coal and wood to gas and electricity, and all four fuels were used for city stoves in the late 1920s. According to an immigration pamphlet published shortly after the war, "Coal or wood is used in [Canadian cooking] stoves. Gas stoves are to be found in some of the bigger houses; electric kitchen ranges are rare, though electric irons are regarded as absolutely indispensable in every household."<sup>14</sup> Ontario housewives did indeed seem to accept the electric iron more readily than the electric stove, perhaps because it caused fewer problems. Macdonald College at Guelph which investigated new appliances for the home as part of its promotion of domestic science, reported in 1909 that:<sup>15</sup> "We have been so discouraged with our experience with the Simplex electric oven that we have decided to wait until electric apparatus improves before doing much with it, although we are enthusiastic converts to the electric iron." For similar reasons of expense coupled with initial operating problems, the electric vacuum cleaner and the electric washing machine, which significantly reduced the physical labour of cleaning, only began to be common equipment in urban middle-class homes in the 1920s.

The exact relation between the increasing use of labour-saving appliances, especially electric servants, in the home and the decline in the employment of human domestic servants is a puzzling issue. Were more labour-saving devices purchased because it became increasingly difficult to obtain domestic servants? Were fewer domestic servants hired because employers preferred their privacy once it became possible to do the work more easily and economically with the aid of electric servants? I think the most accurate answer does not try to establish a simple cause and effect relationship but links the increasing use of labour-saving appliances and the declining availability of domestic servants as parallel developments, the one reinforcing the other. In the period before World War I, in Canada as in the United States, those who could afford to purchase the new equipment were those who hired maids. For example, an electric vacuum cleaner advertised in Eaton's catalogue cost \$100, more than the price of a choice nine-piece oak dining room suite.<sup>16</sup> Thus, maids were generally the first to use the new appliances in the home. In the 1920s, in urban centres, maids and middle-class housewives without servants both benefited from cheaper, more reliable, appliances.

Labour-saving appliances in the homes helped to attract domestic servants to Canadian city employment. Immigrant domestic servants had to face a sometimes tense and sometimes humorous adjustment to new conditions in Canada. Margaret from Northern Ireland, who, as noted above, thought she had died and gone to heaven when she came to Canada and found the vacuum cleaner, moved to a Toronto Rosedale home in order to earn more money to send to her mother. In her new position in the two-servant household of a doctor's widow, Margaret earned \$35 a

month and shared the work with a nurse-housemaid, a girl straight from the Hebrides. Her employer also had a woman come in to sew and all the laundry was sent out. The work was not arduous but Margaret discovered that compliance with even simple requests could require ingenuity because of ethnic differences in diet. She describes the occasion when her employer asked her to prepare lunch for the lady who came to sew:

Says I, "Oh sure." She says, "I hope you don't mind, Margaret, she's mulatto." I said, "No, certainly not, no, not at all." So I said, "I wonder what I should give her," and she says, "She's very fond of macaroni and cheese." Well, I had never heard of macaroni and cheese. We didn't use macaroni in Ireland but there was Mrs. Beeton's cookbook. So I made this right according to Mrs. Beeton and the lady said it was delightful and she had such a sense of humour. We sat and had lunch together. I don't think I ate any of this macaroni and cheese. I don't remember now — but the lady said how good it was. So I said, "Thanks to Mrs. Beeton."

An immigrant domestic servant, who had experience or training in cooking could adapt to the preparation of unfamiliar food. Others had more difficulty and bitter complaints came from employers whose cook-general could not recognize a squash when she saw one or did not know how to prepare a simple item like grapefruit. Domestic servants who worked for the social élite also might encounter problems in adapting from humbler backgrounds to service with the wealthy. One of the Scottish twins recalled a humorous incident in Owen Sound which she would never forget:

They were expecting the Eatons from Toronto up for the week-end. So the old lady told me the night before to be sure and put the coffee cups out and have the table nice for the Eaton company that was coming. I had the two different cups and I says [to my sister], "What would you say would be the coffee cups, Jen?" You know, we were new to anything like this. "Oh," she says, "I think it would be those ones with the handle on each side because coffee is usually very hot." So I puts those cups on the table. The old lady came in to inspect the table in the morning before breakfast. She says, "child," she says, "what are those cups doing on the table?" "Oh," I says, "something wrong?" "Yes," she says, "you've got bouillon cups on there." I'd never heard of bouillon. We couldn't see coffee in a little wee cup that size. So anyway I says to her, "bouillon, what's bouillon?" She says, "It's a very light soup that's used at luncheons." I never forgot that. I never lived that one down.

