



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

by Dan Azoulay

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EPILOGUE

The New Order

If World War I shook the very foundations of Canadian romance, its effect on *postwar* romance was arguably just as great. How could it not be so? An event that altered so dramatically the roles of men and women and that left in its wake so much death and destruction was bound to affect how people perceived and conducted romance thereafter. And if World War I was, in fact, the birthplace of “modern culture” – of a more liberal, secular, rebellious, and experimental mindset – as many historians contend,¹ how could it have not affected heterosexual romance as well?

Unfortunately, we know little about postwar Canadian romance. Perhaps it’s because evidence of popular attitudes and behaviour has been (as always) hard to find. The personal columns are not terribly useful either. Not only did fewer people use them after the war, but those who did said less about matters of the heart. The reasons for this are clear enough. With so many leisure activities available after the war, including radio and sports, letter-writing became less the recreational pastime it once was. More important, as Canadians continued to pour into urban areas from the countryside, and as the number of roads and cars grew, and especially as commercial amusements flourished, opportunities for romance multiplied, even in rural areas. As a result, Canadians relied less on the personal columns to find partners. At best, the columns point to *trends* in postwar romance, as do some of the existing studies of the period. Still, these trends, taken together, suggest nothing less than the emergence of a new romantic order

in Canada, one in which the ideal partner was substantially recast and the rules of romance rewritten.

THE NEW MAN

Identifying how women defined the ideal man after the war is not easy. That's because those who wrote to the *Family Herald* and *Western Home Monthly* basically stopped specifying the qualities they wanted in a husband. The only exception was their lingering adulation of soldiers and the Western Man. In the immediate postwar years, many women requested correspondence from "returned soldiers," and some desired no other. "I lost my boy over there at the Somme," wrote one, "and no one will ever take his place but a true blue Canadian soldier, if I will ever be able to get any"; others met up with soldiers they had begun corresponding with during the war.² Canadian veterans, in turn, were eager to trade on their wartime service for romantic purposes. In fact, it was usually the first thing they mentioned in their letters: the years spent overseas, the adventures, the medals won, even their injuries. Some went further, suggesting they deserved more "credit" from the fair sex than men who had merely served on the home front.³

This blatant self-promotion continued well into the mid-twenties, even when it became clear that Canadian women were no longer as interested in a man's wartime sacrifices. Female adulation of the patriotic Canadian man waned considerably after 1921, as wartime patriotism itself waned and, perhaps, as the *image* of veterans deteriorated. Indeed, this image had begun to crumble during the war itself. In his study of community responses to the war – in Guelph, Lethbridge, and Trois-Rivières – Robert Rutherford demonstrates the public's growing fear of veterans, based on newspaper reports of the returned man's propensity to public brawling, drunken rowdiness, and radicalism as well as his high incidence of venereal disease, tuberculosis, and mental instability. "Unfavourable depictions of troops began to appear," he writes, "stories of boisterous rank-and-filers, of men infected by tuberculosis, or of hardened men back from Europe supposedly corrupted by radical politics."⁴ The widely reported week-long riot in Toronto in August 1918, in which angry veterans destroyed parts of the city's Greek community in response to an alleged slight against one of their own, did little to dispel the image. Nor did stories that circulated *after*

the war about the savagery and carousing of soldiers at the front, behaviour that in some instances carried over into civilian life, especially the penchant for drinking and smoking. “Now that they had seen ‘Paree,’” writes one historian, of veterans generally, “it was difficult to keep them in check.”⁵

No doubt this behaviour disturbed some people. Referring to the veterans in her city, a young Ottawa woman reported that “it sometimes makes me ashamed of my country to see how some of these fellows are treated, socially.”⁶ Veterans were disturbed with their new image as well. “I served in the artillery in France,” wrote one, under the ironic moniker “Reckless 33,” and “I have heard some girls around here giving a very bad opinion to the boys who waded the mud over there. I have decided to ask some girl who still has faith in us fellows to write to me as I am lonely.”⁷ Another veteran recalled that “there was a lot of ill feeling. We came home at a time when there was no sense of appreciation. ‘The war is over. Those guys were over there to have a good time.’ That was in the minds of some people. Veterans were not treated all that well.”⁸ Add to this reckless image the restlessness of soldiers, their trouble holding down jobs, and the limited employment opportunities for those with debilitating injuries, and we can understand why the patriotic man’s stock soon plummeted in the postwar romance market.⁹

In the war’s wake, many Canadian women continued to admire, as well, the Western Man – his virility, his courage, and his patriotism in building up the country – as well as the wonderful West itself. This was especially true of Maritime maidens (for some reason), like Nova Scotia’s “Bashful Twenty-Two,” who praised the Western bachelors “for the work they are doing,” admired “their pluck,” and envied “them their privilege of living in the great West.”¹⁰ Nourished by the exciting adventure stories of Zane Grey, Ralph Connor, Nellie McClung, and Gene Stratton Porter, many young women from central and eastern Canada remained entranced by the romance of the region and by its manly, heroic inhabitants.¹¹ This infatuation never entirely disappeared, but after 1921, and except for the occasional request for letters from “Mounties” or “cowboys,” it was less noticeable.

