SEX AND INFLUENCE:

THE GENDERED NATURE OF CANADIAN POLITICAL CULTURE DURING THE ABERDEEN YEARS, 1893-1898

By

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the links between social and political life in Canada at the close of the nineteenth century through an exploration of the lived experience of four very different political wives. Building upon the important work of historians such as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, who successfully argued that women played key, if informal, roles in the world of nineteenth century politics and society, it generates new perspectives on the role of women and their influence on Canadian political culture. Drawing on personal letters, journals, newspaper articles and columns, as well as on memoirs, reminiscences, autobiographies, biographies and popular histories, this micro-historical study adds to our understanding of the subtle, varied and idiosyncratic ways that patriarchy and liberalism made an impact on the gendered experience of their everyday lives.

If these political wives played an important role in the political life of late nineteenth century Canada, politics also played an important role in the creation of the synergistic friendships that developed among these women, friendships that in turn encouraged and directed their political activity. As this dissertation will argue, the ideology of separate spheres both enhanced and constrained the ability of these women to influence political culture, not by breaking down the boundaries of gender hierarchy but by working within them, reverencing separate spheres ideology and by sometimes astutely maneuvering accepted gender paradigms to achieve a measure of political influence.

The dissertation begins with an overview of the emblematic ceremonial representation of gender and politics, and provides a detailed examination of the micro-politics of social
and married life to argue that women played a significant part in the construction and the consolidation of political culture in late nineteenth century Canada.
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Introduction

There is a power in the land, which even the male legislators are forced to consider.¹

The original purpose of this work was to investigate the links between Canadian political and social life in late nineteenth century Ottawa. What emerged from the archival research was a new and insightful recognition of the significance of the synergistic or mutually supportive friendship that developed among four political wives, Lady Aberdeen, Lady Thompson, Lady Laurier and Lady Edgar, who were close to the pinnacle of political power. This work examines the ways in which the nature of their friendship effectively helped to reposition their roles as cultural agents and increase their social and political influence.

Ishbel Maria Marjoribanks Gordon, Lady Aberdeen, is the central figure of this work. She was the wife of John Hamilton Gordon, the seventh Earl (later, the 1st Marquis) of Aberdeen, and Canada’s sixth Governor General. Conspicuously different from any other consort to a Governor General of Canada, Ishbel Aberdeen is remembered for her social and political activism. Her extraordinary public role remains a topic for discussion by both political and social historians in Canada. Popular historian, Doris French in her biography Ishbel and the Empire portrays Lady Aberdeen as a woman whose, “natural element was the vigorous adrenalin–rousing battle of reform, where she stood armed with a conviction and a faith in a just cause.”² Similarly, Canadian political historian P.B. Waite describes her as, “a die hard Liberal, passionate, energetic and aggressive with a confident critical mind.”³ John T. Saywell, editor of Lady Aberdeen’s Canadian Journal, paints much the same image of an “intense and passionate, confident and aggressive” woman, preferring “companions who could discuss political issues or the need for social

¹ Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” Saturday Night 1902


welfare.⁴ Popular historian Sandra Gwyn’s assessment follows much the same line in which Lady Aberdeen’s “commanding presence” and “limitless energy” made her “Governor General in all but name.”⁵ Any doubt of Lady Aberdeen’s intense interests in political issues is dispelled with the recognition that her Canadian Journal is “primarily devoted to political analysis.”⁶ Canadian feminist historian Veronica Strong Boag has written extensively about Lady Aberdeen’s place in Canadian history and concludes that, “her perspective on progress helped set the trajectory of much of modern Canadian feminism.”⁷ This work builds upon previous assessments of Lady Aberdeen’s work and provides new insights into the part that friendship played in achieving some of her social and political objectives that were informed by her conviction that “Liberalism is the Christianity of politics.”⁸

The focus of this work is centered upon the Aberdeen years (1893-1898) since this historical period reflects a political changing of the guard from a long-standing Conservative administration to a Liberal government under Sir Wilfrid Laurier. As well, it was a period of ascendancy of the ‘new woman’, maternal feminism and an increasingly vocal demand for woman suffrage. What effect, I wondered, did this shifting social and political paradigm have on political culture in general? More specifically, were political wives able to achieve some measure of political influence, at a time when ostensibly they had no political voice? An exploration of the friendship and real lived experience of each of these four women and their formal and informal roles as political

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⁸ Lady Aberdeen summarized their religious and political principles: “We were at one in believing that Liberalism is the Christianity of politics, and that those who take service under its banner must apply its principles in all relations of life, both public and private.” Aberdeen, We Twa: Reminiscences of Lord and Lady Aberdeen, Volume 1 (London: W. Collins, 1925), 89.
wives adds to our understanding of how gender and cultural considerations shaped the role of women in late nineteenth century Canadian political culture. It reveals how patriarchy influenced these women in both visible and invisible ways. In the process, this work addresses the ways that a Liberal homogeneous ideology made an impact on their sense of personal authority and how the supportive friendship that developed among these four women heightened this awareness.

Each of the women in this study came from a different stratum of society, making it improbable that they would meet and develop an intimate friendship, especially one that lasted to the end of their lives. Their elite status developed because they were married to men at the political summit, and that rarified social position provided a common ground on which to build a relationship. Lady Aberdeen was the wife of the aristocratic, piously liberal minded, Governor General, Lord Aberdeen. Lady Thompson, a former shop clerk, was the wife of the Conservative and first Roman Catholic Prime Minister Sir John Sparrow David Thompson, whose brilliant term was dramatically cut short by his untimely death. Lady Laurier had eked out a meagre living as a piano teacher before her marriage to the charismatic long serving Liberal and first French Canadian Prime Minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier. Lady Edgar, the genteel descendent of Family Compact Society, was the wife of the Speaker of the House and key liberal party organizer, James David Edgar.

Of the four women, Lady Aberdeen was the aristocratic grand dame. As vice-reign in Canada, her elevated social and political position was unimpeachable. Colin Coates


10 Paul W. Bennett and Cornelius J. Jaenen have described the hegemonic leaders of early nineteenth century Upper Canada “the Family Compact” as “a self appointed aristocracy dedicated to advancing its own economic, social and religious interests.” In Paul W. Bennett and Cornelius J. Jaenen, Emerging Identities: Selected Problems and Interpretations in Canadian History (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall, 1986), 160. Additionally, Maud J. Mclean and Robert M. Stamp describe Matilda Ridout Edgar’s family as “prominent members of Toronto’s business and social elite, part of Upper Canada’s well-entrenched Family Compact.” In Maud J. McLean and Robert M. Stamp, My Dearest Wife: the private and public lives of James David Edgar and Matilda Ridout Edgar (Toronto: Natural heritage Inc., 1998), 62.
emphasizes the significant role that the Monarchy and its representatives played both culturally and politically in late 19th century Canada. He writes:

Canada’s connection to royalty was often experienced through the personal representatives of the monarch. Governors General wielded significant political, financial and cultural power into the 20th century, and in various ways they attempted to ensure Canadians’ allegiance to the throne.11

As representatives of the Monarchy the Governor General and his consort were considered to be “above politics.”12 With her official connection to royalty, Ishbel Aberdeen possessed a definitive social currency that enabled her to bring together a superior group of women to work towards redressing social and political discord.13

Research for this study has been drawn from primary documents in the public domain, including: personal letters, journals, newspaper articles and columns, as well as from memoirs, reminiscences, autobiographies, biographies and academic and popular histories.

Theoretical underpinnings of thesis

Traditionally, historians have constructed social and political history as fundamentally different, generally ignoring women’s historical role as being separate and apart from the public and political realm. Isabel Skelton challenged this ideological dichotomy on the

11 Colin M. Coates, editor, Majesty in Canada: essays on the role of royalty (Toronto: Dundurn, 2006), 11.

12 As Phillip Buckner has argued, “The monarchy was seen as one institution that stood above politics and that could unify communities peopled by a variety of ethnic groups and factionalized by religious sectarianism.” Phillip Buckner, “The Invention of Tradition” in Colin M. Coates, editor, Majesty in Canada, 24. Additionally, Barbara J. Messamore cites nineteenth century Canadian constitutional expert “Alpheus Todd, who insisted that the governor’s (general) position must be one of ‘strict neutrality’. He must manifest no bias towards any political party, but on the contrary be ready to make himself a mediator and a moderator between the influential of all parties.” Barbara J. Messamore, Canada’s Governors General, 1847-1878: Biography and Constitutional Evolution (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 25. See also Barbara Messamore, “On A Razor’s Edge: The Canadian Governors General, 1888-1911” in British Journal of Canadian Studies 13:2 (1998): 376-395.