The work required of domestic servants in urban centres varied according to the size of the staff. The exceptional wealthy employers who could afford a large staff of five or more often sought to hire domestic servants from

Britain; the attraction was mutual, for many British domestics preferred the specialized work in a large household where their duties were more clearly defined. The Scottish twins moved from Owen Sound to Toronto in 1914, and during the War one went to work at "Deancroft," the Rosedale home of Lt.-Col. Gooderham, millionaire distiller and banker, where, as she remembers, a staff of ten was employed. Her description of the staff and of her own duties as table maid indicates the division of labour among the servants and the housekeeping details which were given strict attention in a large establishment:

We had a lady's maid, she was English, and we had a cook and a cook's assistant and then I was a table maid, well there were two of us really. Then there were, I think, three housemaids and a cleaning woman came in part time every day and then we had two chauffeurs... [As table maid] I had the drawing room to look after and I had to look after the budgie birds and clean out the fish, goldfish you know, and everything like that and then be very, very careful with the ornaments. Everything was valuable, you know. And then I had a nice little sitting room to look after where Lady Gooderham did all her writing and I think, if I remember right, there was a long winding stair and I looked after that. Oh yes, I had to wait on the table, in fact there were two of us waited on the table.

In one-servant households, where the majority of domestic servants worked, the cook-general or maid-of-all-work earned her title by performing a wide range of tasks from cooking to cleaning to care of children. Maids knew very well that the attitude of their employer, the size of the household, and the equipment in the home all affected their work. Even in city and town homes, the mistress might share the work with the maid. Sally, who took a position with two sisters in an Ontario town in the 1920s, describes how her employers energetically took control of the weekly laundry. As well, she shows that acceptance of new technology in the home did not necessarily mean a disruption of old work habits:

Yes, they had the electric washing machine and the ringer into the tubs. They had the laundry out from the kitchen and they had a little stove in it, like a little old fashioned stove. They put the water on, they had hot water too, but they boiled the clothes, and they made homemade soap... They'd get up early before daylight early on Monday morning to light this fire and get the boiler on, and you know they weren't doing a thing the rest of the day but they'd be up and I'd have to get up too. They'd be up and put on their boiler and boil the clothes and their clothes wouldn't be that dirty.

Before the electric washing machine and commercial soap flakes, the laundry was the most hated regular household

chore. Even with a hand-operated washing machine to assist with the rubbing process, it was a hot, physically exhausting, task which occupied all of Blue Monday. However, it was a task which was often thankfully avoided by the maid as well as the mistress in city homes. Requests or ads for domestic servants frequently specified "No Laundry." In such homes, one of two solutions was adopted. Either the washing was sent out to a commercial laundry, or a woman came one day a week to do the laundry or to take it to her house. The laundry woman was often a married immigrant woman, seeking work which she could combine with family responsibilities.

The low social status of the maid in city homes, especially in smaller households, offset the physical advantages of urban work. In large establishments, servants lived in separate quarters, usually in a separate wing of the house or on the third floor, and ate their meals in the servants' dining room. Servants working in a large establishment often shared a sense of pride in belonging to an eminent household. In one-servant city and town households, where the social position of the employer was less secure, the employment of a maid became an important symbol of middle-class status. Since the physical distance between mistress and maid in such households was minimal, greater emphasis was placed on insuring that the maid knew her place. The domestic servant usually slept in a bedroom adjacent to the family bedrooms, but she ate by herself in the kitchen after serving the family in the dining room. Frequently, she was not permitted to use the front door of the house, but had to enter and depart by the back door, for which she might or might not have a key. Her time off was very carefully controlled — usually one afternoon a week and every second Sunday with the requirement that she return by 10 p.m. Some employers did not allow her to entertain friends, and certainly not male friends, in the house, although not all employers were so restrictive. Indeed, the Scots twins in Owen Sound, who entertained the British United Football Team in the kitchen, told their employer in no uncertain terms that the kitchen was their territory and she should stay out of it.

