



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

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Why Romance?*

During the week of March 10, 1913, five Canadians, each in a different province, sat down to compose a letter they hoped would be published in the next issue of the *Family Herald and Weekly Star*, a Montreal-based magazine with subscribers from across the country. Their letters were indeed published and appeared in the magazine's wildly popular "Prim Rose at Home" column. From Saskatchewan's Carrot River Valley came a letter from a farmer calling himself "Rasmus," who told the editor that he and eleven fellow farmers had recently formed a "Bachelors' Club" with the goal of enticing letters from women looking for husbands. "It seems a shame for us to be living alone in a country where nature has so abundantly provided the necessities of life, which are so essential in raising a large family." Any woman wishing to write to one of the club's members, he said, should contact him for a list of names and addresses. He warned, however, that "this is a new country, and they must not expect to find all the luxuries of life which they may enjoy in the older settled localities."

A "Wood Builder" from New Brunswick spoke of another danger: marrying someone you don't know well enough. "I am personally acquainted with a young woman who married a man after a short acquaintance," he said, and "with what results? A thousand miles separates them today." Another letter, from a "Busy Girl" in the fruit belt of Ontario's Niagara peninsula, pleaded for young men to remain in her province instead of heading West in search of fortune, as so many were doing. "Why leave these good old

farms and the certain promise of comfort and a happy home,” she asked, “for the uncertain promise of much gold, accompanied by great hardships ... and untold discomforts?” And from Alberta came a letter from one such displaced Ontarian who had, in fact, much to complain about: “Though I have just been homesteading for three years, ... like many of my kind, I find the life pretty dull in the winter time, especially on account of a scarcity of the opposite sex.” He also agreed with a writer in an earlier issue who had warned women against marrying men in debt. Buried in the “Condensed Letters” section of the column that week was also the editor’s summary of a letter from Nova Scotia’s “Golden Dear,” a twenty-one-year-old bachelorette who “is boarding quite alone in the city and finds the evenings after work very long. She would like correspondence with respectable nice young men in the West, being interested in that part of the world; Roman Catholics preferred.”<sup>1</sup>

These five letters were not unique. Like the hundreds of others the magazine received each week (only a fraction of which were published), they revealed some of the realities of heterosexual romance in these years: the scarcity of the opposite sex, the loneliness and boredom of many single people, the strong desire to marry, the qualities Canadians wanted in a spouse, and the measures they took to find such a person. What *is* unique is the window these letters provide on a part of Canada’s past we know little about, namely, the romantic lives of our ancestors. Not that historians have lacked interest in the life experiences of average Canadians. Far from it. Since the 1970s, they have been providing answers to questions that earlier generations of scholars considered unimportant, even silly, like what did ordinary people do in their leisure time? Or what was it like being a lumber worker, immigrant, child, housewife, or soldier? And how did Canadians adapt or respond to their environment and to the powerful forces around them, be it war, depression, exploitation, or discrimination? Such questions have generated a rich body of historical literature about day-to-day life.

Studies of heterosexual romance, however, have been rare. Partly this is due to the absence of sufficient evidence. Romance, by its very nature, is a highly private and personal activity, one not likely to be observed and recorded for public consumption the way an election might be, for example, or a strike, parade, trial, royal visit, or war; this was especially true prior to the 1920s, when courtship took place largely in the home and when couples who did venture beyond the family parlour were expected to act with utmost discretion. But what about personal private records, such

as diaries, correspondence, and memoirs? These are by far the best sources for reconstructing the romantic past, but they are also the hardest to come by in sufficient quantity. True, historians and others have done a fine job in recent years unearthing and publishing substantial collections of letters buried in archives and old newspapers, but the romantic content of these collections is typically low.<sup>2</sup> What's more, the letters, diaries, and memoirs available to historians tend to be skewed towards the elite – politicians, entrepreneurs, novelists, and clergy – in other words, to literate and well-known individuals whose writings were more likely to be preserved for posterity.

To date, the most extensive study of heterosexual romance in Canada, and indeed the only full-length academic study, is Peter Ward's *Courtship, Love, and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada*. This study, although it pays some attention to marriage patterns in Ontario and to English-Canadian *perceptions* of marriage, deals principally with nineteenth-century courtship. The author describes in detail the rituals of courtship, from gift-giving to proposing marriage, as well as the varying degrees of "courtship space" or "territory" available to both sexes, to rural and urban couples, and to Canadians of different social classes. If there is a central theme in Ward's analysis it is that, over the course of the century, as Canada became more urbanized and industrialized, courtship changed: its rituals became less restrictive, the opportunities for courtship more abundant, and the influence of parents and communities over the process weaker.<sup>3</sup>

