

HEARTS AND MINDS: CANADIAN ROMANCE AT THE DAWN OF THE MODERN ERA, 1900-1930

by Dan Azoulay

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The Woman of His Dreams

If Canadian men were clear about one thing in their letters to the personal columns, it was about the qualities they wanted in a wife. True, some seem to have had few standards to speak of. Many bachelor farmers out West, for example, clearly became far less fastidious with each year of toiling away in lonely isolation. “I believe I could live with almost any one who could cook a good meal, wash the dishes, and not grumble because it had to be done” remarked one Alberta farmer.¹ At the other extreme were those who demanded *too* much from a potential partner – and who were reprimanded accordingly. Referring to the “ideal woman” such men described, one indignant female correspondent shot back,

The list of qualities she must possess if she would aspire to be the wife of any one of these gentlemen is simply appalling: docility, amiability, cheerfulness, patience, education, intelligence, a graduate in the arts of music and cooking and everything else that goes to make up an angel and a housekeeper. When I read one of these ‘What I want for a wife’ letters, I am forced to exclaim: ‘Has God – thou fool – worked solely for thy good, thy joy, thy pastime, thy attire, thy food?’ I wonder, does it ever occur to one of these gentlemen to think of what a woman, who possesses all these qualities, might require in the form of a husband?²

Most men, however, were neither desperate nor delusional. They had a clear idea of what they wanted in a partner but defined their “ideal woman” realistically. They realized, as one bachelor put it, that “angels do not masquerade in physical forms.”³

“THOROUGHLY DOMESTICATED”

So what qualities did Canadian men of this era find most appealing in the opposite sex? At the top of the list, simply by how often they mentioned it, was the so-called “domesticated” woman, who had the skills and dedication required to run a household: to cook, clean, sew, and care for children. At a time when most Canadians considered the home to be a woman’s primary sphere, this preference was hardly surprising. How many men would have wanted a wife deficient in the “domestic arts” and unable to raise healthy and “proper” children? “My ideal has always been a neat, home-loving woman not ashamed of housework and proud of her cooking,” wrote an Alberta homesteader. “I do not want a chore boy. I want a helpmate to look after my house and get my meals, while I labour in the fields to support and make ‘our’ surroundings comfortable.”⁴ Another bachelor, from B.C., was just as adamant. “The average girl of today,” he complained, “is much fonder of dances and other forms of amusement than was the case in her mother’s time, and as a result the wily bachelor often sees neglected homes, and dirty children. Then again, the pretty and desirable girl of today frequently becomes the unkempt and careless wife of tomorrow.” His preference was for the “home-loving” girl.⁵

But did some men value the “home-loving” girl more than other men? Probably. The genuine bachelor – living on his own or with other bachelors, cooking his own meals and doing his own laundry for the first time – fell into this category.⁶ So, too, did the many young men opening up the great West to settlement in these years, who had to juggle arduous farming or ranching duties with household chores. Wanting to devote themselves fully to the former, these pioneering bachelors were *especially* eager to secure a domesticated woman, preferably a farmer’s daughter from the West itself. “Give me a Western girl, who is not too proud to be a farmer’s wife,” was a common refrain from the men in this region.⁷ And when their gaze extended too far eastward, western girls were quick to bring the western boys into line. “There are a number of ‘roses,’ withering on the parent stem,



Mrs. Arthur Beales of Toronto typified the sort of woman most men prized above all in the pre-war years: the woman who knew her way around a kitchen. *Library and Archives Canada, Arthur Beales, Arthur Beales Fonds, PA-800211.*

in single blessedness, right here in Alberta,” four young women reminded their bachelor neighbours, “[who] would gladly assist ‘Dusty’ or some of his brother bachelors to wash dishes and keep the shack in order.” And such girls, they added, “are much more likely than their Eastern sisters to take kindly to life in a shack on the prairie.”⁸

Such reminders were usually unnecessary, but they do suggest that women, no less than men, saw value in the “home-loving” girl. This was certainly true. Nor were women shy about advertising themselves as “thoroughly domesticated” to attract male correspondents.⁹ Many, in fact, took great pride in their housekeeping abilities. “What can there be degrading about such work,” asked one Ontario farmer’s daughter, “when you are bringing your best to make the home attractive and lovely? And surely nothing nobler can engage the attention of any true girl than the

delightful task of making home ‘the dearest spot in all the world.’”¹⁰ Their letters also reveal contempt for women who *lacked* such abilities. “Deliver me from the girls who are proud of not knowing how to mend or to bake bread!,” pleaded one exasperated mother, who said she was raising her sons to avoid such women at all costs.¹¹

There were, of course, exceptions. “Leal” and “True,” two bachelorettes from Ontario, expressed concern about the woman many men seemed to want, particularly out West. “The crying need of the Western bachelor is for a wife and one is prone to ask the question: in his mind are the terms ‘wife’ and ‘housekeeper’ synonymous? We would be sorry to think so but some of the letters lead us to that conclusion.” They agreed that domestic qualifications were important but felt there was more to the perfect wife than being able to sew or make bread. “In their search for wives,” they said, “let the bachelors of the West demand fewer domestic qualifications and look more closely to the qualities of mind and heart.”¹² Leal and True aside, most Canadian women viewed their ability to run a household as a chief selling point in their bid to find a husband.

“MADE OF STERNER AND NOBLER STUFF”

The male desire to marry, above all, a domesticated woman made them, in turn, leery of certain kinds of women. They had no patience for the lazy or “frivolous” woman, for example, the girl who shunned strenuous exertion in and around her home in favour of more leisurely pursuits, like reading trashy novels or gossiping with other women, or whose mind was continually preoccupied with her appearance. “How can a girl expect to keep the domestic machinery running smoothly,” asked “Sam Weller” from Ontario,

when her stock-in-trade consists of being able to get the latest pompadour effect in her hair, her waist compressed to the smallest possible circumference and to pound out on the piano the latest rag-time music? Her mind is filled with sentimental fiction of the Bertha M. Clay and Opie Reade style. To look nice and have a beau is all the essential.¹³

Mr. Weller's views were echoed by "Rara Avis" from northern Ontario. Like many other men he lambasted the "town girl" or "city-bred" woman, "who considers it almost savagery to live more than a hundred yards from a departmental store, opera house, etc., the girl who lounges about dressed up all the time, plays the piano, reads and does anything but work, while the dear old mother does it all."¹⁴ These men lamented what they saw as the recent ascendancy of such "frivolous" women and the passing of women like their grandmothers, women "made of sterner and nobler stuff" who "were willing, for love's sake, to follow their husbands into the wilderness, enduring such privations as are unknown in these days."¹⁵ This didn't mean, of course, that men wanted their wives to play the role of "slave" or "hired hand." "You do me an injustice," replied Alberta's "Mr. Witterly" to one such accusation, "in suggesting that I should allow [the prospective] Mrs. W. to fill the position of 'hired girl.' Nothing was farther from my thoughts when I mentioned industry as one of the qualities of my ideal. There would not be any question between Mr. and Mrs. W. as to how much work they would each do. They would be equal partners in everything."¹⁶ In short, men wanted vigorous, energetic women, willing to do whatever it took to manage a household and, if necessary, help them with their own work, whether in the family business or on the farm. They did not want slaves. But they did not want "wax dolls" either.