What, then, constituted the ideal man in the 1920s? Since so few women bothered to articulate this, we can only infer such qualities from what they *stopped* asking for and, even more, from the comments of bachelors trying to attract women through the personal columns. Women stopped requesting, for example, men of high moral standing – who did not smoke, drink, or

gamble; after the war, and in part *because of* the war, they were more tolerant of such one-time “vices.” Canadian bachelors had picked up certain bad habits in Europe and most women seem to have resigned themselves to this. “The rest rooms of skating rinks, dance halls, and house parties get so thick with smoke,” wrote a Saskatchewan woman about the many veterans now smoking in public, that “one can hardly see the other.... There are very few young men around here who have not been ‘Over There,’ and we girls and mothers sympathize with them, for we know they have to have their smoke as well as their meals.”¹² Some deplored the new male morality – “most young men of today think that they cannot be sports unless they smoke cigarettes and drink,” fumed Ontario’s “Miss Timid. “Where is the manly young man of yesterday?” – but hers was a rare example of the moralism that had so strongly defined the ideal man before the war, but that now only survived in pockets, mostly rural.¹³

Nor did women seem as concerned about a man’s *financial* standing or prospects, or about how “ambitious” he was. Of course some men insisted otherwise, accusing women of being essentially “gold diggers.” But such accusations were no more common than before, and there was little evidence, from the letters women wrote to the columns, to back them up; in fact, a number of women emphatically denied this.¹⁴ Nor did men advertise themselves in such terms as much as before.

Only in one respect did a man’s real assets seem to matter: car ownership. No woman actually said so in her request for male correspondents, but it’s clear that in the 1920s, women (like men) loved joy-riding in cars. And because few women earned enough to afford their own, they had to depend on boyfriends for such recreation. “Extravagant courtship seems to be again the order of the day,” wrote a *Family Herald* columnist in 1920, “and there is also much truth in the complaint of the young man that no girl wants him unless he owns a car!”¹⁵ What’s more, from the frequency with which men boasted of owning a car (or complained about *not* having one), it is obvious *they*, at least, considered it a romantic asset of the highest order. “Many a boy has met what [*sic*] he considers the right one,” observed an “Ex-Soldier” from Manitoba,

and still he is unable to carry out his wishes. He may have [a] nice home waiting for her, but she doesn’t take to him for the simple reason that he has no motor car in which to drive her around. A car costs money and young farmers have a better use

image not available

Owning a vehicle, especially at this early date (ca. 1914), gave a man a distinct advantage in the romance market. Perhaps that's why this dapper-looking Calgary bachelor seems so happy. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA 5262-101.*

for their money than spending it in such an expensive luxury.
How many boys have been disappointed in this way?¹⁶

A salmon fisher from B.C. was dubious about all this. "I am sure the girls don't marry for the sake of the car," he told *Prim Rose* readers. But many bachelors evidently agreed with "Ex-soldier." In their solicitation of female correspondents, those lucky enough to own their own cars often made a point of saying so – "I have a Hudson Super Six-cylinder car and I would like Cupid to help me find a fair chauffeur [*sic*]" declared a Manitoba farmer's son – while those not similarly endowed were apologetic.¹⁷

If a woman did want a man with wheels, however, it wasn't because she equated car ownership with wealth but because she associated it with pleasure. And this was what the ideal man likely boiled down to after the war. Without wanting to put too fine a point on it – postwar women, as mentioned, were tight-lipped about their ideal man – what she probably

admired most in a man was his lighter side. Why else would matrimonially minded men spend so much time listing the leisure activities they enjoyed most, while saying little about their characters, appearance, or financial assets? Was it because they knew that women now wanted a man who liked to dance, skate, travel, go for drives, take photographs, play music, ride horseback, and hunt? Typical postwar male “advertisements” include that from B.C.’s “Jolly Sport,” a young farmer who sought to entice women by emphasizing his fondness for “sports of all kinds, such as boating, motoring, swimming, and ... reading,” and Ontario’s “Dancer,” who told female readers that “I like swimming, canoeing, tennis, baseball and dancing.”¹⁸ Even older bachelors sensed the changing winds. “Now I am not sweet sixteen, have seen twice that and a little more,” wrote a Saskatchewan bachelor, “but I can enjoy myself just as much as those at sixteen and can get around just as fast.”¹⁹ For the same reason, many men spoke about how much *travelling* they had done and, therefore, how many stories they could tell prospective girlfriends about the exotic places they had visited; several women also solicited men of this sort.²⁰

THE ‘MODERN GIRL’

What men looked for in a woman changed as well. Two weeks before the start of World War I, an Ontario bachelor had submitted a poem to the *Family Herald* called “Wanted – a Wife.” The last verse went as follows:

A commonsense creature, but still with a mind,
to teach and to guide, exalted, refined –
A sort of angel and housemaid combined.²¹

This was what most men wanted in 1914. *After* the war, they wanted something different. In their letters to the columns, when they specified any qualities at all, they stopped emphasizing a woman’s domestic abilities, femininity, “refinement,” or virtue; nor, therefore, did they show as much distaste for the working woman or the advocate of women’s rights. For the average Canadian bachelor, in other words, the woman of his dreams was no longer first and foremost a “lady.”

This change did not happen overnight. It began in the 1910s when some men began showing a preference for the “fluffy and dollified” woman;

that is, for the good-looking woman who was, as well, less reserved with her feelings and affections – who was, in fact, coquettish. In her lively account of high-society romance in wartime Ottawa, Sandra Gwyn tells of a revealing incident in 1916. Ethel Chadwick, one of the city’s socialite debutantes, complains to her diary that her boyfriends are passing her over for a new kind of woman, a more daring, affectionate, and scantily dressed woman who loved to dance vigorously all night and was not above a bit of silliness. The Ottawa newspapers had affectionately dubbed such women “naughty women,” but Chadwick wasn’t amused. To protest the attention the city’s eligible bachelors were paying these women, she and her sister began boycotting social functions at which such women appeared. When one of her boyfriends asked why, she said, “How would you and Duff like it if *we* started throwing our arms around your necks?,” to which he replied, simply, “We should like it.” For their principled stand, Chadwick and her sister gained little from their boyfriends, except the nickname “The Prudish Pickles.”²²

In the 1920s, even more men embraced the “naughty woman,” both figuratively and literally. In their letters to the columns, they spoke less about wanting to marry the domesticated, modest, pure, christian “lady” of yesteryear and more about the out-going, athletic, fun-loving, daring, and affectionate woman who had emerged in the 1910s and whom Canadians now called the “Modern Girl.” They especially wanted a woman who knew how to have fun. When “Bonnie” told Prim Rose readers that young women should “stay at home and not go chasing after pleasure,” she was quickly challenged by B.C.’s “Sage Brush Jack.” “Now does she think every girl or woman should do the same as she does?,” he asked.