The most visible and most controversial sign of status was the uniform. Like other uniforms, such as those worn by police officers or nurses, the maid's cap and apron readily identified her occupation. For the maid, the uniform symbolized not professional training and recognition, but rather the social distance between herself and her employer. The cap and apron eliminated any danger that the maid might be mistaken for her mistress and ensured that neighbours and visitors would know that a maid was employed in the house. Female servants generally wore simple cotton print dresses for their morning household cleaning when they were removed from public view. At noon, they changed into their more formal dresses, usually black, with white aprons and caps, for serving the

# CAPS AND APRONS HERE from ENGLAND



A good little girl is Polly, who dons a colored apron when peeling potatoes. These from 35c to \$1.25. Her cap, a "Sister Dora," 25c.



Peeling apples is quite pleasant if you look fresh and sweet in neat morning apron, 59c to \$1.25, and again "Sister Dora" cap, 25c.

PARIS may set the pace for fashionable attire. But when it comes to the correct uniform for the maids—those precious people on whom so much of our comfort depends—we turn to England. Naturally so, since it is England who sends us the most perfect maids to keep our homes in order.

A recent shipment—not of the much-to-be-desired house-workers—but of English caps and aprons, has just been unpacked, and the various styles for as many workers are now available in this department on the Third Floor.

Surely no maid ever looked more fetching than when capped with the "Quaker," the "Sister Dora," "Linda" or "Coronet?" Organdy, dotted Swiss, fine lawns and embroideries are used to fashion these extremely well-made caps.

New Aprons for the parlor-maid are dainty affairs of embroidered voile edged with lace, or of fine dotted Swiss or lawn with fine embroideries.

Uniforms for house workers, include morning dresses of striped or plain blues, with or without collars and cuffs. Afternoon dresses are of black lustre, lustrette, cashmerette and mercerized poplin.



Bridget, we think, has a "twisht" to hertongue. Her "Sister Dora" cap 35c, and her nice enveloping heavy white apron are very practical affairs. Apron, \$1.50.



When it's time for little people to be bathed, an apron of white cotton is protective. Serviceable and well made; from 65c to \$1.65. Her dress in blue, plain or striped, \$2.95 and \$3.50.

Below—"Linda," the name of her Frenchified cap with touch of black velvet, 65c and 75c. Her black lustrette dress is \$3.95, and her apron, 75c.



Right — Demure Annette is a joy to behold in lustre dress with white collar and cuffs, \$5.95, embroidery trimmed apron \$1.00, and "Coronet" pleated cap, 25c and 35c.

Left—Her "Coronet" cap of embroidery comes at 35c and 60c. Her afternoon dress of mercerized poplin, with hemstitched collar and cuffs, \$10.50. And her pretty apron, \$1.25.

Fig. 2. This ad, from *Eaton's News Weekly* (6 October 1923), shows a selection of caps and aprons which Eaton's imported from England for customers who wished their maids to be attired in the latest fashion in uniforms. (Photo: Eaton's Archives.)

family and receiving guests. In large establishments, employers usually provided uniforms for their staff, and servants could take pride in their uniforms and in the recognition that they belonged to an important household. It was in one-servant households, especially in smaller centres, where some servants wore uniforms and some did not, that the uniform became a greater source of friction between mistress and maid. Joan, who came from Scotland in 1913 and worked in an Ontario town, explains her refusal to wear a uniform, especially a cap, when her employer came home with the idea after having visited one of the judges where the maid looked so nice in her black dress and apron and cap.