And again, Canadian women were of similar mind. "Why should women be lazy when the fathers, husbands, brothers and sons have to work hard from morning to night?," asked the wife of an Ontario farmer. "We Canadian women despise a woman who wishes to be a wall flower letting her poor husband or father slave his fingers to the bone to give her ease."¹⁷ Women were also quick to defend themselves against accusations of vanity and laziness. "Don't for one moment imagine," asserted "Lilian," another farmer's wife, that "we are wax-dolls who must be fetched and carried. Not a bit of it. All the girls of my wide acquaintance are quite capable and willing to exert themselves at many kinds of work."¹⁸ Ontario's "Dickie" was no less defensive. "Some of the Western bachelors are too hard on Eastern girls," she wrote. "If we can play the piano, we also can milk cows, bake bread, ... make butter, sew, and do housework."¹⁹ To women like "Lilian" and "Dickie," the heroic pioneering grandmothers many men pined for had nothing over them.

“THAT MOST OBNOXIOUS OF ALL . . . BREAD-WINNING FEMALES”

Men also found women who held certain *occupations* to be undesirable. Their bias against marrying a “business girl,” for example, was fairly strong. In this period the term “business girl” was synonymous with office worker or secretary, and many Canadians felt it was an occupation incompatible with domestic ability. They conceded that women had the right to *do* such work – at least while they were single – but felt office work distracted them from proper domestic training.²⁰ Businesswomen, themselves, disagreed. “A girl must be remarkably stupid,” wrote a bookkeeper in a law firm, “if she cannot make ‘good bread’ or bake pies just because she happens to be a business woman.” A Manitoba stenographer agreed. Despite the common perception “that business girls are of no use for wives and housekeepers,” she said, “some of the smartest business girls have made the best wives, mothers and housekeepers.” She added that she, herself, could “cook and keep house, having done so for five brothers.”²¹

Nor did most men find female school teachers – or “school ma’ams” as they were called – appealing, and for mostly the same reason: poor house-keeping skills, especially the ability to cook a decent meal. “Some of the school teachers could be taught to cook by nine-tenths of the bachelors,” wrote one of the latter.²² As such, several writers warned men not to marry teachers. The strongest came from Manitoba’s “Jack O’Brien,” who provoked a small storm of controversy among *Prim Rose* readers with his comment that “if a man who has been at home while his sisters were learning housekeeping, knowingly and willfully marries a school ma’am, he ought to be arrested for attempted suicide.... No, boys! If you take my advice, leave the school ma’am for the city dude and get a good country girl who will be a true helpmate in every sense of the word.”²³ Men also accused teachers of being vain, conceited, and flirtatious.²⁴

Such criticisms were no trifling matter for single women. Although only a small percentage were actually teachers, a significant number of *working* women – about one in nine – *were* so employed, this being one of the few professions open to white, educated, middle-class women at the time.²⁵ Most of these women hoped to one day marry and start a family. But the likelihood of them doing so was damaged by the widespread perception – encouraged by letters like Mr. O’Brien’s – that they were poor domestic

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“Business girls,” like this Hardisty, Alberta, stenographer (top) and this Cobourg, Ontario, sales clerk (bottom), were thought to have poor domestic skills. Bachelors were advised to avoid them. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA-2284-11, and Archives of Ontario, C 4-0-0-0-12.*

image not available

These “school marms” from Nesbit, Alberta, would have objected strenuously to the charge that they would make poor wives and mothers. Their training and duties, they believed, suggested otherwise. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, PA-3976-35.*

managers and would therefore make poor wives and mothers. It’s no wonder, then, that so many of them spoke out forcefully in their own defence. “Bachelors of the West,” declared one, “you say we cannot keep house, [but] how do you know? I wager any of you who have a ‘school ma’am’ for a friend or wife find she is just a human lovable woman like all others, and as capable.”²⁶ In fact, teachers who wrote to the column believed they were ideally suited to be housewives. After all, their work taught them patience, problem-solving, how to care for young children, and how to maintain a clean and tidy classroom – all transferable skills. Furthermore, many of them insisted that because of their upbringing – on a farm or in a household full of male siblings – they already *had* the requisite domestic skills. “I belong to that most obnoxious of all orders of bread-winning females,” declared another, but “I am a farmer’s daughter, and can do any or all of the woman’s share of work on a farm” and “can sew enough to make all my own clothes.”²⁷ And even when they lacked such skills, teachers considered themselves intelligent enough to learn them easily enough.

“THE GENTLER SEX”

Next to domestication, a man wanted a “feminine” woman. Being feminine in this era meant a number of things, but above all it meant being modest or reserved and knowing one’s place. Specifically, it meant acting in a restrained, graceful manner, dressing neatly but simply, and being happy with the role as housewife and mother. A number of men writing to the column were unequivocal in their preference for this type of woman. “Men don’t, as a rule, admire the girl who can shoot, play football, talk slang, and who tries her best to be as masculine as possible in all her actions,” wrote “Vox” from Manitoba. “Once a girl starts to compete with man in strength and agility, she ceases to be lovable and feminine and certainly she is not attractive, except as a curiosity... Man admires first of all womanliness, and it is in the home that a woman looks most like herself... [Her husband] expects her to admire him for his strength and to give him the right of protecting her.”²⁸

If men like “Vox” were adamant on this point – and they were – it was partly because women were changing. By the early 1900s they were no longer as confined to their home or (as domestic servants) to someone *else’s* home. The recent spread of factories, department stores, and office buildings in towns and cities had created opportunities for large numbers of young women to enter the paid labour force for a few years before marrying: by 1901, one in four factory workers, and one in five clerical workers, was a woman. Many of these women were also living on their own for the first time, consorting regularly with people their own age, in large urban centres, well beyond the supervisory gaze of family and Church. This gave them a measure of freedom and independence they had never known. The result was the emergence of the “new woman” – bolder in manner and appearance, less prudish in matters of speech and sexuality, and less willing to accept her subordinate social status. The “new woman” demanded the right to earn her own money, wear less restrictive clothing, participate in sports, play a role on the public stage, and share the same legal rights as her brother or father, including the right to vote and hold office. “Brashness, irreverence and independence were among the notable qualities of the new woman,” writes one historian. “[She] was both spirited and public-spirited.”²⁹