The strengths of Ward's seminal study – not least the bringing to light a little-known facet of Canada's social history – are many, the weaknesses few. Among the latter are the author's understatement of female power in initiating courtship opportunities, an all-too-brief reference to the difficulties of romance, and his slippery use of the "courtship territory" concept.<sup>4</sup> More problematic, however, is the narrowness of his sources. Ward's observations and conclusions are drawn heavily from the journals and letters of the English-Canadian elite, from the offspring of professionals, government officials, military officers, and prominent merchants; members of Toronto's illustrious Jarvis family and the well-established Tanswell family of Quebec City loom large in his account. This is understandable, given the paucity of more representative sources, but the result is a skewed portrait, one in which the romantic views and experiences of the average Canadian are largely obscured.<sup>5</sup>

The same can be said for Sarah Carter's *The Importance of Being Monogamous*, a recent exploration of marriage in western Canada in the half-century before World War I. To be fair, the romantic views and experiences of the masses are not Carter's main concern. She focuses mainly on the efforts of the white Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie (newspaper editors, government officials, medical experts) to impose a particular marriage model on the region's heterogeneous population, a model marked above all by lifelong, intra-racial, and patriarchal monogamy; she also devotes much space to the challenges such efforts faced, especially from native and Mormon communities.<sup>6</sup> It is, on the whole, a convincing account, one that is especially adept at placing the "monogamous ideal" within a wide range of competing practices. Nevertheless, its elite-level analysis serves merely to reinforce certain historiographic stereotypes for this period, stereotypes with romantic implications: that Canadians measured female worth in exclusively domestic terms; that they were xenophobic and patriarchal in the extreme; and that they pursued romance mainly for "missionary," "colonizing," or "civilizing" reasons.<sup>7</sup> It remains to be seen, however, whether ordinary Canadians came to share such assumptions to any marked degree.

Courtship and marriage have also received some peripheral attention within larger studies. In her ground-breaking examination of sexual violence in rural and small-town Ontario between 1880 and 1930, for example, Karen Dubinsky devotes a chapter to courtship. In it she argues that rural women had as many opportunities as urban women to meet men and were no less defiant when it came to challenging social mores, especially in the sexual realm.<sup>8</sup> She also discusses briefly the efforts of parents and communities to protect the chastity of young women and how this restricted the courtship freedom of young couples, a topic explored more fully for Toronto's working-class women by Carolyn Strange,<sup>9</sup> for the city's university students by Catherine Gidney,<sup>10</sup> and for Canadian nurses by Kathryn McPherson.<sup>11</sup> This strict moral supervision, in addition to the sexual violence women sometimes experienced, made courtship less than ideal for many women, rural or otherwise.

We know somewhat more about *postwar* courtship from the work historians have done on youth and women in the interwar years. Cynthia Comacchio, in her recent study of Canada's interwar youth, devotes a chapter to "dating and mating." She tells us about a generation of young people that was not only more sexually permissive after the war, but also

adopted (at least in urban areas and among non-immigrants) a less home-based, less marriage-focused form of courtship that came to be called “dating.” *Why* such changes occurred, however, is only briefly discussed, with passing reference to the war and a more sexualized postwar pop culture. Additionally, the author is reluctant to make any firm generalizations, even about her main theme – postwar premarital sex – leaving readers to draw their own conclusions from the rather limited montage of romantic experiences she presents, a problem the author compounds by focusing more on the moral panic surrounding youthful sexual experimentation than on what youth were actually doing.<sup>12</sup> Somewhat less illuminating, in what is otherwise an excellent survey of girls’ and women’s lives between the wars, is Veronica Strong-Boag’s chapter on courtship in her book *The New Day Recalled*. Without evidence or elaboration, for example, Strong-Boag asserts that “for many Canadians, courting remained a family-centered affair,” something most historians of postwar romance, including Comacchio, would dispute. Apart from this, she says little about courtship; her focus is primarily on female marriage patterns and, even more so, on their (invariably unpleasant) experiences as wives.<sup>13</sup>

To these peripheral studies can be added a handful of shorter, more specialized studies. Denise Baillargeon has provided us with a picture of courtship and marriage in interwar Montreal, for example, in which she emphasizes the persistence of traditional courtship rituals, like chaperonage and the avoidance of pre-marital sex. But the bulk of her case study focuses on the wedding rituals and married lives of her small sample of women.<sup>14</sup> Catherine Gidney, in her examination of a working-class Baptist couple in Welland, Ontario, also notes the continuation of older courtship patterns, including well-supervised home and church-centred activities, although she does emphasize the greater freedom couples gained by this time to be alone in unsupervised and increasingly commercialized settings, such as movie theatres and dance pavilions.<sup>15</sup> Like Baillargeon (and Strong-Boag), however, she focuses mostly on the couple’s wedding and married life.