Those days are gone forever, and my idea is this: why should not a girl have all the pleasure she can get while single, as she will only be a girl once. Now ‘Bonnie’ leave that to the girls.... Just because you can’t dance and are a home-loving person and like a quiet life, that is no reason why all girls should be the same.²³

Alberta’s “Bachelor Rancher” agreed completely. “I never could see how a woman could stay in the house day after day and never get any outdoor sports of any kind,” he said. “There is nothing I like better than to see a woman who likes to ride horseback, drive a car, or go on camping trips



Reminiscent of Ottawa's wartime "Naughty Nine," these 1920s dancers at Toronto's Hippodrome symbolized both the hedonistic spirit of the postwar years and the open, affectionate type of woman that more young men found appealing. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, F 1075-13, H 574.*

and enjoy it."²⁴ The postwar bachelor was also attracted to the fun-loving woman because she enjoyed a man's company for its own sake and not as a prelude to marriage. As the aptly named "Happy-Go-Lucky" told readers of the *Western Home Monthly* in April 1920, "I like the free jolly girl who can have a good time wherever she may be, and not the one who thinks she must not look at a boy unless she intends to marry him."²⁵ Any of these men would have gladly traded places with a certain western rancher who, a month before, had stopped along the road to help a stranded woman with motorcycle troubles. "She was daintily clad," he recalled happily, "with a very, very short skirt; her hair was bobbed, and she wore no hat. I mended her motorcycle, and she went on her way singing a vaudeville ballad."²⁶

Even more noticeable was how many single women now advertised themselves strictly by their leisure pursuits and interests. A New Brunswick farm girl's comment that "I am very fond of coasting, skating, and snow-shoeing, also music, dancing, knitting and crocheting" was typical.²⁷ So was that of Alberta's "Brunette," who told prospective male correspondents that "I play hockey, tennis, and golf and I enjoy swimming and horseback riding. I can do any of the latest dances."²⁸ That so many women chose to play up their fun-loving side in these years – as opposed to their domestic skills, as before – was partly a reflection of changing male desires: they knew what men wanted.

Many postwar bachelors also wanted a bolder or "spunkier" woman, a woman not afraid to speak her mind, show some initiative, and be more independent. Men used to dismiss such women as "flirts," tomboys, or worse, but by the 1920s they called them, affectionately, "jolly girls."²⁹ And the jolly girls were in demand. When a man calling himself "Solitaire" dared criticize such women, a twenty-two-year-old office worker from Ontario delivered a sharp rebuke:

I suppose every generation have some busybodies that feel it their duty to uphold the traditions of their grandparents. At a dance, can you imagine the boys flocking around a girl in a long, plain dress, tightly screwed-back hair, eyes downcast, with not a line of conversation and blushing every time she's spoken to! Why 'Solitaire' would be the first to flee from that corner if he had even gone near it in the first place.³⁰

Her letter prompted a Swedish-Canadian bachelor to ask *Prim Rose* readers, "who would flock around a girl like the one she describes when we can have the modern girl? Not I!"³¹ Given such views, girls who were *not* modern naturally felt disadvantaged, like Ontario's "Bashful Betty." "I would like to get some good [male] correspondents," she wrote in 1921, "but I am rather bashful, and do not like to write first – though they say bashful girls are not the style – so, of course, I am out of it."³²

But how many men actually came to prefer the "modern girl" over the so-called "old-fashioned" girl, like "Bashful Betty"? At first, not many. As more women joined the work force during the war – often doing "men's work" and wearing similar uniforms as men – and gained the right to vote and hold office, the traditional definition of how a woman should look

and behave, and to which activities she should confine herself, was further eroded. Even more than before, women – especially young women – saw themselves as not very different from men. They considered themselves entitled, therefore, to not only the same legal rights, but to the same *social* rights, including the right to swear, smoke, drink, play sports, wear practical clothing, and have sex before marriage. More generally, the war produced feelings of anger and cynicism. Canadians of all classes came to believe their leaders had made serious mistakes, both at home and abroad. The horrendous cost of the war, as well as its failure to settle much of anything in the end, damaged Canadians' faith in the old order; traditional beliefs, including notions of proper feminine behaviour, were largely discredited. What's more, young people who had witnessed first hand the horrors of trench warfare, or were close to someone who had, now felt the older generation had nothing more to teach them about life.

In this atmosphere of changing gender roles and widespread cynicism, the modern girl was born. But not without controversy. Canadians who clung to a more traditional definition of womanhood were at first appalled. Many bachelors accused the modern girl – and her more objectionable relative, the “flapper” – of being frivolous, vain, immoral, and obsessed with fun. Rural bachelors were especially critical. “I see a number of letters on your page from bachelors who seem to have a grudge against ‘the modern girl’,” wrote a farmer's son. “For my part, I'll say that I can't understand them [i.e., modern girls] at all. They seem to think of nothing else but having a good time. Of course, there are a few girls who seem to think seriously of life and love, but in my opinion these are the exception.”³³ The modern girl's detractors disliked her appearance in particular: the bobbed hair, the “short” skirts (up to mid-calf by 1924!), the short pants (called “knickers”), and above all, her fondness for “powder” and “paint.” “What is wrong with the young girl of today?,” demanded one bachelor. “Are they [*sic*] not satisfied with the face that was given them?”³⁴ He and several others asked the “painted dolls” in the city to please *not* write them. At least one felt such women should be spanked.³⁵

Many country girls objected to such criticisms. To compete with their city cousins in the romance game, they argued, they needed make-up. A Cape Breton stenographer asked one critic “just how many men of today he could find who would take a girl out for the evening if she didn't have enough powder on to take the shine off her face. I am afraid that he wouldn't find many.”³⁶ Another, more bitter, Nova Scotian made the same

point. “How many of the every day girls without powder and without paint get chances to go car-riding, fishing and picnicking?,” she demanded to know.