Based on her prim and proper appearance alone, this Erindale, Ontario, maiden would have met most men's definition of the ideal woman in the pre-war years. *Library and Archives Canada, R. S. Cassels, Richard Scougall Cassels Fonds, PA-123263.*

In time most Canadian men accepted and even embraced the new woman. In the early 1900s, they did not. They considered her a disruption to the natural order and a threat to woman's "privileged" position as keeper of the home and moral guardian of the family. "One of the most disquieting things that we see today," wrote a young male teacher from Ontario,

is ... the spirit of 'mannishness' that seems to be a part of some women.... I fully believe that the morality of the world would be higher today, were it not for the apparent desire of many women to adopt masculine manners. Men, as a class, admire those women most who are content to so live as to be worthy of the name 'the gentler sex.'... [They also admire] frankness, sincerity, spirit, courage, industry, etc.... I believe the woman who is content to remain in the home and inculcate these qualities into the character of those about her is fulfilling the divine law much better than she who seeks to go out into the world to 'make a name.'³⁰

From Saskatchewan came a further plea to women to not abdicate their "proper sphere":

The woman of today craves freedom, self-opinion, self-reliance (not to mention a vote) and for these mere masculine qualities she is prepared to sacrifice that most endearing of all her charms – winsomeness.... Let members of the gentler(?) sex recognize their limitations, concentrate their minds on those things which appertain to their own domain, taking heart with the truism, 'The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.' Let woman remember that her duty and privilege is to 'lighten and gladden the heart.'³¹

Such opinions found broad support across the country.

Canadians disagreed, however, on what exactly constituted "femininity." A number of correspondents – mostly working women – did not consider office or factory work, for example, to be "unwomanly."³² Ranch women sometimes boasted of their ability to "throw a steer and tie him in four minutes, brand a colt, and handle the rope in all its forms" and still remain "ladylike."³³ And some argued that granting women the right to

own homesteads would not render them less feminine; it might even make them *more* desirable.³⁴ By stretching the definition of femininity in this way, these individuals, along with a handful of correspondents who challenged the legitimacy of a distinct female role and demeanour, were redefining the ideal woman along more modern lines. But they were clearly struggling against the current.

“DO NOT MARRY A SUFFRAGETTE”

At no time was this struggle more apparent than in the great debate that raged in the column, and in fact across the land, over the issue of woman's suffrage – over the right of women to vote. More correspondents commented on this issue than on any other, with approximately 60 per cent coming down firmly, in the pre-war years, on the *anti*-suffrage side. Their reasons were varied, but at the core of their opposition was the belief that suffrage would *de-feminize* women, that it would distract them from their “proper sphere” and strip them of their modesty, dignity, charm, selflessness, and other prized feminine attributes. Most men, like “Homo” of Saskatchewan, felt a woman's place was not in the polling booth but in the home, caring for and exerting her moral influence on husband and child: “If those few women of today, who are clamoring, shrieking, and wasting their time in a futile attempt to attain that which would be of little if any use to them would devote that time to their children, and other duties for which they were created, they would be rendering a far greater service to their sex.”³⁵ Others worried about what women would lose by gaining the vote, including “the delicate reserve, the quaint propriety, [and] the exacting self-respect, etc. that,” according to one Alberta bachelor, “should at all times characterize the true woman.”³⁶

Most Canadian women agreed. “Woman is man's equal in intellect,” wrote a twenty-four-year-old Nova Scotian,

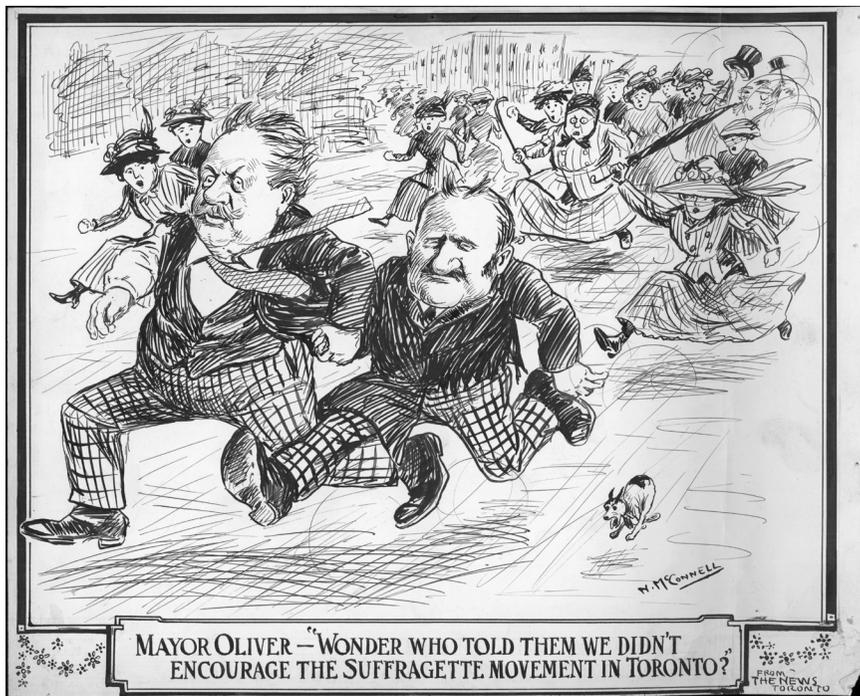
but she does not show it when she leaves the sphere in which God placed her, as wife and mother, and endeavors to take her husband's place. She has as much to do in the affairs of the nation if she stays in the home and confines herself to making it a perfect one, to advise, to love, to cherish, to send out into the

world clean-hearted, clear-headed husbands and sons, as if she went out in their place and voted.³⁷

A former stenographer from Ontario, now keeping house for her father and eager to attract male correspondents, put it more succinctly: “I don’t think a woman should vote. I think her place is in the home.”³⁸ In the pre-war marriage market, such women had a distinct advantage, for most men made it clear they wanted nothing to do with women who favoured suffrage.