13 Lady Aberdeen described the challenge of creating an ecumenical non-partisan national women’s organization: “the peculiar struggle has been to get the really nice and influential women…however it has been done and we have got capital women together and through them we get our hand on the pulse of the country…” Journal, 14 April 1894.
basis that the history of Canada “was incomplete without [the inclusion of] the role of women, social history and cultural life.”¹⁴ Leonore Davidoff’s landmark study of nineteenth century British social life, *Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season* bridged this gap, revealing the link between family, political and economic institutions.¹⁵ Pat Jalland’s *Women, Marriage and Politics* explores the ‘actual lived reality’ of late nineteenth century British political wives, and considers the connection between the social and political. Jalland concludes that while there was an interconnection between the social and political, nevertheless for political wives there were clear limits to their influence. “They had no role in political decision making, even indirectly and their influence on political issues was negligible.”¹⁶ Alternatively, Jonathan Schneer’s later work of the same historical period challenges Jalland’s conclusions and adds to Davidoff’s assertions that link the social with the political. Schneer emphasizes that at least some elite women who were close to political power were indeed able to “influence, introduce, exert patronage and dazzle.”¹⁷

While British scholarship discusses the connection between the social and the political and whether disenfranchised women have informally exercised political influence,

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¹⁵ Leonore Davidoff has made the connection between the social and political, arguing that it was so well hidden that “Very few of the participants realized what the system was as a whole or what functions it performed ... they were the norms that had been thoroughly internalized and legitimized.” Leonore Davidoff, *Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season* (London: Croom Helm, 1973), 17. Conversely two decades after Davidoff’s pioneering work Canadian political historian Michael Bliss rejected the argument that social history was integral to a fuller understanding of political history. In Michael Bliss, “Privatizing the Mind: the Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 26; 4 (Winter 1991-1992): 5-17. However, as Ruth Roach Pierson has argued, Michael Bliss’ “assumption of a great divide between the public and the private, privileging of the public over the private, a definition of the public so narrow as to exclude all but the so-called ‘high politics’” She further suggested that Bliss’ view of the “history of women as particularly irrelevant to the national dream is indicated by his twice quoting the contemptuous phrase ‘the history of housemaid’s knee in Belleville in the 1890s.’” Ruth Roach Pierson, “International Trends in Women’s History and Feminism: Colonization and Canadian Women’s History” *Journal of Women’s History* Volume 4, No.2 (Fall, 1992): 134-149. For further discussion of the marginalization of women’s history see: Catherine Hall, *White Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)


regrettably there has been limited analysis of this process in Canada. Nearly thirty years have passed since Sandra Gwyn published *Private Capital*, which is a remarkably detailed narrative of political culture that links the social with the political in late nineteenth century Ottawa. A decade later, Gail Cuthbert Brandt’s scintillating analysis of the role of women in the Charlottetown Confederation Conference helped to clarify how the social and political operated in tandem, paving the way for negotiations to succeed.\(^{18}\) Beverley Boutilier analyzed the politics of philanthropic institution building, and concluded that social activist women “might have authority to influence but no real power to effect social reforms and challenge institutionalized male prerogative or authority.”\(^{19}\) On the other hand, Elizabeth Kirkland examined the political and social activism of elite women in turn of the century Montreal and determined that they used their identities as mothers and in doing so, “created opportunities to wield power and to see it multiplied.”\(^{20}\) The elite women in Kirkland’s study were able to “shape an identity that was both maternal and political.”\(^{21}\) Nevertheless, despite these more recent works, the interrelation between Canadian political and social life continues to be essentially an under explored subject, leaving political history and the history of women in Canada for the most part segregated from one another. This work contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the gendered connection between the social and political history of Canada and focuses particularly on the role that female friendship played in political culture and discusses whether four political wives were able to achieve political influence in late nineteenth century Canada.


\(^{20}\) In her study of Montreal’s elite women, Elizabeth Kirkland has summarized the connection between social life and political life, observing that, “As they envisioned their influence to be growing, out of their homes, across the city of Montreal and extended to the nation and Empire, elite women in Montreal, as elsewhere, engaged the political world long before full citizenship rights were extended to them.” Elizabeth Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens: Elite Women in Montreal, 1890-1914” (PhD diss., Montreal: McGill University, 2011), 311-12.

Building upon British, American and Canadian scholarship, this thesis interrogates the connection between the gendered nature of political culture and political influence in late nineteenth century Ottawa. It explores how four women experienced the political world, how they perceived it and used it and what it meant to them in late nineteenth century Ottawa. Their biographies provide a window into the social and political history of the period under examination. Elizabeth Kirkland’s study of elite women in turn-of-the-century Montreal utilizes a “collective biography” that reveals a female “realm of social and political influence.” But as Barbara Taylor notes, “biography remains highly problematic for historians” because it often reflects an “emphasis on individual agency at the expense of larger historical forces.” The challenge is to recognize the larger social and historical forces at play that have an impact on the biographical subject. As Jo Margadant maintains, biography is a useful source of historical inquiry because it potentially opens rich opportunities to “integrating individual life stories into the grand historical narrative” and in the process achieves an understanding of cultural politics that is “most easily examined as well as empathetically imagined in the individual life.” Additionally, as David Nasaw asserts, “the biographical form” is useful because it “offers a way of transcending the theoretical divide between empiricist social history and linguistic-turn cultural history without sacrificing the methodological or epistemological gains of either.” The larger objective in utilizing biography in historical analysis is “not simply to tell a life story but to deploy the individual in the study of the world itself and to explore how the private informs the public and vice versa.” Kali Israel’s biography of Emilia Dilke for example, “offers a nexus to generate [a fuller] understanding of


24 As David Nasaw has argued “The biographical form may become a favoured one for 21st century historians because it offers a way of transcending the theoretical divide between empiricist social history and linguistic-turn cultural history without sacrificing the methodological or epistemological gains of either.” See David Nasaw, “Historians and Biography” American Historical Review (June, 2009): 573-578.

25 Nasaw, “Historians and Biography”
Victorian culture.” Additionally, as Lois Banner points out, feminist historian Joan Scott regards the “subjective identity” of biography as “an effective tool” in understanding how gender has an impact on “social organizations and cultural representations.” Through biography this examination of four political wives employs a gendered analysis of political culture in Ottawa, to determine how they utilized and negotiated the public and private boundaries, the degree of informal political influence they achieved and whether these informal worlds became formalized.

Gender is a useful analytical tool for this project, since, as others such as Joan Wallach Scott and Mary S. Hartman have argued, the relationship between the sexes is at the heart of social organization and cultural construction. As Joy Parr points out gender analysis is useful for the “interpretive analysis it engages that manliness and womanliness are socially constituted and continually reconstrued in specific historical junctures.” Terry Crowley argues also in favour of a gendered analytical approach because it “establishes the temporality of sexual differences.” What is notable during the period under study is the continuous discourse in the media as well as among women themselves, about the shifting gender boundaries and social organization. Gisela Bock makes the case for the


28 As Joan Wallach Scott has maintained “Gender is an important analytical tool...[to] analyze the ways in which politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics.” Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 26-7. Additionally Mary S. Hartman has argued that “biological elements of gender identity as well as the cultural ones are socially constructed...throughout the long agricultural period, women achieved gender identity comparatively easy, since their bodies appeared to give stronger cues than men’s to their primary social tasks...adoption of a late marriage regime in north western Europe, moreover, further increased the challenges for men in achieving gender identity by blurring boundaries that were reinforced elsewhere in early marriage areas, in turn meant that beliefs in gender difference and male dominance became harder to uphold as built-in features of the human condition.” Mary S. Hartman, The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 261.

29 Joy Parr, “Gender, History and Historical Practice” The Canadian Historical Review 76, 3 (September, 1995): 354-376.

30 Crowley, Marriage of Minds, 5.

31 The following newspaper article of the period highlights late nineteenth century public discourse surrounding the ‘new woman’ and women’s proper role in the community. “Women of Importance: One of
value of gender analysis “in the questions it asks and in its perspectives” to render visible not only “the complex set of relations and processes” between the sexes but also “women’s relationships with each other.”