Weddings also figure prominently in Suzanne Morton’s study of working-class brides in 1920s Halifax. In it the author makes a reasonably strong case for the persistence of distinctive *working-class* wedding rituals and for the emergence, among working-class brides-to-be, of more sentimental, “companionate” attitudes towards marriage.<sup>16</sup> On this latter subject, Elaine Silverman argues the opposite about single women on Alberta’s frontier in the early 1900s. She contends that this group of women, pressured by their

parents to marry early for the sake of economic sustenance, saw marriage in purely practical terms. “Frontier marriage,” she asserts, “was quite simply a requisite economic arrangement.”<sup>17</sup> Cecilia Danysk advances a similar interpretation of the bachelor-homesteaders of the region, whom she portrays as seeking primarily housekeepers as wives.<sup>18</sup> Both the Silverman and Danysk interpretations are somewhat at odds with the findings of the present study – men and women, even on the frontier, were never this narrow-minded – but they do raise a question historians of romance have been reluctant to raise, namely, what did marriage-bound Canadians look for in a partner?

What little we know about this subject comes from the relatively new field of gender history, whose practitioners have tried to define the changing meanings of “masculinity” and “femininity” over time.<sup>19</sup> From this still-emerging portrait at least two things are clear. One is that gender identities, apart from being changeable, were not universal or hegemonic in this period – that to some extent masculinity and femininity meant different things depending on the age, ethnicity, and class of the men and women in question.<sup>20</sup> The other is that notions of masculinity and femininity were most clearly and forcefully articulated by the rapidly expanding Anglo-Saxon Protestant middle class, whose spokespersons expended a tremendous amount of time and energy trying to make others conform to their ideals. In their way of thinking, the ideal woman of the late Victorian era, for example, was strongly committed to the “domestic ideal,” which meant placing her role as wife and mother above all other concerns. She was a paragon of virtue and “respectability,” which meant abstention from drinking, smoking, gambling, swearing, and especially sex (except within marriage for reproductive purposes), and was, in turn, expected to exercise a restraining or civilizing influence on males. She dressed and behaved modestly, especially in public. She displayed a high degree of altruism, in part by helping the less fortunate and working to create a better world (a powerful imperative in the progressive era especially). And, thanks to the growing emphasis on physical fitness and non-competitive sport, she was also sturdy and robust, yet still graceful.<sup>21</sup>

The dawning of the new century saw this conservative, middle-class ideal of womanhood challenged by another, albeit generally less popular, ideal. The so-called “New Woman” of the early 1900s, while she still displayed some of the attributes of the older femininity, particularly the missionary impulse to help the poor and civilize the “heathen” races, was

less enamoured of the domestic ideal. Young and university-educated, she was just as likely as not to forsake marriage for a career. She also displayed a visibility, freedom of movement, independence of thought, and brashness and irreverence of manner sufficient to elicit a good deal of scorn and dismay from the older generation. In the apt description of one historian she “was both spirited and public-spirited.”<sup>22</sup>

She was, as well, a precursor to a new, more popular ideal of womanhood, one reminiscent in many ways of the much-maligned “working girl” at the turn of the century, but one which came to predominate in North American culture, if not by the 1910s, certainly by the 1920s. Canadian historians have said little about this development, but if American studies are any indication the ideal Canadian woman of the early post-Victorian era was very different from her recent middle-class predecessors. She did not display much in the way of reforming zeal, did not care much for either domesticity or career, eschewed modesty of manners and appearance, and had little use in particular for the prudish bourgeois morality of the pre-war years. This was the “modern” woman, best symbolized, perhaps, by the carefree and sexually liberated “flapper” of the twenties.<sup>23</sup>

Less is known about the changing notions of masculinity in these years. The task of identifying such notions is made even more difficult by Canadians’ ambiguity over the issue, for definitions seemed to vary more with age and class than they did with femininity. For much of the nineteenth century, for example, it was considered manly for young, unmarried men, particularly among unskilled transient labourers, to engage in certain rowdy or “rough” activities, including drinking, fighting, swearing, gambling, and illicit sex.<sup>24</sup> Labour and social historians have reminded us, as well, that masculinity was often job-specific, and closely bound to certain skills and workplace traditions.<sup>25</sup> Generally speaking, however, most nineteenth-century commentators, whether from the pulpit or from the pages of the daily press, tended to measure true manhood – regardless of age or class – in terms of self-restraint. Real men drank only in moderation or not at all, avoided profanity, curbed their natural lustfulness, and demonstrated a high level of physical and emotional self-control. They were also brave, independent, hard-working, tough, concerned for the less fortunate, loyal to Crown and country, polite to women, and, above all, eager for physical, moral, and intellectual self-improvement.<sup>26</sup>