This was the day that they were going to visit at one of the judges. And she came home and she said, "Oh Joan, they've got a very nice girl there, a maid." I said, "Oh, yes. I know the girl." She said, "You know, she just looked so nice with her black dress and white apron and little cap on. I'm going to get one for you." I said, "Well, you'll have to get somebody else to wear it, because I wouldn't wear it." She said, "You wouldn't." I said, "No, I don't mind a black dress or a white apron, but not one of those caps on your head. I wouldn't wear it for anybody." "Oh well then, we'll just forget about it." That's just the difference between me and my brother. He wanted to be dressed up but not me. I just would *not* wear one of these caps. I said, "I think they're just afraid, you know, that you might be taken for the lady of the house and that wouldn't do. That's your distinction, that you're the maid. You have to wear this cap."

A strong demand for immigrant domestic servants came from rural districts as well as from cities and towns. An immigrant domestic servant who obtained work on a farm found conditions quite different from service in the city or in a town. The physical labour of housework was more strenuous on the farm, where there were no municipal services and few labour-saving appliances. Farm women could not obtain water simply by turning on the tap. The need to carry water greatly increased physical labour and complicated almost every aspect of daily work. As stated in the *Farmer's Magazine* in 1915: "If it were possible to take a vote of all the women of the country as to what improvement is needed first, I think there is no doubt that the decision would be universally in favour of running water in the house."<sup>17</sup> In the better farm homes, a soft-water cistern was established attached to a pump in the kitchen sink. Throughout the period most of the water continued to be carried to the house from a well or other sources. In addition, electrification came to rural districts later than to cities and towns, so electric appliances were also slower appearing on the scene. Stoves generally burned wood, available locally, and, if washing machines rather than scrub boards were used, they were powered by hand or sometimes by a gas engine which was not always

reliable. A domestic servant from England, describing her work on a farm just before World War I, conveys the spirit needed for accomplishing household work in rural areas:

It was an old stove and it had an oven underneath it, and it baked good but I don't know how we worked on it now at all. I really don't because it would flare up and we'd burn wood in it but we made beautiful bread and then in the summer they had an old out-kitchen, a lean-to, and you could have it as hot as you like and then come into the cooler house to eat. And, oh, the bread that we baked in there! It was wonderful! And they had a washing machine but mostly it was by hand, back and forth and back and forth. We had a gasoline engine on it and when the thing would run it was good because then it would drive it but often it wouldn't go. Choke off, and then you'd try to start it and likely flood it and it wouldn't go but, anyway, you could always get on the handle and finish up. You had to wring everything by hand. Oh, a lot of work!

With little mechanical assistance, women on the farm had to accomplish a wider range of tasks than in the city. Immigration pamphlets informed prospective domestic servants that "Work in the farm homes of Ontario embraces, of course, not only the usual domestic routine, but also butter-making, bread-making, the care of poultry etc."<sup>18</sup> Bread and butter that were purchased in the city were made at home on the farm. In addition, although it was not customary for women to work in the fields, they usually tended the poultry and the kitchen garden and often milked. Farm work was more seasonal than city work and from seed time to harvest, farm women, like farm men, worked from dawn to late in the evening.

A female farm servant, like a male farm labourer, was generally employed because her labour would improve the farm economy. Her assistance was needed for sustenance of the family and of the hired farm labourers, and also contributed to the possibility of her employer earning more money through the increased sale of such items as butter and eggs. Therefore, there was a greater equality of relations between the employer and the employed than in the city. As explained in an immigration pamphlet, an immigrant houseworker on a farm "is usually treated as one of the family and is also able to mingle with other girls in the district on the same footing."<sup>19</sup> On the farm, a female servant might work harder but she shared the work with her employer. She did not wear a uniform, she ate with the family, and she usually participated in social outings and in the social activities of the community. Nevertheless, farm employers, like city employers, were not all alike. There were social rivalries in rural districts too, and some of the "better farm homes" which hired female servants undoubtedly hoped to confirm their superiority by doing so. At times, ethnic jealousies also created tension. An