This work formulates a number of questions that scholars of history have overlooked about the impact of gender on late nineteenth century Canadian political culture. How can we understand the complex power relations that led these women to do the things that they did and in the way that they did them? How were these politically active women sustained by complex and powerful friendships with each other? By examining “the ways that gender assumptions are incorporated into social institutions and practices” and the ways that a continuously evolving public discourse affected women’s abilities to negotiate gender boundaries, this work illuminates a shifting ideological paradigm that influenced the evolving political persona of each of these four women.

the most important questions that has perturbed and excited the minds of all classes of the community during the last decade of our social development is the so-called woman’s question. Only in connection with the woman’s question can that other question as to the form and organization which the entire community must receive if oppression, want and misery in different forms are to be replaced by a free humanity can a final solution of the question be reached. As a means of bringing about many necessary reforms not only in the lives and standing of women generally but in the whole social life the National Council of Women of Canada stands amongst the front ranks…President, the Countess of Aberdeen and vice presidents, Lady Thompson and Mme. Laurier…” Montreal Herald 12 May 1896. Further to the discussion, Veronica Strong-Boag has argued that “Canadian life in the late 19th century was marked by an important change in scale…Canada’s female citizens shared in the organizational expansion of the late nineteenth century…citizens were becoming accustomed to a maternalistic activism.” Veronica Strong-Boag, “Setting the Stage: National Organization and the Women’s Movement of the Late 19th Century” in Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice, editors, The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women’s History (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977): 87-103. In addition see Mariana Valverde, The age of light, soap and water: moral reform in English Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); For a further examination of late 19th century discourse surrounding ‘working girls’ and the consequent philanthropic and legal efforts to deal with the increasing female autonomy, and the ‘girl problem, see as well Carolyn Strange, Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1995)


33 Blanche Wiesen Cook has discussed this same question in her examination of radical female political activism: Blanche Wiesen Cook, “Female Support Network and Political Activism: Lillian Wald, Chrystal Eastman, Emma Goldman” Chrysalis (No.3, 1977): 43-61.

34 As Ava Baron has argued, “We need to develop gender analysis in ways that allow for historical specificity of gender identity while uncovering the ways gender assumptions are incorporated into social institutions and practices.” Ava Baron, editor, Work Engendered: toward a new history of American labor (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 24. See also Elizabeth Kirkland’s examination of the gendered nature of the political and social activism of elite women in Montreal who were “intentionally political” during the years 1890-1914. Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens,” ii.
Women have been largely excluded from the historical record of political life in Canada and with few notable exceptions historians have ignored gender as a category of analysis of Canadian political life. Making the case for gender as an analytical tool, Joan Wallach Scott contends that, “political structures and political ideas shape and set the boundaries of public discourse.”\footnote{Scott, \textit{Gender and the Politics of History}, 24.} From this perspective, gender analysis is useful in the discussion of political history because it “dissolves the distinctions between public and private.”\footnote{Ibid.} The result is to permit a more nuanced investigation of the connection between the social and the political. Despite a growing historiography of gender as a category of analysis Joy Parr observes, “it has not been universally embraced by historians.”\footnote{Joy Parr refers to the “ferociousness and hostility to recent work in gender history.” Parr, “Gender History and Historical Practice”, 354. Studies that illustrate systems of gender to be “socially constructed and historically conditioned” include: Susan Amussen, \textit{An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England} (New York: Blackwell, 1988) See also: Hartman, \textit{The Household}, 222.}

For the purpose of this study, gender analysis is a useful tool to investigate the relationship between the social and the political in late nineteenth century Ottawa. While frequently described as “an environment favourable to women” the extent of the socio-political limits imposed on political wives is discussed throughout this work.\footnote{Sandra Gwyn has argued that about 1903, “Ottawa began to decline noticeably as an environment favourable to women. Here as elsewhere in the country, women reverted more and more to being the ‘Childlike Woman’ about whom Amaryllis had written so scathingly. In the Capital the descent was particularly steep and continuous all the way down to the mid-1970s when the women’s movement began to assert itself.” Gwyn, \textit{The Private Capital}, 483. See Mary Agnes Fitzgibbon remarks to the NCWC: “There are many indications that this is a woman’s age and it is for us to do our duty in it nobly and well.” “Report on the Seventh Annual Meeting of the National Council of Women of Canada” (Victoria B.C., 1900) in Jeffrey Keshen, Suzanne Morton, \textit{Material Memory: Documents in Post Confederation History} (Don Mills: Addison-Wesley, 1998), 107.} Certainly the Governor General, Lord Aberdeen, as well as Prime Minister, Sir John Thompson and Sir Wilfrid Laurier each exhibit some evidence of a measure of support for women’s political and social activism.\footnote{In a letter to Lady Aberdeen, Prime Minister Sir John Thompson supported and encouraged her continuing position in the Women’s Liberal Federation: “I have tried to imagine what possible harm could}
period, evolving gender identity remained a contested issue that threatened to produce “apoplexy” in more conservative Canadians. 40 Throughout this work, maternal feminism is explored as a vehicle that circumvented the limitations of separate spheres discourse. Allan Greer’s insightful discussion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s widely accepted gender theories provides a case in point that maternal feminism offered a pragmatic approach to achieving political influence. As Greer explains, Rousseau “was one of the few writers of the period who gave sustained and explicit attention to the gender dimensions of politics.” In his view, Rousseau “did not consider women inferior to men. On the contrary, he attached great value to the loving and nurturing domestic sphere where women found their true calling.” However, what appears to be a ‘separate but equal’ argument set forth by Rousseau, in fact places women in an ongoing subordinate position since, “in his writings women appear in a positive light to the degree that they are helpful to men [and] … everywhere one turns in his writings, the needs of men take precedence.” 41 Rather than challenging what was generally an accepted gender discourse among Canadians, the following chapters will discuss the ways that maternal feminism

follow from such a course,” he told her, “and all that I can think of is ill natured comments may be made in the British press…such comments would be considered mere newspaper spice and would not lessen the respect or affection of the Canadian people for Her Excellency.” 13 January 1894, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 4. Lady Aberdeen recorded in her Journal her appreciation of Sir John Thompson’s support for the NCWC, “Sir John Thompson made a really beautiful speech for us on Thursday which will help greatly.”; Journal, 13 December 1894: “Not many Prime Ministers would leave the House on the night when the most important division of the session was to take place and when an eager debate was going on, to come down to the Women’s Council Annual Meeting and deliver a most charming and understanding speech, without a trace of that flippancy which so often characterizes speeches made in similar circumstances – but on the contrary full of earnest cheer and encouragement.” recorded in the Canadian Journal of Lady Aberdeen, 14 April 1894. Moreover, Prime Minister Sir John Thompson’s support of the Council is evident in his address to the NCWC: “Let me say that no class in this country could appreciate more than public men the benefits of that are aimed at this movement…Any movement which tends to bring together the people of the various provinces, of different opinion, politics and beliefs will be patriotic in its aim and in its work and Divinely blessed in its results.” in N.E.S. Griffiths, The Splendid Vision: Centennial History of the National Council of Women of Canada, 1893-1993 (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993).44. Further evidence of political support for female social initiatives is provided in the following chapters.

40 An article in the Monetary Times emphasized the public discourse regarding women’s proper role. “Let us say in all candor, that simply because this is debatable land, the wife of the Governor General would do well to keep clear of it…there are still among the survivors of the antique generation, people in whom the bare suggestion of a national council of women will be in danger of producing apoplexy.” 10 November 1893, Toronto, Monetary Times, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 4.

41 Allan Greer, Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 198-199.
embraced an ideology of separate spheres that served to rationalize women’s influence beyond the domestic and into the public sphere.

Both Elizabeth Kirkland and Sandra Gwyn point to this period as one of women’s apparent “pre-eminence” that was merely a temporary anomaly in Canadian political history and view the commencement of the First World War as the catalyst to the death knell for a political environment that was favourable to women in Canada.\(^{42}\) Nevertheless the discussion is more complicated than either Gwyn or Kirkland suggest since woman suffrage was widely achieved during this decade, in conjunction with a greater global democratization, along with an increasing demographic of women in post secondary education and in the workforce. At the same time, the arguments put forth by Kirkland and Gwyn substantiate Greer’s analysis of Rousseau “that the needs of men take precedence” since the achievement of woman suffrage was essential to the support for the controversial issue of conscription. Sheila Jeffreys draws a similar conclusion. “WWI,” she says, “was an event of such magnitude that feminists were forced into a response and could not simply ignore it. …the phenomenon of mass male aggression seems consistently to drive women, feminists and otherwise, into a defensive position where they must struggle to maintain such principles as the continued existence of human life on earth. Directly, feminist concerns which are aimed at increasing women’s status and opportunities vis-à-vis men are at such times forced into abeyance.”\(^{43}\)

This apparent advancement and retrenchment of women’s position in late nineteenth century Canadian political culture highlights the historicity of gender in power relations. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall in their seminal work *Family Fortunes* conclude that gender “categories are continually being forged, contested, reworked and reaffirmed in social

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\(^{42}\) As Kirkland has argued, with “the onset of the First World War…their power…[was] markedly diminished.” Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens,” introduction. See also Gwyn, who has argued that, “Most of the reasons for the withering away of the feminine principle in the capital…[was a result of] the cataclysmic effect of the First World War, which thrust masculine affairs to the forefront, followed in turn by the Depression and the Second World War…The role models who had been so important to women’s pre-eminence, were already beginning to disappear. Never again at Rideau Hall would there be a consort like Lady Aberdeen…” Gwyn, *The Private Capital*, 483-484.