Even less desirable was the so-called “suffragette” – the militant suffrage activist who resorted to disruptive or violent methods to advance her cause. “Whatever you do,” warned one Ontario bachelor, “do not marry a suffragette.”³⁹ Canadians were all too familiar with this brand of activist. They read frequently in their newspapers about the notorious “howling suffragettes” in Britain and the United States who marched in the streets, held hunger strikes, chained themselves to lampposts, and destroyed property. When readers of the *Family Herald* turned to the Prim Rose column for the week of June 4, 1913, the first thing they saw was a photograph of a church ablaze in London, England, displayed prominently in the centre of the page under the stark headline: “Suffragettes Burn Church.” Canadians were appalled with such behaviour. They found it unwomanly in the extreme, and in their letters to the column they responded with uncharacteristic vituperation. “The conduct of these ladies, so called, is nothing short of disgraceful,” snapped Saskatchewan’s “Mere Man.” A suffrage supporter from Ontario warned that “when women so unsex themselves as the suffragettes in England, with their fires, riots, and other unwomanly demonstrations, an administration such as these hysterical persons would make is much to be feared.” A “business girl” from the same province called the suffragettes’ actions “more those of heathen, than Christian women and a disgrace to our country and sex.” And voicing a concern shared by most Canadians, one Alberta mother posed the simple question: “Should not a woman be gentle and womanly at all times?”⁴⁰

Although most Canadians would have answered “yes,” not everyone agreed suffrage *per se* would render a woman “unwomanly,” any more than if she owned a homestead or worked in an office or factory.⁴¹ “Was Victoria less a loving wife and tender mother because she was Queen?” asked a B.C. woman, “and ... how would voting once in a year or so and attending a few political meetings cause a woman to neglect her home and family and all her higher duties?” Did men neglect *their* sphere – their jobs – asked



This 1910 cartoon from the *Toronto News* managed to capture both the pre-war feelings of most men towards female suffrage and the unladylike militancy that was said to have infected its supporters. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, C 301, 9999.*

another, simply because they had the right to vote? Several also pointed out that the definition of “womanliness” was constantly changing and that suffrage opponents should keep this in mind. “Most of the men seem perfectly sure that what is not customary is unwomanly,” exclaimed “Woman” from Alberta. “What nonsense! Do they know that when Florence Nightingale and her companions first went out to nurse dying soldiers they were censured as doing something unwomanly” and that “here, at home, it is not very long ago when it was thought unwomanly to ride astride [a horse]?”⁴²

Many Canadians, in fact, believed that suffrage would help women to *better* perform their feminine duties, by extending their nurturing and moral influences into the public realm. A woman who voted and held office could restrict the liquor trade and prostitution, improve working conditions for her sons and daughters, and secure cleaner supplies of water and milk, more

playgrounds, and more hygienic schools and neighbourhoods. “My ideal woman takes a great interest in the questions of the day,” wrote one Alberta bachelor. “She believes in Woman’s suffrage (though not of the militant kind) and takes an interest in all movements which affect the welfare of the nation.”⁴³ This “maternal feminist” rationale, as historians like to call it, would eventually win out. But in the pre-war years it held little sway. Most Canadian men preferred the “old-fashioned” girl, and the old-fashioned girl did not vote.

“REFINED AND INTELLIGENT . . . LADIES PREFERRED”

The third most important quality Canadian men valued in a woman was her ability to provide a husband with “cultured companionship.” When a man returned from a day at the office or factory, or from toiling away in the field, forest, or on the water, not only did he want to return to a properly managed home – with a well-prepared meal on the table and with neatly dressed, well-behaved kids to greet him – but to a wife who could help him forget his troubles and lift his spirits. This meant, above all, a wife who was educated and well-read, someone he could talk to intelligently about his job or business or the issues of the day.⁴⁴

She should not, however, be “bookish,” as this would distract her from her domestic duties and her husband. Nor should her reading material consist of “light,” trashy novels, as these did little to elevate the mind.⁴⁵ “The average man does not want one of those fluffy and very much dollified young women,” wrote one Saskatchewan bachelor, “but rather one who without the least trouble can engage in the ordinary run of conversation and also can speak with intelligence on most subjects.”⁴⁶ A fellow resident of that province, calling himself “Chick-a-Dee,” put it less politely:

The great majority of the [farm] girls around here are surprisingly ignorant and vulgar and can talk of very little beyond cows, pigs, and picnics. If you ask one of them if they are fond of reading they stare, their literature being confined to the comic page of a favourite paper. Music they know nothing of, flowers they laugh at, and if you use a word of more than six letters, it provokes another grin.⁴⁷

Such women knew well enough how to keep house, he conceded, “but a man that would marry a girl just to get his house kept clean and his meals cooked is not a man, and I’m afraid he would come in for little of the true happiness of married life.” This provoked a polite but firm reply from “A Farmer’s Lassie” in Manitoba. “If Chick-a-Dee were here,” she wrote, “he would find among the farmer’s daughters girls not only well versed in farm work, but musical girls, who are able to converse on the topics of the day, as most of them here read their newspapers well.”⁴⁸ Others came to the defence of rural bachelorettes as well, but either way the point was clear: men preferred educated, thinking women.

They also wanted women who were “refined.” Sometimes this meant a woman who appreciated good literature and the beauties of nature, or who was artistic, but usually it meant someone with *musical* ability. In these years, the price of a woman who sang or played an instrument was “far above rubies.” This is understandable. At a time when commercial recreation was limited, particularly outside the larger cities, and before the advent of radio or television, people had to make their own fun. Winters were particularly dreary, as the cold weather and shorter days meant more time indoors. The wife who could entertain her husband and family, by playing the piano or organ, was therefore considered a catch. For one B.C. man, the ideal woman, in addition to being “Christian” and well-educated, would be a musician, “so [that] the long evenings in this delightful climate can be spent with an occasional song at the organ or piano.”⁴⁹ At the other end of the country a Nova Scotia man identified his ideal as one who could “talk intelligently about the world around us, or take her place at the piano and play the sweetest music with ease and grace,” for in his view “there is no accomplishment more desirable than to be a good musician.”⁵⁰ An Ontario bachelor summed up the prevailing view when he said that what bachelors wanted was “refined and intelligent ... ladies.”⁵¹

It’s also clear that many correspondents, mostly women, thought these men were lying. They argued that men were not, in fact, drawn to women of refinement or intelligence, but to attractive and domesticated women – that they chose beauty and brawn over brains. Many of these letters, however, had an unmistakable tone of bitterness, as if written by someone who had been scorned or passed over. One over-thirty B.C. woman, for example, said most of her male acquaintances “do not want a woman with brains” because she would expose the fact that men were not as great as they



Many bachelors wanted a wife who was musical. A woman who could play the piano was therefore highly desirable. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, C 130-5-0-0-192.*

thought they were; and so they preferred “some light, airy, silly creature.”⁵² Another single woman, enrolled at a business college in Nova Scotia, was equally cynical:

Why, only a few days ago a well-educated businessman said to me, ‘What is the use for you to spend your money and time going to college.... You will only marry after a few years and don’t you know that a pretty dress and bonnet appeal more to a man than all the knowledge you can acquire at college?’ That man’s idea, I think, is the rule, not the exception.... Were you ever at a reception or party where the ‘fluffy dollified girls,’ who could talk airy nothings and who would wear the most daring dresses, not even hesitating at the ‘Tango rig,’ [i.e. a risqué dance for its day] were the ones who received the ‘lion’s share’ of attention? ... Those girls will be chosen for wives, while their more modest and intelligent sisters will be ‘left on the shelf.’ Why is it? Is it because so many men are stupid, but so few blind? I know you will think I am an old maid with a ‘sour’ temper, because I was ‘left on the shelf,’ but I am not.⁵³

Canadians wrote enough *disinterested* letters of this sort, however, to suggest that perhaps the cynics were on to something. An Alberta school teacher noted, matter of factly, that “men are more often taken in by the ‘winsome smile’ and smartness in small talk than are women” and that she had “often heard men laugh and make fun of a girl because she was, what they called ‘literary.’”⁵⁴ A Saskatchewan office worker, put her scepticism to verse:

Though I am not a beauty, I can tell you,
I like to look quite neat from head to toe,
I don’t waste time, nor fill my head with nonsense,
I would be useful, though not meant for show ...

But I have thought the men of my acquaintance,
Prefer the girls with least amount of brain,
The ones who giggle, laugh, and hint for ice-cream,
Appear to have of beaux the longest train.⁵⁵

Some men agreed. “The average man,” wrote one B.C. bachelor, “does not want a thinking wife.”⁵⁶

So which side was right? This is hard to say. Maybe men who really did prefer the “airy, silly creature” to the cultured companion simply chose to keep their views to themselves, for fear of appearing superficial or condescending. On the other hand, the columns’ correspondents were generally honest in their views – their searing comments on the suffragette proved as much. If they had had any bias against refined, educated women, therefore, they probably would have said so, as some did.⁵⁷ It’s safe to say that in the *pre-war* years, at least, most men favoured the “cultured companion” over the “fluffy, dollified girl.”

“... NOT A ‘RAVING BEAUTY’”

This didn’t mean that a woman’s physical appearance meant nothing to a man. It did, but not to a great degree, and not in the ways the cynics thought. Rarely, for example, did men mention a preference for specific physical features, such as hair or eye colour. Yes, one Nova Scotian woman claimed to know a man “who met his bride-elect at the railway station” – having never laid eyes on her before – and who jettisoned the wedding “just because her hair happened to be red.” But this fair-minded fellow was the exception.⁵⁸ Most men ranked a woman’s looks well below her other qualities. Alberta’s “Mountain Boy” spoke for most men (and women too) when he told the column’s readers that,

a man or woman is doing a very foolish thing to set their hearts on a person with certain good looks, regardless of character.... I think that beauty in anyone, if they have any beauty at all, is shown in their character. A girl or woman, who is loving and kind, is to be prized more than lands or gold.⁵⁹

A young “Wife Seeker” in neighbouring New Brunswick drove home the point more forcefully – and apparently in all seriousness – when he requested the acquaintance of a “ladylike, moderately well educated woman, intelligent, willing to learn, healthy and [not] homely to a marked degree.”⁶⁰ In fact, he may have found such a companion in a fellow Maritimer calling herself “Felicitas.” Like many other women advertising for husbands

in the column, Felicitas made no effort to conceal her less-than-perfect appearance. “I would have been a pretty girl,” she told readers,

but am debarred from being so by a scar on my face. However, I have never found that that prevented me from making hosts of friends and sometimes more than friends, or from having plenty of partners, skating and dancing. Indeed, so many of my dearest friends are from among those who at first were indifferent to me, as I thought on account of my defect, that the fact that I am not a ‘raving beauty’ so to speak, drawing all men unto me by my perfection of good looks, has lost a good deal of its bitterness to me.⁶¹

If Felicitas’s experience was as common as it seems, it merely confirms that being plain or ugly was not a serious obstacle to romance in these years. When Canadians insisted that “beauty is only skin deep” – a recurring expression in the columns – they meant it.⁶²

This may come as a surprise to contemporary readers given the tremendous emphasis that our own culture places on physical beauty. We must remember, however, that in the years before Hollywood films and mass circulation magazines – with their glorification of surface beauty and sexual allure – North Americans were less superficial. They were also more religious and prudish, and this, too, made them value individual character over looks. So did the way they earned their living. Canada was still predominantly rural and agricultural, and to survive, many people produced goods or delivered services, whether this meant growing wheat, fishing for cod, building furniture, or selling dry goods in a general store. In this economy, people’s skills, character, and brute strength naturally counted for more than their looks. This was especially true in the West, where legions of ambitious young men were opening up large swaths of land to farming and ranching at an unprecedented pace. For many of them, this meant choosing a wife with the skills and character necessary to build a successful farm or family business. If she also happened to have a pretty face, then all the better. But it was not a requirement.

If physical beauty carried little weight in the romantic calculations of most men before the war, some aspects of a woman’s appearance they clearly did *not* care for. Foremost among these were excessive make-up and flashy clothing. “Kid” from Ontario, for example, wanted a “sensible girl.”

Not “the young, simpering kind that tries to be impressive, in fact to win your affections at first sight. Of course the powdery kind are strictly out of it; powder is all right in its place ... but it seems to me its place isn’t on some giggling, red-nosed, freckle-faced girl in chunks.” Turning to his mother in church one Sunday, he whispered “Miss _____ would be quite a nice girl if it wasn’t for the white spots.”⁶³

Men were no more tolerant of women who wore brash clothing, especially the trendy feathered hats of the day. “Manitoulin Bill,” although he favoured female suffrage, could not bear to think of women as Members of Parliament. “Fancy a woman sitting in Parliament,” he wrote, “with a low cut waist [i.e. blouse], hobble skirt, a large hat with a feather hanging out behind and two or three hat pins that would make spears for seal killing. Women who wear the above clothing are not fit to have a vote. Their style shows what is in their heads.”⁶⁴ Northern Ontario’s “Rara Avis” shared his concern. “The present fashion in ladies hats” among “eastern girls,” he said, “makes one wonder what the sex are coming to.”⁶⁵ Why men like Bill and Rara Avis felt this way is not altogether clear. The etiquette of the day held that women should always strive for modesty of behaviour and appearance, which, among other things, meant avoiding “all extremes of fashion, as well as all eccentricities of style.”⁶⁶ So perhaps men considered conspicuous fashions unladylike? Or perhaps they associated excessive make up and bold clothing with prostitutes? A few men implied as much. “Look at the vulgar and ridiculous fashions!” wrote “Mountaineer” from B.C.:

If women would be more reserved and decent in their mode of dress and not so crazy to follow fashion, there would be a great deal less sin in the world. A woman when her true self is the purest, most respected thing in the world, but it is also possible for her to sink below all else.⁶⁷