Are there many ... young men of today who do not look for ‘dolls’ and remark ‘How cute that girl or this girl is,’ wondering who she is and wishing for an introduction to her? How many girls who are dressed neat and clean, no paint or powder in their ‘swagger bags’ would give anything to go for a walk to pass away an evening and would give no [but] about going to the Pictures or to a dance? You will often see young men, who claim to be gentlemen, driving a car and who meet respectable girls from the middle class – but Oh! No – they do not invite these to go car riding. They would much prefer picking up some ‘fairy’ from the street and taking *her*.³⁷

In short, many women (and some men) argued that, despite male objections to the “fussed up” woman, who not only used make up but also bobbed her hair and wore short skirts, when it came right down to it, this was who they wanted.³⁸

And by the mid-twenties, they were probably right. By this point men had stopped criticizing the modern girl in the pages of the *Prim Rose* column (the *Western Home Monthly*’s column ended in 1924). More often, they praised her and sought her company.³⁹ In his letter to the *Family Herald* in 1926 a Saskatchewan gentleman summed up the new romantic reality. “The modern girl,” he observed,

appears to be very much more popular than the staid old-fashioned girl who in nine cases out of ten is obliged to play wall-flower while her frivolous sister gets all the beaux. The average bachelor, even if he is on the shady side of forty, considers it quite romantic to escort this flashy be-powdered girl about, while if he used his common sense he would take up with her staid sister who would make him a far better partner in this world of work and woe. I think the dress of the modern girl is sensible. Compare grand-mother’s hoop skirt, mother’s crossing sweeper, and the hobble skirt of a few years back with the medium length skirt of the girl of today.⁴⁰

And when a woman calling herself “A Flapper” wondered if “boys like girls with bobbed hair,” such as herself, she was “swamped with replies, many more than I can answer for a long time,” replies presumably from admirers; other self-styled “flappers” received similar attention.⁴¹ Nor, judging from the observation of one farmer, were *rural* bachelors any less taken by the modern girl as the decade wore on. “If a city girl comes to the country to visit or to attend a dance,” he wrote, “the country boys will nearly break their necks to meet her and leave their own girls to sit in the corner.”⁴²

None of this is meant to suggest, of course, that Canadian bachelors became strictly superficial by the late 1920s. Yes, they valued a woman’s outward appearance more than before (like women themselves),⁴³ and they sometimes complimented the modern girl’s grooming and fashions. But they were just as attracted, probably more so, to her fun-loving and extroverted personality. Beyond this, most men – and most women, too – adopted a more non-judgmental, “live and let live” attitude towards the opposite sex. Whether their potential mate lived up to certain ideals of neatness, fortitude, honesty, or morality mattered far less than before; their relative silence about such things in the personal columns suggests as much. A New Brunswick bachelor expressed this more modern attitude best in his response to another bachelor’s criticism of the modern girl’s appearance. “Cheer up,” he wrote in 1926, “this is a New year. ‘Wonders will never cease.’ There are lots of nice young ladies who will never ‘bob their hair’ nor wear knickers come what may, while on the other hand there are lots of nice young ladies who have done so. Now I think for my part that everyone should suit herself.”⁴⁴ By the time Manitoba’s middle-aged “Plough Boy” wondered out loud, in 1929, whether “there are still girls who do not paint?,” most men, like our New Brunswick friend, did not care.⁴⁵

But how do we explain this transformation? Why did Canadians become, in effect, less *idealistic* in their romantic tastes? Here we can only speculate. The main attribute young men and women now seemed to prize in each other, for example, was a fun-loving personality. Why? Maybe they were just following the advice of postwar marriage experts, who now recommended “companionate” marriages, where man and woman were physically and emotionally compatible with one another – chums basically.⁴⁶ More likely they were responding to the new hedonism of the age. “Since the actual cessation of hostilities,” wrote a columnist for the *Halifax Herald* in 1920, “there has certainly swept over the face of civilization an extraordinary wave of irresponsibility – an obstinate and determined refusal to

take life seriously or see in it anything but a kaleidoscopic panorama from which each and every one must snatch as many of the cold fragments as possible in as short a time as possible.⁴⁷

The roots of this hedonism are complex and need not concern us much. Suffice to say that after years of crusading for one idealistic cause or another, including a war that left 60,000 of their countrymen dead and many more debilitated, Canadians were ready to indulge in less serious pursuits. The war had also proved that life could be fleeting and should therefore be enjoyed to the fullest *now*. This desire to get more out of life was made easier by the return of prosperity in the mid-twenties and, even more, by the emergence of new forms of recreation, in both town and country, including radios, cinemas, spectator sports, and cheaper automobiles. The dancing-obsessed flapper, who “stayed out late, danced close, and necked and petted without feeling imposed upon,” was the most visible symbol of the new hedonism, but by the 1920s *many* Canadians believed that life should be about more than just working, serving one’s community (or country), and helping to create better world; it should also be about having fun.⁴⁸