institutions and practices as well as ideologies.”44 Mary Poovey examines the ideological work of gender in mid-Victorian England and reaches a similar conclusion. Gender identity is “contested and always under construction; because it was always in the making, it was always open to revision, dispute and the emergence of oppositional formations.”45 More recently, Hartman’s examination of the early modern western European household emphasizes the point that gender paradigms are fluid and change over time. “The weight of the evidence” she says, “points to the persistence and even acceleration of the centuries long trend [of the] overlapping of men’s and women’s lives and the erosion of the gender hierarchy.”46 This work is a micro-history that examines whether four Canadian political wives experienced a period of “pre-eminence” in the waning years of the nineteenth century, and how gender ideology worked to both constrain and empower them. It builds upon Gail Cuthbert Brandt’s work that demonstrates how changing concepts of gender as a crucial axis of power affect fundamental notions about the connection between the “political and social.”47

Gender is a ‘relational dynamic” and, as Jeanne Boydston makes clear, it is a category of analysis that must be reassessed according to “time, place and culture” as a critical point of interrogation for the concept of gender analysis itself.48 As Linda Gordon explains, a gendered historical analysis identifies the existence and operation of “a set of social norms that possess meaning about maleness and femaleness in the division of power.”49 Thus in the analysis of gender relations “it is imperative that historians not lose sight of


47 Cuthbert Brandt, “National Unity and the Politics of History”: 3-11


the power relations that constitute and are constituted by gender.” Moreover, as Parr reminds us, the practice of gender history is focused on the recognition of “the temporariness and impermanence” of gender roles. In other words, there are no “definitive” or “settled certainties” that gender roles are fixed and unchanging through time. To further substantiate this argument, Deborah Gorham’s earlier research emphasizes that gender and power relations were recurrently contested and reworked throughout the Victorian period. Thus, in the final decade of the 19th century, women were experiencing a “widening sphere of opportunity” while at the same time, they were conforming to a narrow standard of acceptable female behaviour. By using gender as a category of analysis, we can better understand the ways that women in this study pushed the gendered boundaries of political life, while retaining their feminine identity in contrast to earlier in the century, when any degree of political activity was automatically partnered with notions of what constitutes masculinity. As a result, this work explores how four political wives reworked and reaffirmed the gendered categories that governed their lives. It considers how gender identity was important to women, the role desire had in it and finally, what they did to broaden the paradigm of acceptable womanly behaviour. At the same time, it looks at the construction of gendered roles and the power relations which accompanied them and evolved in late nineteenth century Canadian political culture, and the factors that came into play to support a discourse of a ‘woman’s age.’


51 Parr, “Gender History and Historical Practice,” 354-376.


53 As Allan Greer has argued, “Republicanism itself became gendered, equated with the manly virtues of independence and incorruptibility. Susceptibility to tyranny, on the other hand, had feminine connotations.” Allan Greer, “The Queen is a Whore” in Veronica Strong Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, editors, *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women’s History* 3rd edition, (Toronto: Oxford, 1997), 93.

Franca Iacovetta and Linda Kealey point out that the proponents of gender history “tend to stress the social construction of identities, the multiplicity of meanings and the formation of experience through discourse.” 55 Two studies of political life in early nineteenth century Canada investigate the connection between the social construction of identity, political power and gender discourse. Allan Greer’s investigation of the 1837 rebellion in Lower Canada brings to light a gendered political language that invariably linked the crossing of gendered boundaries with political corruption, tyranny and sexual disorder. 56 In a similar vein, Cecilia Morgan’s discussion of Reformers in pre-Confederation Upper Canada reveals that political dissenters employed a gendered discourse to identify a cruel and capricious government as “the logical outcome, when femininity was allied with monarchical power.” 57 Each work stresses how language works to differentiate appropriate gender roles. For example, masculine and public is clearly identified as separate from feminine and domestic. The respective studies of both Greer and Morgan illustrate that in early 19th century Canada, a discourse that connected public, political and female was expressed as a dangerous combination. Their work emphasizes the argument that Joan Wallach Scott makes: “the political is personal” and “political ideas set the boundaries of public discourse and of all aspects of life, even those excluded from participation in politics are defined by them.” 58 Both Joan Wallach Scott and Mary S. Hartman’s analysis underscore the role of gender as “the most salient component of identity” and serves to buttress Alan Greer and Cecilia Morgan’s conclusions regarding the gendered nature of political discourse. 59 Expanding on these issues of gender, politics and power, my work rests upon the premise that a broader historical picture emerges through the use of biography as micro-history. Thus, “political


58 Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, 24.

59 Hartman, The Household, 159.
questions’ about women’s public role” and the “broader contours of the social landscape” are illuminated through an examination of the lives of these four political wives. Through their real lived experience, we can see the interconnection between the construction of gender identity, and social and political power among political elites in late 19th century Canada.

Since gender analysis is rooted in feminist-inspired scholarship, this thesis delves into feminist historiography to explore how women developed the capacity to pursue choices and strategies to access political power from within a paradigm of separate spheres. To date, the riddle of patriarchy remains an analytical puzzle. Historians have been unable to develop a universal system of theoretical analysis to explain the apparently persistent “cross-societal condition of women’s subordination to men.” Interdisciplinary approaches also have failed to devise a universal explanation for this phenomenon and the notion that sexual hierarchy is fixed in a binary system of public (male) and private


61 As Franca Iacovetta and Linda Kealey have observed, “Other historians working in the area of gender history…about power and identity….have taken up the challenge of textuality and representation posed by theories regarding the literary and linguistic production of meaning.” Iacovetta and Kealey, “Women’s History, Gender History and Debating Dichotomies”, 227.

62 For further discussion regarding the debate on the distinction and linkages between women’s history and gender history, see Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde who argue in favour of a continuing relationship between women’s history and gender history, “we thus, want to emphasize explicitly that for us gender history is a deepening of the analysis already carried out by women’s history, not a less political more fashionable diversion.” Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, editors, Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women’s History (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992): xix-xx See also Kathryn McPherson, Cecilia Morgan and Nancy Forestell, who have observed “the links between the two [women’s history and gender history]…[and argued that] their relationship has often appeared much more symbiotic to us than the fundamental oppositions posited by some feminists.” McPherson, Morgan and Forestell, Gendered Pasts, 11. Additonally Franca Iacovetta and Linda Kealey have determined that “feminist perspectives continue to inform gender studies in Canada.” Iacovetta and Kealey, “Women’s History, Gender History”, 224.

63 As Hartman has pointed out, “Scholars calling for more refined theoretical approaches also urged the abandonment of efforts to explain the evidently constant, cross-societal condition of women’s subordination to men, advising researchers to focus instead upon the change that has ever been at the heart of historical research.” Hartman, The Household, 258. See also Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis” American Historical Review 91, No.5 (December 1986): 53-75.
(female) spheres is the subject of continuing historical debate. Indeed, the concept of separate spheres has become what Hartman describes as an “interpretive divide.”

A considerable feminist historiography has developed since Barbara Welter’s essay “Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” identified separate spheres ideology as a vehicle for female oppression. It identifies the private/domestic sphere as the locus for women being “held hostage in the home.” This notion of a strict divide between public/male and private/female spheres has been the subject of considerable debate among feminist historians. For example, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall contend that by the mid-nineteenth century, English women “found a world more rigidly divided into separate spheres.” Mary P. Ryan’s study of the middle-class family in late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century Oneida County, New York reaches a similar conclusion that:

the importance of this sexual segregation cannot be overemphasized. On the one hand as historians of women have pointed out, isolation in a single common sphere could nurture a self-conscious female identity and foster strong loyalties among women. …On the other hand, sex segregation tended to mire women in a world that was remote from the public where men continued to wield power. The women of the nineteenth century, in other words were caught in the contradictions of the problematic notion of ‘separate but equal.’

Joan Kelly, however, has determined that the social reality was “much more complex” than a simple binary divide of public and private life. Further to Kelly’s position, Marjorie Griffin Cohen’s examination of women’s labour in nineteenth century Ontario supports the argument of economic and social connectedness between public/private

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64 Hartman, The Household, 258.
66 Davidoff and Hall, Family Fortunes, 453.
boundaries. Additionally, the work of Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby illustrates that public/private boundaries were permeable and the apparent separateness is actually social and economic connectedness. More recently Hartman concludes that, “the Victorian ideology of separate spheres continues to persuade far too many people that the so-called gender divide widened and hardened in the early industrial era” when the evidence reveals a progressive overlap of men’s and women’s lives. In contrast, Carroll Smith Rosenberg concludes that while the evidence points to a “vision of new power and autonomy for women, nevertheless, no permanent restructuring of male/female power relations resulted.”