By the late Victorian era, as the social purity crusade intensified, middle-class standards of manly behaviour rose. Even less tolerance was afforded men



who lacked self-restraint, particularly around women and alcohol. Middle-class spokespersons also placed greater emphasis on the physical prowess of men – or at least white Protestant men. In their estimation, the morally upright Victorian male was superseded by the “muscular Christian,” whose perfectly symmetrical body and virtuous mind would work in tandem to reverse the alleged moral and physical decline of the Anglo-Saxon race, defend the British Empire, and set an example to slovenly immigrants. The ideal man of the early 1900s was also “progressive.” In addition to high moral rectitude, he rejected dishonesty and unbridled individualism and embraced fair play and a sense of social responsibility. As in the case of femininity, however, this essentially bourgeois, Protestant ideal of masculinity seems to have been overshadowed after World War I by one far less puritanical, militaristic, and reformist, although evidence of this transformation is still somewhat sketchy.<sup>27</sup>

Thanks to the work of gender historians, therefore, we have a reasonably complete picture of the changing ideals of masculinity and femininity during the Victorian and immediate post-Victorian eras, as defined primarily by the Anglo-Protestant middle-class elite. Less clear, however, is the extent to which these ideals were internalized by everyday Canadians and, in particular, by those looking for a spouse. What role did the attributes promoted so forcefully by the elite play in the romantic preferences of young men and women seeking life-long partners in the first three decades of the twentieth century? And did these preferences, like the “official” ideals of masculinity and femininity, change over time and, if so, why? As far as I know, no Canadian historian has tried to answer such questions in a systematic way.

Clearly, then, there are problems with the historiography of Canadian romance: much of the literature is based on sources that are either too few or too elitist, or both; it is, with a few exceptions, unduly sentimental; it says little about the *etiquette* of romance – that is, about the specific customs men and women were expected to follow before and during courtship; and it is generally static, leaving us with little sense of how romance changed over time and why. Perhaps most serious is the continuing dearth of research on the subject of romance itself. This is especially true for the years 1900 to 1930, a period that witnessed, among other things, massive immigration, unprecedented prosperity, widespread social reform agitation, great strides in women’s rights, rapid urbanization, industrialization, and western settlement, a world war that killed and maimed hundreds of thousands of

young Canadians, and a virtual revolution in morals and manners. How did this great transformation affect the romantic attitudes and experiences of Canadians? Despite the lavish attention paid by Canadian historians to these years, we still cannot answer this question. We can't even say with certainty what those attitudes and experiences *were*. This study seeks, therefore, to fill in some of the historiographic gaps by examining, in particular, four key aspects of romance for these years: what average Canadians sought in a marriage partner; the specific rules they were expected to follow and in most cases *did* follow in their romantic quest; the many hardships they endured along the way; and how the defining event of that era – the Great War – affected such things.

That I am able to do this has almost everything to do with two magnificent collections of letters I discovered a few years ago – two “correspondence columns” to be precise. The first, and most valuable, is the “Prim Rose at Home” column mentioned earlier, which ran continuously, on a weekly basis, from 1904 to 1929. The other I found buried in the pages of the *Western Home Monthly*, a magazine produced in Winnipeg and, like the *Family Herald*, widely distributed. This column began at the same time and ran, albeit only monthly, until 1924.<sup>28</sup> Together, the two columns printed approximately 20,000 full-length letters and, in the Prim Rose column, many more “Condensed Letters” distilled by the editor. Except for the few letters from non-Canadians, I have read them all. Granted, they don't all discuss romance-related subjects, but most do. And that's because the columns' main purpose was to “introduce” potential spouses to one another, by allowing contributors to essentially advertise themselves, and to then bring couples “together” by offering to forward letters to, or provide addresses for, their matrimonially inclined contributors. The need for such a service, as chapter 4 makes clear, was strong. At a time when Canada was still predominantly rural, many Canadians found themselves quite isolated – in rural hamlets and tiny fishing villages, on farms and in the bush – with few opportunities, and often insufficient time to meet potential partners. This was especially true in the vast expanses of the newly opened West, where loneliness was often intense. But loneliness was hardly unheard of in the more populous towns and cities. “I am a lonely little city girl, living in the metropolitan, cosmopolitan city of Vancouver,” wrote B.C.'s “Vancouver Belle” to the Prim Rose column in 1913,

and although I like Vancouver very much I am not acquainted with many people, and there are times when I feel very lonely, and think that I could not be more so if I were isolated from everybody and everything.... If any young man wishes to write with a view to matrimony, I should be pleased to hear from him.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that young women tended to predominate in urban areas while young men were over-represented in rural areas only made matters worse, as did the lack of rapid and affordable transportation for much of this period. To a great many matrimonially inclined Canadians, therefore, the personal columns provided an inexpensive and easily accessible method of finding a mate. Essentially, they served as “matrimonial bureaus” and their editors as match-makers.<sup>30</sup> The columns’ predominantly romantic content is all the more remarkable given that Canadians of this era considered the public expression of romantic views improper. Perhaps the legendary modesty and prudishness of the age account for this, but, for whatever reason, such columns were not only useful, but evidently rare as well.<sup>31</sup>