English domestic servant from Southampton in describing her relations with her American employer shows some of the ambiguities of farm employment:

I enjoyed it except that my employer was an American and she had a great hatred of the English and she would set me all kind of tasks to see if I could fall down on them. I remember they had a big pile of railway ties in the yard and in order to cook a meal I had to go out and split those railway ties. Well I had never chopped wood in my life before but I soon found out that if I split them in halves one way, then I could lay one on the other and chop it with the back of the axe and they'd fly all over the place. So you soon found out how to do things. I had to get up and get breakfast. She never did. I don't think there was any reason why she stayed in

bed, just figured she had help and I was English and she didn't like the English.

While some British domestic servants enjoyed the greater informality of farm employment and the attention which they often received from local farm lads, others migrated as soon as possible to the conveniences of the city.

Whether or not they were lucky in the lottery of domestic service, the British domestic servants whom I have interviewed were survivors. Whether they worked in domestic service in a city or on a farm, for several employers or for only one, for a couple of months or a number of years, they nearly all also fulfilled the other mission for which they were encouraged to come to Canada — they married and became mothers.

#### NOTES

1. Calculated from *Census of Canada*, 1891, 1911, 1921, 1931.
2. Calculated from *Census of Canada*, 1921, Vol. IV, Occupations; 1931, Vol. VII, Occupations.
3. Claudette Lacelle, "Les domestiques dans les villes canadiennes au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle: effectifs et conditions de vie," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 15, no. 29 (May 1982): 191. Of Toronto households with servants in 1871, 72 per cent had 1 servant and 18 per cent had 2 servants.
4. *Fifth Census of Canada*, 1911, Vol. VI, Occupations, Table 6. Ontario cities over 15,000 in descending order of population were Toronto, Ottawa, Hamilton, London, Brantford, Kingston, Peterborough, Windsor, Fort William, Berlin, and Guelph.
5. Lacelle, "Les domestiques dans les villes canadiennes," pp. 188-89. *Census of Canada*, 1911, 1921, 1931.
6. Calculated from Canada, *Sessional Papers, Annual Report of the Department of the Interior*, 1904-14, and *Annual Report of the Department of Immigration and Colonization*, 1919-29.
7. Calculated from *Census of Canada*, 1911, 1921, 1931.
8. As explained at the beginning of the paper, I am interviewing women who came to Canada before 1939 and worked in Canadian homes. I have interviewed more than 60 women whose work experience ranged from New Brunswick and Montreal to Vancouver Island, but who are now living in Ontario and western Canada. Approximately half the women interviewed come from England, Scotland, or Ireland and the other half from continental Europe. All the excerpts which follow are drawn from my interview tapes. In introducing the young women, I have used only first names in order to preserve confidentiality as requested in some cases. My research is continuing and I should be very pleased to receive suggestions regarding other women whom I might interview.
9. *Woman's Work in Canada*, Ottawa, Department of the Interior, p. 1.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 2; Canada, *Sessional Papers, Annual Report of the Department of the Interior*, 1900-14; *Annual Report of the Department of Immigration and Colonization*, 1919-30.
11. *Census of Canada*, 1911, Vol. VI, Occupations, Table 6; Vol. II, Birthplace, Table 16.
12. *Woman's Work in Canada* (Ottawa: Department of the Interior, 1913), p. 3.
13. *Openings for British Women in Canada*, p. 25.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Provincial Archives of Ontario, R.G. 16, Department of Agriculture Records, D-7 Macdonald College, Box 2, Correspondence to Canadian General Electric Company Toronto, 13 March 1909.
16. *A Shopper's View of Canada's Past: Pages from Eaton's Catalogues 1886-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), pp. 136, 170.
17. Ethel M. Chapman, "Machinery for Women," *Farmer's Magazine* (September 1915).
18. *Sunny Ontario for British Girls* (Toronto: Ontario Government Pamphlet, [n.d., 1920s]), p. 12.
19. *The Houseworker in Canada* (Ottawa: Department of Immigration and Colonization, 1928), p. 6.