While some feminist historians identify separate spheres ideology as a vehicle for oppression, others have developed a more positive interpretation of a binary social system within which women “elevated their own status.” Carroll Smith Rosenberg for example, argues that although gender boundaries remained intact, the employment of separate spheres analysis reveals the ways in which homo-social relationships created a female world of agency that protected and promoted women’s mutual interests.

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69 As Marjorie Griffin Cohen has argued women played a part in the family economy, and because of female subsistence production, employers “need not concern themselves with providing a wage that would maintain the worker and his family.” Marjorie Griffin Cohen, *Women’s Work: Markets and Economic Development in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 38.

70 As Dorothy O Helly and Susan M Reverby have observed, “Feminist scholarship has focused on examining the very creation of this dichotomy and the role gender plays in concealing the permeability of the boundaries.” Dorothy O Helly and Susan M Reverby, editors, *Gendered domains: rethinking public and private in women’s history: essays from the 7th Berkshire Conference on the History of Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 9.


74 As Smith Rosenberg, has contended, “A specifically female world did indeed develop…highly integrated women’s networks.” Smith Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 61.
Rosenberg contends that rather than being constricted by separate spheres discourse, “women transposed the ‘cult of true womanhood’ to suit their needs.”

Historians continue to debate whether separate spheres ideology severely limited feminine participation in public life. Despite this, it continues to be a useful analytical tool. As Linda Kerber maintains, separate spheres ideology has “enabled historians to move the history of women out of the realm of the trivial and anecdotal into the realm of analytical social history.” Cecilia Morgan takes a similar position that separate spheres ideology has functioned as a usable strategy enabling serious historical analysis. All the same, Ava Baron makes the case that historians need to “move beyond dichotomies of public and private spheres…to develop gender analysis in ways that allow for historical specificity of gender identity while uncovering the ways gender assumptions are incorporated into social institutions and practices.” However, rather than scrap one analytical strategy for another, studies of women that incorporate separate spheres are complementary to gender analysis. Karen Dubinsky and Lynn Marks maintain that there is “no need to choose between the two fields …gender is not a universal eternal opposition between male and female but rather a set of social norms about the meanings of maleness and femaleness and the division of labour.” As Katherine Lynch suggests, “when we sever the equivalence sometimes drawn between public life and formal politics and expand our notion of the public to include life in civil society, links between women’s public and private roles become more obvious and the family’s status as a

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75 Smith Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 173; As Kerber has pointed out “Welter’s ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ was interpreted by Lerner as a vehicle by which middle-class women elevated their own status.” Linda Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Women’s Place”, 12.

76 Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Women’s Place”, 9-37.


public and private institution becomes clearer.” 80 Karen Offen makes a similar determination, “that a broader definition of what comprises ‘politics’ must be evolved to include women’s informal and formal attempts to influence the state.”81

The lives of the women in this work will illustrate that while they enjoyed an elevated social status, separate spheres ideology was a mitigating factor that provided them with resources to participate in the public sphere.82 As Linda Kealey argues, late nineteenth century discourse supported

the conviction that woman’s special role as mother gives her the duty and the right to participate in the public sphere. It is not her position as wife that qualifies her for the task of reform, but the special nurturing qualities which are common to all women, married or not. In some sense maternal feminism de-emphasizes or subordinates personal autonomy in favour of a (relatively) wider social role.83

Moreover, a discourse was developing among late nineteenth century Canadian feminists that claimed “perfected womanhood would participate in the public sphere of politics and employment as well as in the private sphere of home and family.”84

It is the real lived experience of the four political wives in this study that substantiates Carl Degler’s argument that the ideological framework of separate spheres could function as a vehicle for women to make an impact on the public sphere.85 Writing a decade


82 As Veronica Strong Boag has observed “Women themselves, like virtually everyone in Canadian society, identified their sex with a maternal role [that]…could serve as a buttress against all the destabilizing elements in Canada.” Veronica Strong Boag, “‘Ever a Crusader’: Nellie McClung” in Veronica Strong Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, editors, Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women’s History 3rd Edition (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 274.


85 As Carl N. Degler has concluded, “If women were to be effective guardians of the home and its morality, then they might well find it necessary to act in the world in order to protect the home and its preserve of
before Degler, Harold Macmillan (former British Prime Minister, 1957-1963), emphasized that although women’s role in political life has been generally hidden by its classification as private, nevertheless some elite women have influenced political life.\textsuperscript{86} Joan Perkin takes a similar view of the role of elite women, pointing out that “although women did not sit in Parliament, they expected to exert direct influence over their friends who did and gain patronage for their relatives, friends and protégés.”\textsuperscript{87} In the same way, Gail Campbell’s study of disenfranchised women in mid-nineteenth century New Brunswick emphasizes that “women, like men, were involved in creating the political culture of their society.”\textsuperscript{88} In her centennial history of the National Council of Women of Canada, N.E.S. Griffiths points out that while there existed “obvious discrimination against women…in their exclusion from direct political power and in the continuing attempts to circumscribe their employment world to the home;” nevertheless, she describes separate spheres ideology as the “pernicious half-truth [that fails to recognize] the ways in which women have always had a public voice through their work for the social and cultural communities in which they lived.”\textsuperscript{89} Separate spheres ideology and maternal feminism are irrevocably linked in the lives of the women in this study and “their conception of female authority.”\textsuperscript{90}

Beverley Boutilier and Veronica Strong Boag have explored the links between maternal feminism and separate spheres ideology. Boutilier’s examination of the creation of the Victorian Order of Nurses in 1897 looks at a dichotomous feminist ideology in which

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\textsuperscript{86} Harold Macmillan points to many historical examples of the political influence of elite women that shows “the effective power of women in politics did not depend on their formal admission to political rights.” Harold Macmillan, \textit{The Past Masters: Politics and Politicians} (London: Macmillan, 1975), 210.


\textsuperscript{89} Griffiths, \textit{The splendid vision}, 1.

\textsuperscript{90} Boutilier, “Organized Women,” 2.
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equal rights feminism is “carefully distinguished” from maternal feminism that is
grounded in an essentialist discourse of sexual difference based solely on biology.91
Boutilier concludes that maternal feminism “founded upon women’s strong identification
with the private sphere of domesticity … shaped [their] political strategy.”92 Similarly,
Veronica Strong Boag describes maternal feminism as an instrument of authority that
substantiated women’s expectation “for equal participation in every aspect of community
life.”93 Examining the ideological dichotomy between maternal feminist and equal rights
feminists, Wendy Mitchinson argues that maternal feminists were “social feminists, not
feminists” but their maternal feminist discourse “could and did encompass the women’s
rights movement.”94 Ruth Roach Pierson picks up the discussion on this discursive
dichotomy that “places women in opposition to other women” and proceeds to dismantle
the perception of an ideological divide between equal rights and maternal feminists,
arguing that to suggest “that true feminists would not have considered themselves with
motherhood or addressed themselves to women as mothers… is, to say the least, an
ahistorical expectation.”95 Ernest Forbes, focusing on male/female power relations
suggests that maternal feminism was simply a stratagem to “assuage the fears of …anti-
suffragists” and argues further that it is a mistake to miscalculate “the extent to which
gender oppression united and actualized organized women at the turn of the century.”96
Similarly, Ellen Dubois charges that historians have underestimated “the impact of the

dominant male culture on the lives of women” and the “real importance of the concept of women’s culture.”

My work picks up the connection between gender analysis and feminist historiography. The women in this study represent a privileged class in which their role in society and their exclusion from political life was presumably separated by sharply delineated lines of gender demarcation. Nevertheless, as Griffiths points out, women were joining together “in a wide variety of associations, dedicated to influencing the course of public policy.”

As the following chapters will show, the four political wives analyzed here were able to influence Canadian political culture by joining together and paying allegiance to contemporary notions of separate spheres ideology.

This work has a dual purpose to appraise and provide insight into late nineteenth century Canadian political culture and gender ideology. First it is an appraisal of the role of four political wives in the existing and ongoing creation of the political and social milieu in late nineteenth century Ottawa. Secondly, it provides new insights into Canadian social and political history and whether gender boundaries were definitively drawn and negotiated within an ideological concept of separate spheres.