For a historian, the discovery of such a rich vein of information on an otherwise obscure subject is akin to striking gold. I know of no other sources that tell us as much about romance in Canada in the early 1900s as the *Family Herald* and the *Western Home Monthly (WHM)*. Yes, reading thousands of letters (in small print on microfilm) has been a time-consuming and eye-straining process. But also fascinating. A self-styled “Wrathy Bachelor” from Saskatchewan, writing to Prim Rose in the spring of 1906, expressed my own feelings well. “I have taken quite an interest in your columns lately,” he said. “What western bachelor would not when there are such glorious chances for studying human nature?”<sup>32</sup> At the very least I have come to appreciate how the romantic colloquialisms of one era can mean different things to another. Consider my surprise, for example, when I first encountered the phrase “to make love to” in the letters. Thinking I had stumbled across new evidence of liberal sexual attitudes and practices in a generation famous for its sexual repressiveness, I felt a bit like Columbus. Of course, I soon realized that in those days the phrase had no sexual connotations whatsoever. It simply meant to offer expressions of love to someone in an effort to win that person’s affections. Similarly, a “lover” was a girlfriend or boyfriend whom one loved. I also came to realize that when Canadians criticized a bachelor for being “backward” or “too slow,”

this had nothing to do with his conservatism or how quickly he moved. They were referring, instead, to his bashfulness.<sup>33</sup>

But how representative were these letters? Did they accurately reflect a cross-section of Canadian society at the time? For the most part they did, particularly in the Prim Rose column, whose editor went out of her way to ensure a balanced sample of letters from all regions and groups.<sup>34</sup> Certainly men and women were equally represented. All the provinces and territories were represented, too, in proportion to their population, although the match is not exact. For example, in the *Family Herald* – the source of 80 per cent of the letters in the sample – the voices of Canadians from Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia were heard more loudly. Only one in thirteen Canadians lived in Saskatchewan in 1916, for example, and yet one in six letters published in the magazine came from that province. The *WHM* was even more skewed in favour of the West's residents, and in both publications the views of French-speaking Quebecers were highly under-represented.<sup>35</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to exaggerate the regional differences in the views and behaviour of Canadians at this time. Many areas were still too new to have formed a distinct regional identity. This was especially true of northern Ontario and the West. More important, such areas were being settled heavily by individuals transplanted from older regions of Canada. Of the close to one million people who poured into the West in the two decades before World War I, for example, almost one-third came from central and eastern Canada.<sup>36</sup> Rural and urban identities, on the other hand, were far more developed. Unfortunately, the balance between rural and urban correspondents in the columns is difficult to gauge, since writers usually only cited their home province. Nevertheless, rural Canadians – even though they represented a majority of the population until the 1920s – were probably over-represented in the columns, mainly because they were more isolated and lonelier than city folk and, therefore, more likely to use the columns to secure correspondents. Given the matrimonial purpose of the *Family Herald* and *WHM*, the voices of young, single Canadians were also heard more frequently than their numbers warranted.

The range of occupations was well represented, too. Clerks, teachers, stenographers, railway engineers, doctors, businesspeople – all made an appearance at some point. So did those involved in heavy manual labour, such as railway, forestry, farm, and dock workers, although not as often. Lack of time and poor literacy were probably to blame. Similarly, the voices of

those who could not write *any* English – including many recent immigrants and francophones – went unheard. As such, it would be fair to say that the letters in the columns represented mostly the views of anglophones, who did nevertheless constitute almost 60 per cent of the Canadian population in this period.<sup>37</sup> Even so, the editors tried to publish letters from all groups, as long as these were reasonably comprehensible. In an effort to be inclusive they sometimes accommodated writers whose native tongue was clearly not English, such as “De Duch Warbler,” who wrote phonetically to the *WHM* in 1910: “I aldetime like to rite a letter so some of dem loaffie gales vud rite mit me, put I vus so pashful. Put at last I vil put on my dignitude und try und say sonding and if dem gales gif me sum curachment I vil say sonding more.”<sup>38</sup> They also welcomed letters from visible minorities. When “An Indian” from Ontario asked if he could join the *Family Herald’s* circle of correspondents, Prim Rose replied, “Of course.... We are delighted indeed to welcome one of the original inhabitants of Canada.”<sup>39</sup>

Readers will also wonder why I chose to examine some aspects of romance over others. Here I defer to the evidence on which much of this book is based, namely the letters. These suggested a particular focus. Perhaps more than anything they suggested an analysis of the qualities Canadians looked for in a partner. Did they value a person’s physical beauty or financial prospects? Did having a sense of humour matter? How important was someone’s religion or ethnicity? Did it make a difference if the person chewed gum or smoked a pipe? What, in other words, constituted the ideal partner? And how closely did Canadians’ romantic preferences coincide with prevailing notions of masculinity and femininity? Thanks to the richness of the personal columns, we finally have answers to such questions. Chapters 1 and 2 provide those answers.<sup>40</sup> Granted, the class and ethnocultural bases of such romantic preferences are less clear; as noted, only the writer’s home province is consistently cited. Nevertheless, self-references to class and ethnic background are frequent enough to allow for some tentative observations in these chapters.