Canadians expressed this hedonism in words. “I agree with ‘A Flapper’ when she speaks about people who think of nothing else but work from morning till night,” wrote one veteran. “I like to mix the work a little with play.”⁴⁹ But mostly, they expressed it in deeds, particularly their insatiable appetite for movies, dancing, and other amusements. In 1928, lamenting the marked drop in attendance at his local church, a Toronto parishioner complained to his pastor that “the cinema or picture show, the automobile, the radio and jazz, as well as other things, have all had an effect on home life, drawing young people particularly away by themselves for entertainment.”⁵⁰ A year earlier a Saskatchewan school teacher lodged a similar complaint with readers of the *Family Herald*. After noting that high ideals were “so palpably lacking in so many young people nowadays,” she asked “what do you think girls? Can you find many young men, or old ones either, in your neighbourhood who know as much about hard work and ideals as they do about ‘petting parties’ and the like?”⁵¹ These comments suggested that Canada’s youth were *especially* eager to “seize the day.” Having lost so many of their peers in the trenches of Belgium and France, this was hardly surprising. Speaking for her generation, a young Nova Scotian asked *Prim Rose* readers “Why not let youth have its fling? We are only young once... So, why not ‘jazz’ and motor, etc., to our heart’s content, while we have the chance? We grow old fast enough.”⁵² And in response to critics of dancing,





Here are two examples of the 1920s “Modern Girl”: a free-spirited, boyish woman (left) and the daring, bare-armed “Miss K. McCarthy” (right), both of Ontario. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, F 1075-13, H 1026 and F 1075-13, H 936.*

a “Soldier’s Sister” told readers, more poignantly, to “Dance while you may: another day will bring enough of sorrow.”⁵³ The “Jazz Age” had arrived, and with it came a less idealistic definition of the ideal partner. A bachelor or maid who could answer “yes” to the question “Can you jazz?” was now the prize catch.

If the Great War produced much of the hedonism that by the 1920s made bachelors and maidens want more fun-loving companions, so, too, did it affect the definition of the ideal woman. By placing young women in unconventional roles, the war had helped further liberate them from Victorian definitions of “femininity.” It had helped create the “modern girl” – independent, playful, high-spirited, and affectionate. And as the modern girl emerged, she not only came to be accepted by Canadian men, but eventually to be *desired*; popular depictions of modern girls and flappers in movies and magazines only increased her allure.⁵⁴

But if women were changing, and by doing so creating a male “demand” for themselves, they were also *responding* to male demand, to the male desire for a new kind of woman. And here, again, the war was important. Men who knew they might be dead the next day – men like Ethel Chadwick’s Ottawa boyfriends – lost patience with women who, out of traditional female modesty, held their emotions and affections in check. Their experiences overseas changed their expectations of women even more. While on leave in wide-open cities like London and Boulogne, Canadian soldiers and officers had easy access to risqué theatrical performances and to “women of easy virtue”; they indulged heavily in both.⁵⁵ And in restaurants and dance halls they met spunkier, less reserved women, women rarely encumbered with chaperones and who didn’t seem to mind having their hair pulled or legs pinched by inebriated soldiers.⁵⁶ Many Canadians were drawn to *English* women in particular (those not prone to public drunkenness anyway), whom they found friendlier, more playful, and less prudish than women back home. Many veterans commented on this, none more directly than an “Ex-Sergeant”:

Before the war I noticed that the average Canadian girl was just a little bit independent, and was not willing to come halfway. Now, in England (and I think that most of the boys who have been there will back me up in what I say), the average girl is altogether different in that respect. She is so much



By the 1920s, young Canadians admired the fun-loving qualities of the opposite sex, especially a willingness to dance. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, F 1075-13, H 571.*

warmer-hearted and loveable, and I am sure more sincere, that it is no wonder the boys were so attracted and made so many matches. Although I have the very greatest respect for the Canadian girls, I know, to be perfectly candid, I must say that I prefer the English girl.⁵⁷

English women, it seems, were also keen on having fun with men without necessarily seeking a commitment of marriage. “They make themselves at home with everyone,” another veteran recalled fondly, “and do not think that every boy they meet is wanting to marry them.”⁵⁸ Soldiers found the *appearance* of British women appealing as well, the fact that on the streets of London, for example, they wore bobbed hair and more revealing clothing.⁵⁹ It is no surprise, then, that when Canadian soldiers returned home, they sought a more modern woman, and that many Canadian women, in turn, obliged.

THE NEW ROMANCE

The same modernizing and martial forces that changed what postwar Canadians looked for in a partner also changed the “where” and “how” of romance. Certainly the *venues* changed.⁶⁰ By the 1920s, young couples spent less time in parlours and on front porches, sipping tea and lemonade under the watchful eye of parents and older siblings, or at church-sponsored events like picnics and dances, under the supervision of the community. The rapid growth of commercial amusements and the greater access to cars and roads took courtship into more anonymous and secluded places, usually outside the community, like dance halls, amusement parks, and especially movie theatres.⁶¹ One veteran, on his return to the West, immediately purchased a Model T Ford. “I did my courting in it,” he recalled. “I think that was probably the best car Henry Ford ever made. It put a lot of people on the road. You know, getting them off the farms and out where the lights are bright.”⁶² By the 1920s, a couple’s favourite pastime was “going out.”⁶³

The workplace became a more common venue for romance as well, or at least for *budding* romance. As young middle-class women continued to enter the work force after the war – by 1930, one-third of women aged fifteen to twenty-four were working – they began to enjoy a romantic advantage working-class “city girls” had enjoyed for years: regular contact with eligible bachelors in unsupervised, non-familial settings. As writer Gertrude Pringle observed in 1932, somewhat ruefully, “the men the modern maid meets are both more numerous and of a more varied type than those her grandmother knew. Today even the well-to-do girl seeks a career, and in search of one sometimes finds instead – a husband.”⁶⁴ Sharply dressed and tastefully “made up” female stenographers, telephone operators, bank