This study is inspired by and builds upon the work of Gail Cuthbert Brandt’s sparkling analysis of the significant role of women in the Charlottetown Confederation conference. Following Eric Hobsbawm’s lead that directs, “the primary task of the historian is to pursue the central issue of power, in all its dimensions [including how it] is constructed, maintained and exercised,” it illuminates the experiences and special roles of four political wives to determine whether these particular women acted as political power

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98 Griffiths, The Splendid Vision, 20; Additionally, Jeff McNairn discusses the development of women’s organizations such as the WCTU and the NCWC and concludes that these sorts of organizations created, “A new social space – potentially political but independent of the state – developed with its own norms and sociability.” Jeff McNairn, The capacity to judge: public opinion and deliberative democracy in Upper Canada, 1791-1854 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 114.
brokers and how they utilized domestic ideology to move beyond ideological concepts of separate spheres while retaining their gender identity as genteel bourgeois ladies at the apex of political culture. 99

Before proceeding to this discussion, the opening chapter provides an overview of the emblematic position of political wives as symbols of nationalism, imperialism and the progress of civilization. In the process, it addresses the role of political wives as creators and bearers of status, signifiers of caste and an indication of the quality of a man’s moral ability to govern. What becomes evident are the ways that the informal world of political culture became formalized during a period that experienced a confluence of factors in the development of a Canadian national identity.

Chapter Two explores the micro-politics of social life in which women played a critical part in the construction and consolidation of political culture. By managing the business of sociability, political wives advanced and cemented their husbands’ preeminent position in the political hierarchy, influenced political alliances and emphasized national and imperial identity. The chapter focuses on the importance of the mutually supportive friendships that developed among women at the summit of political culture. It interrogates the ways that they negotiated and contested the public/private paradigm that informed their lives. At the core of this discussion is an examination of how these women related to political culture with and for their husbands and the ways that their friendships both allowed and encouraged political activity through evolving concepts of womanhood.

Chapter Three examines the gendered interrelation between political culture and social reform. In the process, it adds a new dimension to existing scholarship regarding the ability of political wives to influence public policy in late nineteenth century Canada. The evidence presented here demonstrates how Lady Aberdeen, as the wife of the Governor General, was able to reposition the role of the political wife as cultural agent. She did this

by showing women how to navigate popular discourse and entrenched gender ideologies in order to achieve political influence at a time when presumably, women had no public voice or political presence in Canada. Through an examination of primary and secondary literature, this chapter addresses the variety of ways that Lady Aberdeen was able to effectively capitalize on a broadening discourse of what constituted a respectable public presence for women, while utilizing separate spheres and maternalist ideology to achieve support for her initiatives. Her legacy of remarkable achievement has been to provoke politically formalized and sustainable social reforms.

Chapter Four provides insight into how some measure of patriarchal influence was evident to these women, while other aspects of it were not. Here the focus is on what David Nasaw emphasizes as the responsibility of the historian who utilizes biography as historical examination to “look beyond the subject’s gaze and achievements to the meanings and possibilities they did not recognize.” In this chapter and the following one a discussion of the different aspects of women’s property rights and the franchise in Quebec and the rest of Canada reveals a real decline in women’s situation. What becomes apparent is the manner in which nineteenth century formal and informal, legal and social structures serve to buttress patriarchy, are manifested continually and effectively subordinate women to men even in apparently progressive social systems.

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100 Some classes of women did enjoy a limited franchise: As Catherine L. Cleverdon has observed, “Political equality was ordinarily first attained at the local level. By 1900 many provinces permitted women to vote for school trustees and for municipal officials, although these privileges were often restricted to unmarried women” For example: “Although evidence exists that women of Nova Scotia were entitled to vote and even to hold office down to 1851, there is no record that they ever took advantage of their privileges….a vote was passed in 1887...to secure the right of unmarried women with property to vote in municipal elections.” (158-9) In Quebec, 1888: “widows and spinsters possessing property were granted the right to vote on municipal by-laws creating debt. Full municipal and school voting privileges were extended to the same class of women by a general act of 1892.” Catherine L. Cleverdon, Woman Suffrage in Canada: The Start of Liberation, 1900-20, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 5. 158-9, 219. Additionally, Chris Clarkson has summarized efforts to permit women to vote: “in order to win support for the measure, supporters made a telling concession, they reformulated the proposal to permit only unmarried women to vote…while the amendment ultimately carried, making single and widowed women in British Columbia the first in the Dominion to be enfranchised at the municipal level, it passed only on the deciding vote of the speaker. The municipal suffrage amendment reveals a legislature divided in its sympathies for women’s rights campaigns of the 1870s” Chris Clarkson, Domestic Reforms: Political Visions and Family Regulation in British Columbia, 1862-1940 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), 51.

101 Nasaw, “Historians and Biography"
Included in chapter Four is a discussion of how the fetishization of masculinity was counterpoised to an ideology of women’s natural position that functioned to support late Victorian patriarchy. At the same time, it was the perception of a ‘woman’s age’ that suggested greater opportunities for women. Notwithstanding long-term trends, the marriage of Matilda Ridout Edgar functions as a micro history that reveals the complicated process of social change, how change is comprised out of continuity and how it relates to women’s evolving political activities and transforming identities.

Chapter Five argues that although Zoë Lafontaine Laurier’s supportive role in her marriage reflects the larger power relations and structural constraints of late nineteenth century gender ideology, over time, her womanly sense of interdependence and service to a man presented the eventual path to her own political influence. Lady Laurier’s life illustrates what Jo Margadant describes as the “rich potential” of individual biography for “exploring changes over the course of the nineteenth century in the possibility of a feminine presence in public life.”102 Her marriage illuminates the informal and the legal constructs regarding the sexual double standard, divorce and the larger power relations and structural constraints of late nineteenth century marital relations and emphasizes the extent of “gender oppression” that Ernest Forbes asserts was the basis for maternalist discourse.103 This chapter employs a gendered analysis to examine how structures of power were contested and supported in relation to societal values, and determines that liberal homogeneous ideology had a direct impact on women’s self concept of their interdependent position and maternalist identity. It was an interdependence that gave them agency.

In Chapter Six, the lives of Lady Thompson and Lady Aberdeen illustrate the ways that separate spheres ideology was on an increasingly convergent trajectory of gender roles in late nineteenth century Canadian political culture. As the exploration of their private lives brings to light, gender boundaries were not rigidly enforced. Just how flexible were the

102 Margadant, “Constructing Selves in Historical Perspective,” 1-33.

boundaries depended on the manner of approach. This is evident in an examination of the ways that Lady Thompson and Lady Aberdeen used separate spheres ideology effectively as a vehicle to influence the public sphere. Their maternal feminist approach demonstrates the points of conflict and agreement in gender identity and the nuanced process of social change that validated female agency while continuing to pay homage to sexual hierarchy. Succinctly put, the synergistic friendship that developed between Ladies Thompson and Aberdeen enabled them to productively utilize late nineteenth concepts of womanhood to influence the careers of two Prime Ministers of Canada. What emerges in the conclusion is that these four women, while having no direct authority in political decision making, made an impact on political culture not by breaking down the gendered boundaries but by working within them, by reverencing accepted gender roles and by sometimes subtly skirting accepted paradigms to achieve a measure of political influence.
Chapter One
Public Processions and Separate Spheres:
The Symbolic Role of Women in Political Culture
as Purveyors of National Identity and Imperial Civilization

Beauty is an amazingly compelling force and yields a more powerful influence than fear.¹

In Canada the ceremonial opening of parliament is steeped in British tradition, symbolically reinforcing ideological concepts of political order and stability that serve to underscore the historic connection to the mother country.² John G. Bourinot, Clerk of the House of Commons of Canada described the ceremonial procedure in 1892:

At the opening of a new parliament…the Senators assemble in their chambers at the hour appointed…and after prayers, the Speaker of the Senate presents to the House the usual communication from the Governor General informing them of the hour when he will proceed to open the session.

As soon as His Excellency is seated in the chair on the throne [of the Senate Chamber], the Speaker will command the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod to proceed to the House of Commons and ask their attendance in the Senate chamber. Accordingly, he presents himself at the door of the House of Commons and strikes it three times with his rod. He is at once admitted by a Sergeant-at-arms and advances up the middle of the House, where he makes three obeisances [sic], and says in English and French: “Gentlemen (or Mister Speaker), His Excellency the Governor General desires the immediate attendance of this honorable House in the Senate Chamber. The Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod then retires without turning his back upon the House, and still making the customary obeisances. The House will then at once proceed to the Senate” led by the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod to hear the speech from the Throne.³

¹ Madge Macbeth, The Land of Afternoon (Ottawa: Laurentian Press Syndicate, 1924), 55.

² As Cross has observed “The colonial political structure is still apparent in Canada’s governance. The Governor General and the provincial Lieutenant Governors are recognizable descendants of the colonial administrator. The federal Senate like its colonial predecessor, the Legislative Council, is an appointed body with legislative functions. The House of Commons mirrors the former House of Assembly. The structure remains up to the head of state the English monarch.” Michael S. Cross, The Morning Star of Memory: A Biography of Robert Baldwin (Toronto: Oxford Press, 2012), 5.