One particular feature of the *Family Herald* suggested another focus, namely, the “dos” and “don’ts” of romance. The magazine also contained an “Etiquette” column, run by Prim Rose, that answered questions from young Canadians about the *rules* of romance. What should a man say after dancing with an unmarried woman? Was it proper for such a woman to write to bachelors? Should she allow her boyfriends to take physical liberties with her? When was it acceptable to break a marital engagement and, if

so, how should it be done? Prim Rose gave answers to these questions and many more and, in doing so, provided readers with a thorough guide to Canada's romance etiquette. Canadians had access to other etiquette advice, of course, in the form of books and manuals, but almost certainly these were not read as widely as the *Family Herald*, the most popular "farm-and-family" magazine of the day.<sup>41</sup> This made Prim Rose an important source of romantic advice for thousands of Canadians. As far as the *Family Herald's* loyal readers were concerned, her rules were *the* rules. Exactly what those rules were is the subject of chapter 3.

Now whether Canadians actually followed these rules is another matter. Only by examining the realities of courtship – as dating was then called – can we know for sure, and the next chapter does this to a degree. But it does so indirectly, in response to the question, "what hardships did Canadians suffer in their quest for romance?" A strict code of conduct, as prescribed by Prim Rose and others, was certainly one of them. But there were many more, for it was a sad fact that even when Canadians knew exactly what kind of a partner they wanted and had a solid grasp of the rules, success was not guaranteed. For many Canadians, the road to romantic bliss was littered with obstacles. This is the focus of chapter 4.

The final chapter looks at the impact of the Great War on Canadian romance. Here the correspondence columns proved less useful. Although they revealed the war's impact on romantic *attitudes*, more often they served as a platform for the super-charged patriotism of Canadians in these years. Therefore, to answer the question, "How did the Great War affect romance?," I was forced to rely largely on other sources, mostly private letters and diaries. And although it's always more difficult to generalize from such selective sources, the appearance in recent years of some outstanding collections of wartime letters made the task much easier. As such, I feel confident in my assertion that the war's impact on Canadian romance was, on the whole, devastating. I will let the reader decide.

My decision to focus on these four themes – ideal partners, romance etiquette, courtship hardship, and war – will undoubtedly raise questions in some quarters. Some will wonder why I say nothing about marriage, except tangentially. Certainly I do not mean to suggest that marriage and romance were mutually exclusive. Once a couple got married, however, the romance element of the relationship began to recede, while other, more pedestrian, aspects of married life – running a household, earning a living, raising children – moved to the fore. This, in turn, begs other questions:

Were couples happily married? How were household and bread-winning tasks divided up between husband and wife? Which partner wielded the most power in the family? What legal rights did each spouse have? – all interesting and legitimate questions, to be sure, but they have little to do with romance. Nor do I have much to say about the purely *physical* side of romance, mainly because Canadians themselves had so little to say, at least in their letters to the correspondence columns (and even in their private letters during the war). Those wishing to explore this aspect of heterosexual romance should look elsewhere.<sup>42</sup>

Readers might also ask why I chose to focus mostly on the years 1904 to 1920 when the correspondence columns ran into the 1920s. The main reason is the sparseness of evidence beyond the war years. In the case of the *Western Home Monthly*, the volume of letters fell considerably after the war, an indication that by the 1920s single men and women of the “frontier” regions found less need to search for partners in this way. Rapid advances in transportation, like railroads and cars, helped reduce their isolation, while opportunities for heterosexual contact expanded as the new communities of the West and northern Ontario became more populated and urbanized. “There are not many bachelors around here,” wrote a resident of Moosomin, Saskatchewan, in 1914. “Although they were numerous a few years ago, ... they are nearly all married now and settled down nice and comfortable.”<sup>43</sup>

Drawing conclusions for the postwar years was also difficult because the content of the letters changed. Even though the editors still considered the columns as serving an essentially match-making purpose, the *WHM*'s editor began limiting the number of romance letters in the 1910s, perhaps in response to the growing criticism that these were becoming monotonous; the same happened with the *Family Herald*. Over time, therefore, the columns became less matrimonial and more like true correspondence columns, where views were exchanged on a wide variety of subjects. The shrinking pool of evidence, therefore, means the columns are only able to suggest romantic *trends* for the postwar years. These trends are discussed in the Epilogue.