Such behaviour also smacked of vanity and superficiality, which in turn had serious implications in other areas. How proficient could a woman be at keeping house or carrying on an intelligent conversation, for example, if she spent an inordinate amount of time and mental energy on “the rouge pot” and the latest fashions? Not very. And how many young men, struggling to establish farms, businesses, or professions could afford to keep their wives in the latest fashions? Not many.⁶⁸



These feather- and fur-bearing women, crossing a Toronto street in 1911, might have held some appeal to their city's more superficial bachelors, but most men, especially in rural areas, deplored the extravagance. *Courtesy City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 409.*

Many men also disliked the “sloppy,” unkempt woman. One bachelor, who lived in a city boarding house, made this clear enough. “The girl of the house was good-looking,” he wrote,

but unattractive. In the morning she would serve us our breakfast wearing an old dirty skirt and a waist that must have belonged to her grandmother, it was so worn out, and there was a bill of separation between it and her skirt. Her hair was continually done up in braids and tea-lead until supper time, when she would frizz and clean up and scheme to get some of us to take her to the movies. She was a stunner when she did clean up.⁶⁹

He, along with most men, preferred women who were plain-looking, neatly dressed, and well-groomed. Not only was this pleasing to the eye, but, more important, it conveyed the impression of substance and ability.⁷⁰

“SUCH A LOT OF GIRLS SEEM TO BE FLIRTS”

Men also found certain *habits* objectionable. A number complained about the woman who chewed gum, for example. They considered this a “vulgar habit,” and reports of its alleged prevalence among women in the western provinces prompted the normally taciturn Prim Rose to remark, “I have never seen nor heard of a ‘lady’ who was guilty of such an offence against good taste” and “was under the impression that the extraordinary practice prevailed only among the lowest classes, chiefly school boys.”⁷¹ Even more objectionable was the woman who “flirted” – who led a man to believe her intentions towards him were more romantic than they really were. This included the woman who sought the attention of a man despite having committed herself in some way to another. Flirting was considered basically dishonest. Even worse, it could take a toll on a man’s emotions, leaving him broken-hearted. “Many a fellow can trace his downfall through a woman,” complained one westerner. “I mean a flirt, and such a lot of girls seem to be flirts. They encourage the fellow for a time and make him think that he’s all the world to her, and when she has had all the amusement she wants she gives him his dismissal.”⁷² Other female habits men found distasteful included smoking, drinking tea, eating sweets, and gossiping.

They rarely explained *why* they opposed such things, but they certainly left the impression their practitioners were behaving in an “unladylike” way.⁷³

“KIND-HEARTED ABOVE ALL THINGS”

Lastly, many men wanted a woman who was kind and generous, who was willing to sacrifice her own interests and happiness to help others, especially the less fortunate. Canadians had long prized female altruism – it went hand in hand with motherhood after all – but by the early 1900s they found it even *more* desirable. Rapid urbanization, the rise of large, mechanized factories, and the generally sluggish economic growth of the period combined to produce a myriad of social problems: slums, disease, unsafe workplaces, prostitution, and alcoholism, to name a few. Governments were slow to address these things, but middle-class Protestant women were not. In unprecedented numbers they formed and joined their own organizations to pressure politicians into restoring “order” to the industrial city, or they tried to do this themselves, through charitable organizations like the Women’s Christian Temperance Union or Young Women’s Christian Association. Canadians regarded these women as heroes, and the most prominent among them – like American social workers Jane Addams and Frances Willard – became cultural icons.⁷⁴ “When I think of some of the splendid women of today,” gushed one Ontarian, “I feel very small to think I am only a humble man. What a privilege it is to meet such women, noble, pure and true, whose very lives are ones of hourly self-sacrifice.”⁷⁵

Just as significant were the romantic implications. Swept up by the idealistic, “progressive” spirit of the age, Canadian men came to desire in women the qualities of compassion and self-sacrifice exemplified by people like Addams and Willard. “My ideal of a good helpmate,” wrote a Manitoba bachelor, “is one who would be anxious to help, whether in her own household or anyone else’s, and she should be kind hearted above all things.”⁷⁶ Some men had personal encounters with such women and were deeply affected. One Albertan, remembering a recent visit to Victoria, where he witnessed a female Salvation Army officer preaching on a street corner, was moved to poetry: “The fair city of Victoria has a very personal interest for me,” he wrote, “for there dwelt one, a Canadian girl, more than passing fair, whose sweet voice rose nightly on the streets where men were wont to gather, in songs of invitation and praise –”

One whose image never shall depart,
Deep graven on this grateful heart,
While memory shall last.⁷⁷

Women sang the praises of female kindness and altruism as loudly as men, perhaps louder. Many, like young “Juliet” from P.E.I., considered these qualities selling points in the marriage market. How “sweet” it was, she told Prim Rose readers, “to see a young girl give up her own pleasure, perhaps a drive or a walk with the man she thinks she loves, that she may lend a helping hand to those who need her assistance. She does not lose by this. The man, if he be the right kind of a man, will love her all the more.”⁷⁸

“A CONSISTENT CHRISTIAN”

The Canadian bachelor’s desire to marry a “kind” and “giving” woman may also reveal a certain *cultural* bias on his part. Is it possible he was really asking for a *Christian* woman? And did he find other cultural or ethnic traits desirable in a wife? It’s easy to assume that the typical bachelor was, in fact, particular about such things, not least because nativism – a preference for the native-born over the foreign-born – was particularly strong in these years. The average Canadian man was white, Anglo-Saxon, and either Protestant or Catholic, and did not care much for persons of dissimilar background. As a child his parents had told him to keep clear of “foreigners,” and had sometimes forbidden him from playing with them. He particularly disliked persons of southern and eastern European descent, or who were not white-skinned; the average Canadian woman, of course, felt the same.⁷⁹ His preferences were reinforced, moreover, by the eugenic assumptions of the day – popularized by doctors, psychiatrists, public health officials, social workers, and other experts – that relegated most non-Anglo-Saxons to an inferior biological status, physically and mentally.⁸⁰

And indeed such prejudices did surface occasionally in the pages of the personal columns. Several writers made derogatory remarks, for example, about *native* women, whom they considered plain, uneducated, and unrefined. “How would a nice Indian squaw do for a wife?” asked one farmer sarcastically. “No! Not for me.”⁸¹ Others referred disparagingly to eastern and central European immigrants as “illiterate” and, in the case of Ukrainian men, “depraved.”⁸² A few writers also spoke solemnly about

the prospect of “race suicide,” as Canada’s “virile” men of the “northern races” remained bachelors in the maiden-challenged West while the “undesirable class of immigrants” in the region – Galicians, Ruthenians, and Doukhobours – got married and had children.⁸³ The most blatant expression of nativism in the columns was the 1910 exchange in the *Family Herald* between a “Woman” of Alberta and a “Mere Man” of Saskatchewan. The former accused lonely men of having low moral standards for being willing to marry, as a last resort, foreigners and natives. “How is it that white men will marry Indians, and few white women will? What of the standards the women have set up?” In his defence “Mere Man” replied that his protagonist,

seems to forget the number of white women who have inter-married with the negro, a race generally conceded to be vastly inferior to the red man of America.... And, again, there is some excuse for the white man marrying an Indian in this western country, owing to the scarcity of the white woman at that period, for the mixed marriages are but few now; but can ‘Woman’ excuse her white sisters marrying negroes at the present day while there are so many bachelors of her own colour?⁸⁴

That many writers soliciting correspondence from the opposite sex made a point of noting their own “fair complexion” or that of their ideal partner might also be construed as an attempt to limit the field of potential mates to their own racial group.