In the early 1900s, new commercial amusements provided aspiring romantics with more opportunities to meet people and allowed couples to get better acquainted in anonymous settings. Here a couple enjoys “The Whip” at Toronto’s Hanlan’s Point amusement park in the summer of 1930. *Courtesy City of Toronto Archives, TTC Fonds, Series 71, Item 7722.*

tellers, and sales clerks met men on the job, on the streets and public transit to and from work, and in restaurants and parks during their lunch breaks. And after work, of course, working women could sample a wide array of commercial amusements, where intermingling with strange men was common and where romance took root. In such places, writes one historian, “young men and women mingled easily, flirted with one another, made dates, and stole time together,” and they did so without parents, siblings, or relatives breathing down their neck.⁶⁵

It is also clear that by this point romance itself had changed – its rules, its rituals. Simply put, it had become more casual. This process began shortly before the war, when young people started to reject the strict Victorian values and rules with which they had been raised, including a conventional

approach to romance. No surer sign of this rejection was the sharp decline in the number of etiquette inquiries they sent to Prim Rose after 1910. By the time the war began, her Etiquette Column was essentially dead.

There were other signs. At house parties and school dances, young people were doing more risqué dances, involving more bodily contact, like the tango, the one-step, and the bunny hop.⁶⁶ Just as troubling to many adults was that authority figures were not monitoring this interaction as closely as before. The chaperone, for example, was becoming a symbolic figure, particularly at smaller functions. In “the present dancing mania,” wrote etiquette expert Emily Holt in 1915, “there seems to be a growing laxity in the matter of chaperons. Perhaps this is largely because everybody dances now – chaperons and all – and people have begun to suspect that the average matron’s oversight of her charge is not to be taken seriously.” Holt recommended the continued use of chaperones at large balls “of a public – not to say promiscuous – nature” and “in strict society” where a man escorts a woman to the theatre or some other entertainment. But she acknowledged that the “hostess” had replaced individual chaperones at private and semi-private dances, as well as “Bachelor’s Teas.”⁶⁷ Some middle-class women, following in the footsteps of their working-class sisters, had also begun spending time with single men in public, unchaperoned and for reasons other than securing a marriage proposal. Meanwhile, vigorous efforts by parents and school authorities to regulate the behaviour of their young charges often came to naught; boys and girls increasingly found ways to see each other privately.⁶⁸

These changes stemmed, in part, from the closer and more regular contact between the sexes in the early 1900s, as women entered the labour market and, to a lesser extent, universities. In urban areas, working women who lived on their own in boarding houses shared meals with the men who lived alongside them and, after working hours, mixed freely with men in restaurants, dance halls, and movie theatres. This, too, made romantic interaction less formal. “I can remember when it was considered necessary for those of the opposite sexes to be *introduced* before they considered themselves acquainted,” complained Toronto’s pre-eminent moral reformer, C. S. Clark.⁶⁹

The growing ease with which men and women interacted before the war was also a result of women becoming more independent. A woman who lived on her own – as more women were doing – or who contributed part of her wages to her family’s income, was less vulnerable to parental

pressures to abide by a traditional code of romantic conduct. “Working girls,” as mentioned, allowed strange men who treated them to amusements to “take liberties,” even in public; some also asked men for dates.⁷⁰

The war did much to advance the new romance. Because of their circumstances, fighting men overseas and working women on the home front became less inhibited towards one another. Soldiers who had grown used to more casual and affectionate relations with European women expected a similar *modus operandi* on their return. The West’s “Lonely Lieutenant” was one of them. “I became so greatly accustomed to the great sociability of army life,” he proclaimed to readers of the *Western Home Monthly* in 1919, “that I cannot refrain from taking any steps possible, however unconventional, to endeavour to form some lady friends. I expect many of the returned soldiers will do likewise! Perhaps this step on my part is because a part of my service was in the R–otten F–lirting C–rowd!”⁷¹ Women, who had assumed new positions in the labour force and whose new economic independence emboldened them to set their *own* rules, seem to have been receptive. The “naughty women” of Ottawa and elsewhere certainly were, and writers to the personal columns couldn’t help noticing, sometimes with regret, that women were taking the romantic initiative more than before. “The men of today expect the girls to meet them a little more than half way,” complained Manitoba’s “Girl of Today,” “and although men are going to be very scarce after this awful war, I do hope we girls will not have to do the courting.”⁷²

That couples might never see each other again – this, too, made them willing to discard traditional etiquette, particularly the proscription against physical affection in public. The modern middle-class maidens of Ottawa understood, writes Gwyn, “that when the smell of death was in the air, chaffing, the occasional peck on the cheek, and allowing oneself to be addressed by one’s first name were no longer enough,” and that “men familiar with the horrors of war ... and men just about to depart to encounter them, could no longer be expected to behave as [traditional gentlemen].”⁷³ For the same reason, young people increasingly favoured premarital sex. “To young people who had seen how quickly the promise of ‘forever’ could be shattered,” writes another historian, “waiting for marriage seemed ridiculous.”⁷⁴

Attitudes and practices continued to change in the postwar years. By the twenties, Canadians considered it even more acceptable, for example, for unmarried men and women – and not just those of the working class – to see each other, socially, “just for fun.” Before the war, Canadians felt



The war accelerated the move away from strict Victorian etiquette. A boisterous scene like this, from the wartime wedding of Ottawa's Colonel Hogarth, would likely not have occurred in the pre-war years. *Library and Archives Canada, Canada Dept. of National Defence Collection, PA-008238.*

there were two kinds of single women: those who went out with men because they wanted to get married and those who did so because they were prostitutes, either full-time or "occasional." After the war, this distinction no longer held. Comments like this, from a bachelor to the *Western Home Monthly* in the spring of 1920, inaugurated a new romantic order:

I notice there has been some discussion this last while about the frivolous kind of girls who go with the boys for the good time they get only. Now I think some of our readers have been rather hard on these kind of girls. Myself I think it is quite all right for a girl to go out with a boy for an evening, and have a

good time, even if they don't ever intend to get married and I also think a great many will agree with me when I say a young fellow is a great deal better off with the company of a girl than with a bunch of his chums.⁷⁵

Several women agreed. "Girls should not be tied to their mothers' apron-string until they are 'tied up' to the man they marry," declared Dardanella later that year. "I certainly like an evening with a boy friend."⁷⁶ For most young people, marriage was still the ultimate goal, but it was no longer the *only* purpose of romance. After the war, suitors became boyfriends and courtship was replaced by dating.⁷⁷

More Canadians also felt that when young men and women spent time together, the etiquette that formerly governed their interaction need not be as strict, that couples did not need to be as reserved, for example, or as cautious in their choice of words or subject matter.⁷⁸ The best testament to this came from a thirty-nine-year-old Saskatchewan bachelor-farmer in 1925. "I think that the girls of today are O.K.," he told *Prim Rose* readers.

They might not be like our mothers or grandmothers, but times change and the clinging female of mid-Victorian days has passed along with the dandified gentleman who proposed on his knees, one hand clasping his fair one's hand the other pressed over his heart. I can just imagine the girl of today's answer to such a proposal. 'Get up old top, don't be foolish.' Common sense is putting old man romance where he belongs. The modern young folk are much more frank with each other and are therefore much more able to get acquainted with each other's real selves than in the old days when they had to stand on ceremony in each other's presence in the company of a staid chaperone.⁷⁹

As part of the new openness between the sexes, women also did more *flirting*. This was even true of student nurses, traditionally the most modest and wholesome of all single women – another sure sign of the times.⁸⁰

Postwar Canadians were also less opposed to premarital physical intimacy. Before the war, adults told young women to protect their chastity at all costs – even if it meant dying at the hands of a male assailant – and they considered women who had premarital sex *willingly* to be essentially

prostitutes, and shunned them.⁸¹ By the 1920s, Canadians still favoured premarital female chastity, but not nearly as much. Several articles appeared in the *Halifax Herald* in 1920, for example, supporting the right of men and women to live together outside of marriage, mainly so they could “sow their wild oats” before committing themselves to a single partner; finding someone they were sexually compatible with would mean a more stable marriage.⁸² How many couples actually did so is unclear, but Canadians were definitely less inhibited physically. “The girls were more free, permissive, the men more daring,” recalled one bachelor.⁸³ More “necking” and “petting” took place in secluded spots, often in parked automobiles and in the darkened corners of dance halls and cinemas – “pleasure palaces” indeed.⁸⁴

Some historians have said that, because men were now *paying* more for such outings, they expected physical affection in return. Possibly, but women seem to have been more than willing; after all, being “modern” meant kissing as many boys, and as often, as possible. This affection seems to have been more *public* as well. In 1926, an Ontario resident of a YWCA boarding house told *Prim Rose* readers that the men who dated her fellow residents liked to linger outside the front door after a date, hoping for the “Good Night” kiss.⁸⁵ Why would men linger if they knew a kiss wasn’t forthcoming? We also know that premarital sex rose in the 1920s, along with the percentage of illegitimate births.⁸⁶ And from the few etiquette inquiries *Prim Rose* received after the war, it is clear that when men spent time in their girlfriend’s parlour in the evening, not only were they trying to kiss their girlfriends more often, but they were also asking if they could turn off the lamps.⁸⁷

All of this makes sense. The war, as mentioned, had accelerated the arrival of looser sexual mores, with free-wheeling veterans, in particular, bringing back habits Canadian youth were quick to imitate.⁸⁸ Heavily sexualized American films and novels in the 1920s furthered the process. So, too, did the popularization of Freudian sexual ideas, namely that sex was necessary for mental health and that females, too, had sexual needs, needs that should not only be accepted but encouraged.⁸⁹ Members of the personal columns remained silent about physical intimacy, but historians have shown that Canadian youth, even in rural areas, were not immune to such influences, especially as American pop culture infiltrated Canadian radios, magazines, and movie theatres; in their appearance and behaviour, young Canadians sought to emulate Hollywood’s sex gods and goddesses, as they



By the 1920s, public displays of physical intimacy between man and woman were not as proscribed as before. *Library and Archives Canada, Albert Vandewiele Fonds, PA-126674.*

had the veterans.⁹⁰ Nor were they entirely immune to the “pleasure principle” that America’s “flaming youth” embraced so passionately after the war – the revolutionary idea that physical pleasure was not sinful, but good.⁹¹

Then there was the matter of romantic initiative. This had long been a male prerogative, but after the war Canadians questioned this, too. Signs appeared that they were willing to grant women more romantic initiative, and that women were taking it. In 1924 a Nova Scotia school teacher told

the *Family Herald's* perennially lonely western bachelors to “cheer up; you know this is leap year, and the modern girl isn't considered ... to be a very shy one, so your chances are good.”⁹² More revealing is that women who wrote to the personal columns in the 1920s, especially working-class and professional women, were far more likely than before to solicit male correspondents and to not be called “unladylike” for doing so. Some Canadians felt that women, having proved themselves the equal of men during the war, even had the right to propose marriage. “Why shouldn't they?,” asked a B.C. bachelor:

The time has gone when women were looked upon as the silent member of the firm. Public opinion, through Parliament, has given them the franchise, admitted them to seats in the Government, and to positions of responsibility in every day business life and to the pulpit. In a word, women have equal rights with men. Why, then, should they not have the right [or] privilege of proposing if they wish to?⁹³

Lonely rural bachelors were, as usual, the strongest proponents of this radical idea, but even Prim Rose came around. “The experiment of letting the women choose their husbands might be worth trying,” she said. “This dull old world moves on apace these days, and the time may come when woman will be the chooser instead of the chosen.”⁹⁴ Some women availed themselves of this right; many more were at least bolder in *eliciting* proposals. More significant is that many Canadians no longer considered the idea preposterous.⁹⁵ True, most still believed men should make the first moves, romantically – “If a man hasn't grit enough to propose he deserves to stay single” remained a common sentiment – but fewer than before.⁹⁶

Further proof that Canada had entered a new age of romance was the etiquette advice dispensed after the war. The rule keepers, being older than the youth they directed their advice at, had always been more conservative. After the war, they displayed a more relaxed approach. Gertrude Pringle's *Etiquette in Canada* is a good example. Published in 1932 and a mainstay of Canadian social etiquette into the 1950s, it said little about romance etiquette specifically. What it did say, however, was revealing. It noted, for instance, that high-society women were no longer as likely to be formally “debuted” at age eighteen, in part because they had already indulged in romance; “from the age of sixteen,” wrote Pringle, “girls attend ‘not-out’

dances and theatre parties.” And men and women were interacting less formally on such occasions. “There used to be a strict rule that no man should ever introduce a man to a lady without first obtaining her permission,” she wrote, “but at private dances young men now introduce their men friends to young women without any such formality.” It was now also acceptable for a couple to spend the entire evening dancing together without appearing rude or “conspicuous”; they no longer had to limit their dances together to a certain number. And as for the traditional chaperone – the courtship cop of the pre-war years – Pringle put it thus: “to mention chaperons in an age when young women fly, motor, and travel unattended from one end of the globe to the other, seems unnecessary.” With respect to dances, specifically, she noted that “many a girl goes accompanied by only her partner of the evening, who drives her there and home again.”⁹⁷ Yes, Pringle still expected men to take the romantic initiative, to protect their dates in hazardous situations, and to show them deference – by opening doors for them, removing their hats in their presence, not smoking without their permission, and so on. She expected them to act as “gentlemen” in other words. But clearly she had made some concessions to new romantic realities and more often than not appeared to be *reporting* the rules rather than prescribing them – another sign that youth were now calling the shots.

Unfortunately, we know little about what Canada’s leading rule-maker, Prim Rose, thought about all this, her “Etiquette” column having more or less expired by the war. But what little we do know is equally revealing. In 1914, for example, Prim Rose had written that “only a foolish girl seeks to begin a correspondence with a man friend.” Five years later, in a rare etiquette inquiry, this from someone asking who should write first, the boy or the girl, she replied, simply, “Either. It does not matter who writes first.”⁹⁸ She also softened her position on dating. Before the war she had said that girls should not have suitors before age eighteen. After the war she was asked if a girl “Almost Eighteen” could go out with men. Yes, “‘Almost Eighteen’ might certainly go out with a boy friend,” she replied, “if he is a very nice boy, and her mother knows all about it.”⁹⁹ What about a sixteen-year-old girl? This was fine too. “A young man might take a girl of sixteen to the right kind of picture show,” as long as he didn’t put his arm around her; nor did she mention chaperones in either instance.¹⁰⁰ And what about conversation? In the pre-war years Prim Rose had laid down fairly specific guidelines about what young men and women should say to one another, but in the more permissive early twenties she was telling



Compared to the stiff and (literally) distant courting couples of the pre-war years, this group of happy picnic-goers on the Toronto Islands in 1923 is practically having an orgy. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, F 1075-13, H 658.*

couples that the topics of conversation could be almost anything. And when a New Brunswick girl asked her how she should greet her boyfriend after a long absence, Prim Rose told her to not “do and say everything by rule. Be natural, and say the words that rise to your lips, if you feel sure they are suggested by kindness and consideration for the other person.”¹⁰¹ Few comments marked more starkly the cultural distance Prim Rose, and others like her, had travelled in just a few years time.

It would be wrong, however, to exaggerate the changes in Canadian romance after the war. Not only is the picture incomplete, but the continuities are important too. In rural areas and among Catholics and many immigrants, for example, older forms of romance persisted, with couples more likely to “date” in parlours and at church-sponsored events, to avoid

pre-marital physical intimacy, and to face strong parental and community supervision, including chaperonage.¹⁰² Consider, as well, the plea from Nova Scotia's "Lonely Maiden," in one of the last appearances of the Prim Rose column:

Dear Prim Rose,

I am a girl living with my mother who is a widow. We live in the country, where it's very lonely for two women alone. We have a small farm four miles from town. It is a very pretty place in summer but horrid in winter. I am thirty-four years old and a brunette. So come on all members, get busy and write to a lonesome pal, the men around my own age especially.¹⁰³

"Lonely Maiden's" boldness in soliciting a mate and in offering to be his "pal" was a sign of the times. Her loneliness and her desire for romance, however, were timeless. For all the modernization that occurred during and after the war, in other words – in the partners Canadians sought and how they behaved in pursuit of such partners – Canadian romance remained unchanged in fundamental ways: most Canadians still craved heterosexual companionship; their ultimate goal was still the life-long bond of marriage; they still considered *love* a prerequisite to such a union; they continued to suffer from loneliness, heartache, strict rules, and other hardships; and their love lives continued to be shaped by forces beyond their control, including, very soon, Depression and more war. Modern romance may have emerged from the ashes of World War I, among other things, but it rested firmly on foundations that had been laid long before – and would remain long after.