There is one more question that needs to be addressed by way of introduction to this study, and it is yet another that most historians have not asked: “Why Romance?” Why did Canadians long for and pursue partners to share their lives with in these years? The answer is not as obvious as it seems. Prior to the nineteenth century, when parents or guardians *arranged* most marriages, Canadians had little need for romance. Once young people gained the right to choose their *own* spouses, however, romance developed naturally as a prelude to marriage, as an opportunity to find or (in the case of women) attract the right marriage partner.<sup>44</sup>

A better question, then, is “Why Marriage?” Why did most Canadians over the age of fifteen choose matrimony over the single life? Marriage did have its naysayers, those who felt the institution was over-rated and that true happiness lay in “single blessedness”; a number wrote to the *Family Herald* and *WHM* to say they knew of few happily married couples.<sup>45</sup> Men sometimes renounced marriage because they cherished their freedom – “If I was married I should not be able to talk sweet nothings to a good looking girl at the dance” wrote one – and because they considered the modern young woman, with her “abnormal hats, peek-a-boo waists and tight skirts,” frivolous and expensive to maintain.<sup>46</sup> Women had reservations too. Spurred by the “first wave” women’s movement of the early 1900s, a number of female correspondents, especially farm women, denounced marriage as oppressive, as a one-way ticket to hard labour and thankless drudgery. Forced to choose between marriage and a career, more of them were choosing the latter, not least because of the greater number of satisfying job opportunities available to them in these years, including teaching, nursing, and missionary work.<sup>47</sup>

But most Canadians favoured marriage, and with good reason. In practical terms, marriage permitted a sharing of responsibilities necessary to a couple’s survival and well being, whether this meant running a family farm or business, managing a household, or raising children who would one day contribute to the “family economy” and care for their elderly parents. Specifically, a man needed a wife to run a household, raise his children, and help with the farm or family business. And a woman (unless she was lucky enough to be economically self-sufficient) needed a husband to support her financially. No woman wanted to be a life-long burden on her aging parents or one of her married siblings.<sup>48</sup>

At another level, Canadians desired marriage for the companionship it offered. After all, loneliness was common in these years, especially in the





Courtship in the early 1900s was inevitably followed by marriage. This 1923 wedding portrait of a happy Ontario couple was something to which most Canadians aspired. *Courtesy Archives of Ontario, F 1405-9-6, MSR9872-10.*

more sparsely settled areas of the country. Despite the legendary stoicism of Canada's Anglo-Saxon population, the pages of the personal columns are filled with sad letters from young men and women lamenting their "single wretchedness" and desperately seeking companions. Marriage was also the only socially acceptable method at this time of having children and enjoying the more intimate physical pleasures of heterosexual relationships. More generally, most Canadians felt that getting married, building a home, and raising a family was the chief purpose of living and the main route to happiness: "is not matrimony the highest state of earthly bliss?," asked Quebec's "Eastern Girl," after endorsing the matrimonial purpose of the Prim Rose column.<sup>49</sup> They typically saw *unwed* men and women, on the other hand, as failures.<sup>50</sup>

The desire to marry also stemmed from certain social pressures. Men and women were, after all, *expected* to marry. For Canadians who took their religion seriously, as most did, marriage was considered God's will, part of divine design. "When the Creator of the universe arranged things," wrote an Alberta correspondent, "he evidently intended that there should be neither bachelors [n]or old maids. He began pairing them off in the Garden of Eden, and has kept up the same equal proportion ever since."<sup>51</sup> Parents raised their daughters to believe that their ultimate goal in life should be marriage, children, and a home of their own and that they should do whatever was necessary to achieve this. They also told them they could benefit society most as wives and mothers, particularly by moulding the characters of their husbands and children along moral lines.<sup>52</sup> They told their sons, meanwhile, that it was their manly duty in life to become a "provider" for, and "protector" of, a special woman, who would, in turn, refine their rough-hewn characters and provide them with the encouragement and inspiration they needed to succeed in life.<sup>53</sup>

Some Canadians went even further and declared marriage a patriotic duty. How else, they asked, could Canada develop into a great country but through the marriage and procreation of its citizens? "Your page has a peculiar function of its own," an Ontario farmer told Prim Rose, "in drawing together the young men and maidens whose aim it is to make the land of the 'Maple Leaf' greater by the reason of their efforts."<sup>54</sup> She agreed, calling matrimony of "vital importance to the nation, and ... worthy of attention and effort on the part of every man or woman who loves this great country of ours and desires to see it grow and prosper."<sup>55</sup> National greatness also required a *moral* population, and marriage helped here too. It would

have a civilizing effect, especially on men, whose inherently rough and intemperate personalities would benefit greatly from the steadying hand of a virtuous, loving wife.<sup>56</sup> Other patriots, of a more racial mindset, promoted marriage (and procreation) as necessary to prevent the country's dominant Anglo-Saxon race from being overtaken by large numbers of "inferior" east European and Asian immigrants. Fearing such "race suicide," one reader even proposed a tax on all unmarried Anglo-Saxon women.<sup>57</sup> Many more suggested a tax on *all* single persons, except those too poor, unhealthy, or ugly to attract potential spouses.<sup>58</sup> With so much riding on the institution of marriage, is it any wonder marriage rates rose in these years?<sup>59</sup> Or that those who remained single were stigmatized accordingly: unmarried men risked being called "dirty old bachelors," too selfish or cowardly to marry, and women unwed by age twenty-four were called, just as disparagingly, "old maids" or "spinsters," doomed to lives of misery, with only their cats and parrots to keep them company.<sup>60</sup>