It is also worth noting, however, that only a handful of such unambiguously nativist letters appeared over the course of the columns’ long history, that only one correspondent openly opposed inter-racial marriage, that men seemed more interested in “healthy,” “clear,” and “unpowdered” complexions than “fair” ones, and that several writers expressed more liberal views.⁸⁵ More important, Canadian men rarely mentioned ethnic or racial criteria in their solicitations to the columns. The request by an Englishman from Saskatchewan that he “would like to correspond with good, sensible English or Scotch girls” was rare.⁸⁶ A few men expressed a distaste for “foreign born” women, especially from Scandinavian countries and Russia; such women, they felt, were only good for hard labour on the farm and would not make good companions.⁸⁷ And several did praise

German women, because of their reputation for frugality and good house-keeping.⁸⁸ But again, such voices were few.

The only ethno-cultural criterion that Canadian men mentioned with any frequency was religion. Many added “Protestants preferred” to their requests for female correspondents, without specifying a particular denomination, and almost as many – especially in the Maritimes – requested “Catholic” correspondents. More common, by far, was for men to request a “christian” woman – a “true Christian” woman, as so many of them put it. This is hardly surprising. At that time women had prime responsibility for the moral instruction of the young and, by extension, for the moral well-being of western civilization. So which man would not want his wife to be “a good christian”? The era’s near-obsession with social service – with creating “heaven on earth” as the saying went – increased the Christian woman’s appeal that much more (or at least the woman who expressed her Christianity through helping others). And for men who opposed suffrage and suffragettes, the Christian woman was ideal because she knew her place and behaved like a “lady.”⁸⁹

But above all, men wanted Christian women for their “civilizing” influence, especially on themselves. In 1909, a Yukon miner told readers of the *Family Herald* that the many letters sent to him by the “virtuous” women of Canada had helped smooth his rough edges and fortify his resistance to temptation:

Cut off as we are here from nearly all social and intellectual pleasures, you can hardly realize how much pleasure those pen friends bring to me, especially those of your sex. Here we seldom see anything but the ‘camp followers,’ but with a kindly word from time to time from ladies whom I know to be good, true and pure, life seems worth living; it is worth while to be a gentleman in every respect.⁹⁰

To some men, finding a good Christian woman was, in fact, their key to personal salvation – the ticket to avoiding an eternity in hell. “I wish ... to eulogize the girls of this great land,” wrote a Manitoba university student, perhaps contemplating his future. “We men need more of their chastening and refining influence. There are hundreds of young men like myself, who need the sympathizing influence of the gentle sex to elevate, refine them and to beguile sorrow.”⁹¹ The message in such letters was clear:

Christian women helped make Christian men, and for many bachelors, this was important.

“‘CANARY BIRDS’ OR NONE!”

So who was “Miss Right” in the years leading up to World War I? Clearly she was many things. As lonely and needy as many single men were, especially in the countryside, they were not willing to settle for just anyone. They knew precisely the woman they wanted and made this clear in their letters to the personal columns. No one letter neatly summarized the main qualities they desired, but we can imagine what such a letter might have looked like:

Dear Prim Rose,

I am a 30-year-old farmer, Christian and well-established, who wishes to correspond with a member of the fair sex. She must be, above all, well-versed in the domestic arts and not averse to a bit of hard labour now and again, for there is always much to do on a farm. As such, I am not interested in corresponding with school ma’ams or business girls, or with frivolous girls who spend hours in front of the looking glass or shopping for new gowns in town. Indeed, physical appearance does not concern me, so long as she is neat and does not adorn herself with flashy clothes or excessive face powder. She must of course be womanly – gum chewers and suffragettes need not apply – and preferably well-educated, for I often find myself in need of intelligent companionship after a long day in the fields. Those who are musically inclined are especially welcome. Finally, I want a Christian woman. Her nationality is not important so long as she is loving and kind towards all living creatures. Such a woman would bring out the best in any man and could only make the world a better place. If any Eastern or Western girl matching this description should see fit to write to an old bachelor, my address is with Prim Rose.

Typical Bachelor

This portrait is somewhat at variance with what historians have had to say about middle-class conceptions of femininity in these years. The ideal it expresses is, first of all, far more Victorian than we have been led to believe. As we have seen, especially from the debate over female suffrage, few men desired the independent, career-minded, and spirited “New Woman” heralded by the middle-class opinion-makers of the pre-war years; this would come later. Instead, they preferred the “home loving,” reserved, and virtuous woman. Nor was their conception of the ideal woman this narrow. Historians have made much of a handful of desirable female qualities – domesticity and moral virtue in particular – but have said far less about the many *other* qualities the typical Canadian bachelor (and bachelorette for that matter) valued in a woman, such as her physical vigour, education, intelligence, musical ability, neatness, and kindness. And his list of *dislikes* was just as long.

But was there really such a thing as a “typical” bachelor? Would such an advertisement, and the ideal it described, not depend on where the man lived, his occupation, his ethnic background, even his age? Did the miner in Nelson, B.C., want the same woman as the lonely homesteader breaking sod in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, or the young clerk wrapping groceries in Newmarket, Ontario, or the fisher’s son dropping nets off of Shelburne, Nova Scotia?