This ceremony remains essentially unchanged except for some aspects of the role of the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod that have evolved over time. The position dates back to the English King Edward III, when in 1348, the King founded the Knights’ “Order of the Garter.” It was the duty of the Gentleman of the Black Rod to carry a black rod while leading the group, as they moved from room to room. This ceremonial role reflects the British origin of the Canadian parliamentary system where “there has been an Usher of the Black Rod since 1791.” The traditional ceremonial Windsor Court dress of the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod - consisting of a long coat, waist coat, winged collar, barristers bib, white gloves, wig and gown- has given way to more modern formal Court dress of white tie, frockcoat and white gloves. In 1997, tradition was adapted further when the first woman, Mary C. McLaren, was appointed to the position, which prompted an alteration of the title to the gender-neutral term, Usher of the Black Rod. These adaptations illustrate that while the ceremonial opening of parliament is steeped in tradition, nevertheless, the ‘context, performance and meaning of ritual’ is continually under construction in response to the changing context of the cohesive power of ceremony and display.

This Chapter begins by examining the meaning of women’s role in the late nineteenth century ceremonial opening of parliament in Ottawa, which is followed by an investigation of the political role of gender in national identity. From there, it assesses the ways that political wives acted as signifiers of political status, and finally, focuses on the gendered nature of the domestic ideal and its nuanced influence on political

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5 Canadian Heritage/Government of Canada.

6 ibid

advancement. Canadian historiography has largely neglected to examine the role of women in the ceremonial aspects of political culture in Canada. While the ceremonial role of women in political pageantry may be dismissed by some as signifiers of male status and nothing more, this chapter considers the influential role of women as ‘window dressing’ in the serious business of politics and national identity, and argues that political wives were a vital component in reinforcing ideological concepts of political order and stability as well as national identity and imperial connection. In twenty-first century terms, political wives performed a public relations role. As Elizabeth Kirkland maintains, “In Ottawa women were part of the spectacle, part of the performance of politics” and “crucial to the ceremony and pageantry that surrounded government.” Their performance was essentially a ‘branding’ of the image of Canadian nationalism and British imperialism as proof of the appropriateness of an Anglo-Saxon civilizing stewardship of the Globe.

Opening of Parliament: Pageantry, Allegory and Propaganda

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the opening ceremonies of the Canadian parliament became an increasingly “brilliant and picturesque” affair that reflects the growing influence of women on political culture. Female participation in political ceremony symbolized a new nationalist discourse that celebrated an ideology of Canadian national identity and its imperial link to a greater British civilization. Ideology, as Mary Poovey explains, “is given concrete form in the practices and social institutions that govern people’s social relations.” The ceremonial presence of women in Canadian political life provided concrete form in the ongoing construction of Canadian

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9 Ottawa Evening Journal 18 April 1895, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 24. See also James D. Edgar, Canada and Its Capital with Sketches of Political and Social Life in Ottawa (Toronto: Morang, 1898), 114.

10 As Kirkland has suggested, “As a new country, the offspring of one of the grandest imperial ventures to date, Canada was in the early stages of national self-definition at the turn of the century.” Elizabeth Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 208.

national identity. At the time, hegemonic discourse was socially and politically constructed to support a Canadian nationalism that was linked to “the maintenance of the imperial connection.” Political ceremonial display provided a clear visual language designed “to invent and celebrate a new nationality” that maintained a British Canadian identity. H.V. Nelles’ study of the Quebec tercentenary of 1908 indicates that the invention of a Canadian national identity continued to be a key factor in social and political ritual in the early decades of the twentieth century. “The point” that Nelles makes, “is not that politics intruded into the master plan but rather that festivals are politics.” In the course of Quebec’s 1908 tercentennial celebrations, “somehow a civic festival had taken on martial and imperial overtones. By a curious logic, the founding of a city in the 17th century had become connected …to a celebration of imperialist nationalism.” In its own way, women’s significant role in the creation of a “national identity” effectively “mediated and reinforced imperial identity” through the ceremonial opening of Parliament in British North America at the close of the nineteenth century.

Celebrated Canadian economist and humourist, Stephen Leacock, defined the feeling of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that political pageantry served to inspire and reinforce. “Imperialism,” he wrote, “means but the realization of a greater Canada, the recognition of a wider citizenship.” The ornamental splendor and dignified grandeur of political ceremony served to emphasize a discourse that linked Canadian

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12 Kevin Colclough, “Imperial Nationalism: Nationalism and the Empire in late nineteenth century Scotland and British Canada” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2006), 152.

13 H.V. Nelles, The art of nation-building: pageantry and spectacle at Quebec's tercentenary (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 16.


15 Nelles, The art of nation-building, 11-12.

16 Colclough, “Imperial Nationalism”, 2.

17 Jeffrey Keshen and Suzanne Morton, Material Memory: Documents in Post Confederation History (Don Mills: Addison Wesley 1998), 113. Additionally, Robbins who has argued that the British connection was for many Canadians a “unifying response in an environment which was still fraught with uncertainty.” Keith Robbins, Great Britain: Identities, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness (London: Longman, 1997), 213.
unity with an ideology of a greater Britain by “exploiting pageantry as [nationalist and imperialist] propaganda.”\textsuperscript{18} It was a hegemonic Canadian nationalism that was tied to a concept of British Diaspora and dates from the arrival of Governor John Simcoe, “who told the members of the First Assembly in 1792 that they were ‘singularly blessed…with a constitution which has stood the test of experience and is the very image and transcript of that of Great Britain.’”\textsuperscript{19} A century later, Principal George Grant of Queen’s University illuminated this sentiment in an address to the Imperial Federation League of Canada in which he described the emotive aspect of Canada’s place as part of a ‘greater Britain.’ “We are Britons,” he said. “We are the Canadian subjects of Her Majesty.”\textsuperscript{20} Sir John A. Macdonald expressed a similar sentiment when he said, during the election campaign of 1891, “as for me, my course is clear, a British subject I was born – a British subject I will die.”\textsuperscript{21} The sentiments of Leacock, Grant and Macdonald support what Phillip Buckner describes as a tendency for Canadians, during the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, “to define themselves as either British or Canadian without much distinction.”\textsuperscript{22}

During this period, the political challenge was to develop what Nelles has described as a “new sense of Canadian citizenship… that would transcend national antagonisms born of prejudice and thereby lead in the creation of an imagined community. A political


\textsuperscript{19} S. J. R. Noel, Patrons Clients, Brokers: Ontario Society and Politics, 1791-1896 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 45-46.

\textsuperscript{20} Imperial Federation League of Canada –report of the first meeting, 50, as cited in Colcough, “Imperial Nationalism”, 194.

\textsuperscript{21} Joseph Schull, Laurier: The First Canadian (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965), 250.

\textsuperscript{22} As Phillip Buckner has explained, “Those who self consciously defined themselves as British formed a majority of the population and held a disproportionate share of economic and political power, it makes sense to see Canada as essentially British that included a number of ethnic minorities rather than…a multicultural mosaic…even into the 1950s.” Phillip Buckner, editor, Canada and the British Empire (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2-5.
creation, the country, might thereby creep towards social cohesion, or simply a nation.”\textsuperscript{23}

In the attainment of this goal, strictly prescribed ritualized ceremony was splendid theatre. It was designed to encourage a united sense of Canadian identity and provide constructive evidence of a belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority to other races, manifested in British traditions and principles and united under Imperial federation. As Michael Bliss explains, during this period the “tide of emotional Imperialism” was rising in Canada.\textsuperscript{24}

In his speeches and writing, James Edgar, Liberal Member of Parliament and Speaker of the House of Commons (1896-1898) rationalized Monarchy’s symbolic role to unite Canadian nationalism with British imperialism. He wrote, “Canadians are loyal, just as Englishmen to Queen and Parliament. Parliament is the one which makes our laws, the Parliament of Canada.”\textsuperscript{25} Canadian nationalism then was tied to a notion of a greater Britain that was fixed to a racial rather than a geographic patriotism. As Carl Berger explains, “Imperialism was one form of Canadian nationalism.”\textsuperscript{26}

Cecil Rhodes the ardent imperialist and English born founder of Rhodesia, (now Zimbabwe) succinctly expressed this notion of Anglo-Saxon racial unity and the implicit justification for a British imperial stewardship of global civilization. “We are,” he told his audience, “the first race in the world and the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for the human race.”\textsuperscript{27} At the same time, British Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain who was “appointed to the colonial office in 1895, personified the imperial spirit” that

\textsuperscript{23} Nelles, \textit{The Art of Nation Building}, 232; Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 208.

\textsuperscript{24} Michael Bliss, \textit{Right Honorable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 44.