None of this is meant to suggest that Canadians rushed into marriage at the first opportunity. Quite the opposite. Despite the strong desire and pressure to marry, they tread carefully when choosing a life partner. As we will see, they had definite ideas about the person they hoped to marry and, in theory at least, would not settle for less. When others accused them of being too lazy, fussy, or selfish to tie the knot, they invariably responded that they had yet to meet their "ideal" and would remain single until then.<sup>61</sup> Their caution was reinforced by the widely shared belief that for every person there was, somewhere on the planet, a so-called "affinity" or ideal person, chosen for them by God. When Canadians of this era spoke of a "match made in heaven," they meant it literally.<sup>62</sup>

Most also insisted that *love* was an absolute prerequisite, as they had for some time.<sup>63</sup> In their letters they described it, breathlessly, as "the grand passion," "the divine flame," and "a heaven-born gift," and were persuaded by the sentimental fiction and poetry of the day that true love between husband and wife had the power to render any hovel a palace and any marriage happy.<sup>64</sup> They would have been quick to applaud the resolve of the twenty-year-old postal clerk from Ontario who told readers of the *Family Herald* that "I believe in marrying for love, not for a title or an estate, for there can be no happiness with plenty of money only. There must be love... Where love reigns supreme, you have the ideal home."<sup>65</sup> And they would have nodded approvingly upon reading Maud Cooke's pronouncement on the subject in her 1896 tome, *Social Etiquette*: "God's provisions for man's

happiness are boundless and endless, ... yet a right love surpasses them all, and can render us all happier than our utmost imaginations can depict.”<sup>66</sup>

In the absence of love, a number of young women (and men) renounced marriage altogether. “We are not anxious to get married as some girls seem to be,” wrote Alberta’s “Lauretta and Lusetta,” and “will be perfectly willing to be old maids until the end of our lives if the right ones do not come along. We will never marry for anything but pure, unadulterated love.”<sup>67</sup> To Lauretta and Lusetta, whose views were widely shared, it mattered not at what age a man and woman married (provided they were not too young, since love required maturity) or what their financial circumstances were, so long as there was love. Love conquered all. To die-hard romantics, in fact, it came before all else, even life itself. “Better a painful death in youth, or a lingering illness through a long life,” declared another Albertan, herself on the verge of spinsterhood, “than to live a hideous, loveless marriage.”<sup>68</sup> Such views often bordered on intolerance. “Marriage should always be the sequel of unselfish, pure, holy love,” huffed Saskatchewan’s somewhat ungallant “Sir Gallahad,”

[and] I cannot understand how people consent to marry for money, or convenience, unless they are morally degraded. The natural laws of affinity, selection, and the like, forbid such unions and for no consideration, should we adopt any other standard or principle than love, in our matrimonial views.<sup>69</sup>

Choosing the right partner and falling in love, in turn, meant that romance could not be rushed, that couples should spend as long as necessary – at least a year – getting to know one another before getting engaged. “Marry in haste and repent at leisure,” was a popular admonition.<sup>70</sup>

All of this might strike the modern reader as odd. How could our ancestors have been so demanding under the circumstances? How could they have afforded the luxury of such romantic idealism? Did the financial insecurity of single women and the intense loneliness of so many single frontier men not preclude such fastidiousness? It’s true, some desperately lonely individuals were not the least bit fussy, like Nova Scotia’s “Lonely Bayne,” who wrote, simply, “Dear Friend Prim Rose – Please send me a wife”<sup>71</sup>; pioneering prairie bachelors and widowers with young children were not especially picky either. But most Canadians were. Exactly *why* is not clear, although the awareness that marriage was a life-long proposition

was one reason. Not only was divorce difficult to obtain – in most provinces it required the approval of Parliament and adultery was the minimum grounds – but most Canadians considered it sinful. They saw marriage, sanctioned and ordained by God, as a sacred “heavenly bond” not easily trifled with. As the “Good Book” said, “what God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.”<sup>72</sup> A leading etiquette manual of the day was just as insistent. “There are times when a legal separation is necessary,” its author wrote, “but when people marry they marry for better or for worse, and if, unfortunately, it should be for worse, even that does not release them from the solemn vows which they have taken.”<sup>73</sup> In short, when Canadians married, they knew it was for life and so, they chose carefully.