I can offer no definite answer to this question. The letters reveal only the writer’s home province, occasionally his occupation, and even less often his age and ethnicity. Breaking the letters down by region – the Maritimes, central Canada, and the West – and (where possible) by occupation, does, however, reveal some subtle differences. The pioneering bachelor of the West, as I said, probably placed more emphasis on a woman’s domestic abilities, mainly because he had so little time for household management. But he also wanted a woman who wasn’t too proud or too lazy to help *outside* the home, with pioneering duties. B.C.’s “Hotcake Wonder,” for example, wanted a wife “who would not be averse to coming out now and then and pulling a half hitch around a few stumps, just to get things started.”⁹² In fact, for many such men, only *Western* women would do. “In choosing my ideal,” wrote a Saskatchewan farmer, “I would not cross the eastern boundary of Manitoba, for the simple reason that lots of eastern girls ... cannot adapt themselves to circumstances peculiar to the West.”⁹³ In a rousing verse entitled “Our Western Girls,” a B.C. rancher expressed a similar bias:

Side by side with us ye stand,
helping with a gentle hand,
Tame our wild, free Western land,
 Brave, our Western Girls!
Snowy brow and eyes of blue;
Cheeks health-flushed, the rose's hue,
Ruby lips glist honeyed dew,
 Fair, Our Western girls!⁹⁴

These pioneer men of the West, being more isolated from friends and neighbours, were also *lonelier* than bachelors in the more developed regions, which might explain the higher premium they placed on the “cultured” and “cheerful” woman. Having to start a farm or ranch essentially from scratch, and with limited resources, they would have also valued more highly the thrifty, non-extravagant woman.⁹⁵

Bachelors at the other end of the country had distinctive tastes too. Maritime men seemed to value a woman's *companionship* as much if not more than her domestic abilities. Many made a point of telling prospective wives that they didn't want a “servant” or “housekeeper,” like their brothers out West appeared to want but someone with whom to share their joys and sorrows and, above all, their *ideas*.⁹⁶ Perhaps because his region had always held education in high esteem, the Maritime bachelor showed a particular appreciation for the intelligent and highly educated woman; so in his letters he often requested women of “culture and refinement.”⁹⁷ This could also explain why Maritime bachelors seemed less opposed to marrying teachers, and why many matrimonially inclined Maritime *women* made such a show of their literary leanings and expertise.⁹⁸

Less clear is why Maritime bachelors also seemed more partial to women from their own province and – from the number of times “Protestants preferred” and “Protestants only” appeared in their letters – of their own religion. Were they more xenophobic than men elsewhere? Possibly. The region did boast the highest percentage of native-born Canadians, after all. In a letter typical of the Maritime man's preferences, one P.E.I. farmer told Prim Rose that he “has not yet launched his barque on the sea of matrimony, and would enjoy correspondence with young ladies of the maritime Provinces, Protestant, educated and musical.”⁹⁹

The Canadian man's vision of the perfect woman was also shaped by his job. A farm boy, hired hand, or rancher, for example, naturally preferred

a woman raised on a farm – the proverbial “farmer’s daughter.”¹⁰⁰ He considered such a woman sturdy, healthy, and knowledgeable enough to meet the rigorous and varied demands of farm life. She could milk a cow, harness a horse, or stand behind a plough if necessary. “As for city girls,” wrote “Bob” from Nova Scotia, “I don’t think they would suit very well on a farm, as a cow might look at them, and then you would see them making a bee line for the house, rejoicing over their narrow escape.”¹⁰¹ Besides, the average city woman was frail and preoccupied with amusement and fashion. As for the urban “working girl” – much-maligned in her day – she had the added liability of being considered immoral.¹⁰² For many men working in rural areas, in other words, “city and town-bred girls” need not have applied.

For men working in urban areas it was a different story. Factory workers, bank clerks, shopkeepers, professionals, and so on, did not care as much about a woman’s sturdiness or her ability to milk a cow. Her other attributes, including her appearance, were more important. This could explain why Canadians regularly accused city men of being superficial, of favouring the made-up and fashionably dressed girl over the “sensible” one. It would also explain the occasional warnings issued – usually by country folk – for men to “avoid the mistakes prevalent in the cities, viz.: falling in love with the beautiful fairy with blue hair.”¹⁰³ Canadians no doubt exaggerated the city boy’s superficiality – the columns yield little evidence of this after all – but it’s possible, given the greater superficiality of urban life in general, that he *was* more interested than the country boy in a woman’s physical beauty.

These differences aside, Canadian men of this era displayed an unmistakable consensus about what constituted a good wife. Where they lived, the jobs they held, their religious beliefs – these things made little difference. As one Nova Scotia gentleman put it, “when a man returns from his work – whether it be in the field or the carpenter’s shop, the lawyer’s office or the merchant’s counting-house, it matters not – and sits down to a meal, where the bread is soggy, the meat over done and the pies impenetrable if he has nothing worse he will have a fit of the blues.”¹⁰⁴ Similarly, the forestry worker or farmer was just as determined to marry an educated, “refined” woman, for example, as the city banker or lawyer. When one woman brazenly suggested that what farmers needed most was wives of “brawn and muscle instead of intellect,” she was quickly set straight. “She would almost lead one to believe,” smirked one Ontario farmer, that “they ought to select a wife for the same qualities as they would buy a horse. I

think most farmers like a little intellect instead of great strength.”¹⁰⁵ So yes, there *was* a typical bachelor.

That being said, almost all bachelors would have had to settle for something less than their ideal. Although parents tried to raise their daughters with the qualities men wanted, few women would have fit the bill exactly. It was, after all, a tall order. It was also a somewhat contradictory one. As one rural bachelor pointed out to another, “How long does my friend think the dainty fingers of his bride would retain their power to render Chopin with proper depth and feeling after starting to care for a dozen cows night and morning? Moreover, the cries of ‘Chick, chick,’ and ‘Co, bas’ do not tend to bring out the silvery sweetness in a woman’s voice. Nor does cooking improve the complexion.”¹⁰⁶ Even worse, the ideal woman was getting harder to find. Many rural bachelors, in particular, complained that the young women they grew up with seemed increasingly to prefer *city* life – with its growing opportunities for paid employment, advanced schooling, and commercial pleasure – to the rigours of life on the farm and in the home. And these women were voting with their feet.

But Canadian bachelors were not easily dissuaded. Not only did they articulate precisely what they wanted in a wife but they refused to settle for less. Even in areas where men far outnumbered women, as in Alberta and Saskatchewan, and where loneliness and despair were intense, they remained steadfast.¹⁰⁷ “Some of us give up our treasured ideals very reluctantly,” wrote one. “The Western bachelors ... have ideals which they are not quick to sacrifice even though they are very anxious to marry. No doubt many of them would have married long ago but for that.”¹⁰⁸ Another westerner, when told that he and his fellow bachelor farmers should not ask for too much in a wife – that they should be content with simple “sparrows” instead of refined, educated “canaries” – became indignant. “If we could be content with ‘the sparrow,’” he shot back, “I could have secured one long ago.... No! Not for me. ‘Canary Birds’ or none!”¹⁰⁹ Manitoba’s “Bloomin’ Yankee Boy” put the bachelors’ case more succinctly: “if I don’t find my ideal,” he declared, “I will stay single the remainder of my days.”¹¹⁰ It was a time of idealism, and romance was clearly no exception.