\textsuperscript{25} James D. Edgar, “Loyalty an Address delivered to the Toronto Young Men’s Club (Toronto, 1885) as cited in Colclough, ‘Imperial Nationalism’, 194.


\textsuperscript{27} Niall Ferguson, \textit{Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World} (London: Penguin, 2003), 227; Benedict Anderson has argued that “Colonial racism was a major element in the conception of Empire…by generalizing the innate inherited superiority…conveying the idea that if, say English Lords were naturally superior to other Englishmen, no matter: these other Englishmen were no less superior to the subjected natives.” Benedict Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism} (London: Verso, 2006. Rev. edition), 150.
was developing in late Victorian English Canada. Speaking in Toronto, he described, “the greatness and importance of the distinction reserved for the Anglo-Saxon race” as the foundation of the Empire and for many the foundation of Canadian nationalism.

This ideology of British racial superiority served to undermine any notion of a French/English cultural and political duality as the foundation of Canadian nationality. Anglo-Canadian imperialist sentiment effectively set French Canadians apart as “other.” The effect was to reinforce the cultural/nationalist divide, or what Lord Durham had described fifty years earlier as “two nations warring in the bosom of a single state...a struggle not of principles but of races.” Whether the Quebec Act of 1774 was simply an expedient measure to guarantee French Canadian loyalty against the looming threat of revolution in the thirteen colonies or a recognition that the French Roman Catholic population was too numerous to assimilate or an act of benevolent respect for a conquered people, it remains the primary example of a political will to create a bilingual, bicultural colony in British North America. In response to Lord Durham’s Report, the

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29 Ferguson, Empire, 221; See also: Paul W. Bennett and Cornelius J. Jaenen, Emerging Identities: Selected Problems in the Interpretations of Canadian History (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 1986), 303; Kevin Colclough has taken a similar position, suggesting that “The Imperial connection was seen as vital to the future existence and growth of Canada...without it Canada would quickly fall under the control of the United States.” Colclough, “Imperial Nationalism”, 8.

30 As Ian Radforth has argued, “National identity of course was no straight forward matter...Local identities were strong and the idea of a confederated state was as yet ill-defined. Old ties to France, England, Scotland and Wales fractured the population...People wondered whether a Canadian national identity was possible in a society where French Canadians had a sense of nationality that was distinct, and in many ways at odds with, the national sentiment then stirring among English Canadians. Everyone...was supposed to be proudly British, in the sense of being part of a globe encircling empire and linked by a sovereign who demanded allegiance but not cultural conformity.” Radforth, Royal Spectacle, 15.


32 As Bennett and. Jaenen have summarized, The Quebec Act 1774 was “an unprecedented policy in British colonial rule” that guaranteed that “the Province of Quebec may have hold and enjoy the free exercise of the religion of the Church of Rome...established a Quebec House of Assembly, guaranteed French language; Bishop Briand, (1775) on “the recent favours which he (King George III) has bestowed upon us in returning to us the use of our laws, the free exercise of our religion, and allowing us to participate in all the privileges and advantages of British subjects.” Bennet and Jaenen, Emerging Identities, 119-123.
merging of Upper and Lower Canada into the Province of Canada, was intended to facilitate the establishment of a “decidedly English legislature” and the “ascendancy” of an “English population.”

Despite Durham’s gloomy predictions for the “deadly animosity” that “precluded any possibility for bicultural cooperation,” efforts to reconcile the two European founding peoples of British North America into one cooperative bilingual, bicultural entity constitutes a notable aspect of the history of Canada. The Baldwin/Lafontaine political alliance of the 1840s proved that bicultural cooperation was not only possible it was the only conceivable way forward. Together Upper and Lower Canadian reformers, Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, constructed a political alliance that presented a bicultural model for responsible government. The Baldwin/Lafontaine ministry was the exemplar for the Macdonald/Cartier alliance, about which Richard Gwyn persuasively makes the case that without the Macdonald/Cartier political alliance “there would have been no Confederation.”

The federal election of 1891 was politically and historically significant in the struggle to create a national identity that encompassed both European founding nations of British North America. As leader of the Liberal party, and the first French Canadian, Roman Catholic politician to seek to defeat Sir John A. Macdonald and become Prime Minister of Canada, Laurier’s public statements championed a Canadian bicultural nationalism. “There can be more than one race,” he wrote, “but only one nation.” Privately, however, he feared that “the race and religion question was so toxic” that it would doom the Liberal party under his leadership. “I know that I have no aptitude for it,” he wrote, “and I have a sad apprehension that it must end in disaster.”

33 Bennett and Jaenen, Emerging Identities, 219.
34 Ibid.
35 Cross, Biography of Robert Baldwin, 5.
38 Pennington, The Destiny of Canada, 286. See Hector Charlesworth’s discussion of the anti French Roman Catholic prejudice against Laurier in Ontario: “On party grounds he [Laurier] doubted even more
The so-called “loyalty election” of 1891 demonstrates the political and nationalist undercurrent of concern among many politicians to avoid inciting a “race war” that posed a risk to the fragile bicultural duality of a Canadian nationality. In his recent study of the election of 1891, Christopher Pennington argues that the trade question surrounding the issue of economic reciprocity with the United States effectively deflected any focus on the race and religion issue. The Conservative party under Macdonald supported a continuation of the National Policy, which operated as a tariff on imports from the United States, intended to protect the emerging Canadian manufacturing sector. In contrast to the Conservative party’s position on trade, the Liberal party was promoting the dismantling of tariffs in favour of unrestricted economic reciprocity with the United States that was expected to benefit Canadian farmers. Pennington views this election as “perhaps one of the greatest achievements” of Macdonald’s career, since he artfully and effectively, “confined the debate to the trade question and by doing so, he prevented race and religion from becoming the main issue during the election of 1891. It is important to acknowledge here that despite the aggressive efforts of men such as McCarthy to create a Protestant English Canadian nationality as Pennington asserts, “Most Canadian political

than his Ontario friends, the wisdom of choosing a man who was too good a Catholic to suit Ontario and not submissive enough to suit Quebec.” Hector Charlesworth, The Canadian Scene: Sketches Political and Historical (Toronto, Macmillan, 1927), 83. Additionally as H. Blair Neatby has maintained, Laurier believed that “A French Canadian will not get cheerful support in the English provinces.” H. Blair Neatby, Laurier and a Liberal Quebec (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), 44.

39 Schull, Laurier, 198.

40 As Bennett and Jaenen have explained “the National Policy formally adopted by Macdonald and the Conservative Party in the election of 1878 was a system of tariff protection for Canada’s infant industries.” Bennett and Jaenen, Emerging Identities, 294. See also Christopher Pennington who has argued that for those opposed to a policy of tariff protection “at first glance it [unrestricted reciprocity] was a simple and appealing proposal: absolute free trade with the United States, and, as a consequence, …its achievement would be a dream come true for Canadian exporters, especially farmers, who still made up three quarters of the population.” Pennington, The Destiny of Canada, xii.

41 Pennington, The Destiny of Canada 287; Additionally, Kevin Colclough has argued “the influence of the United States in the history of Canada was vital to the discourse of imperial nationalists. The trade debates carried on in the 1880s and 1890s [that] surrounded the issue of Commercial Union with the United States or the pursuit of a preferential tariff…[and the maintenance of a protective tariff] the National Policy [that was] intended to stimulate native Canadian industry…British imperial nationalists saw the formation of the Commercial Union Club as a threat to the existence of the Canadian nation.” Colclough, “Imperial Nationalism”, 212-215.
leaders and the ordinary Canadians who supported them were determined to set aside racial and religious differences and fight for an inclusive national ideal.”

As a consequence of the ongoing racial/religious threat to the creation of a Canadian national unity, there were efforts to construct a British North American nationalism that proposed an organic Canadian identity shaped by the northern environment that united French and English Canadians into one nationality. Carl Berger describes the efforts to create a “homogeneous race” in which it “could be claimed that both British and French contained elements of the northern strain.” For example, toward the close of the 1860s, Nova Scotia essayist and businessman, Robert Grant Haliburton (1831-1901) devised a nationalist discourse that attempted to unite the French/English factions into one Canadian national identity through the invented myth of a northern race, a new nation shaped by the environment. In Haliburton’s view, it was the “cold Canadian climate” that effectively created the “healthy, hardy, virtuous, dominant race” of a bicultural Canada. He went further in his attempt to devise a Canadian identity that encompassed both French and English inhabitants of British North America. “By linking Canada to the British Monarchy and the British Monarchy to Normandy, through Victoria to William the Conqueror, Haliburton implied that both French and English Canadians were of the same origin.” In a similar tone, a century after Haliburton, historian W.L. Morton argued that an organic Canadian identity grew from this duality of cultures since “exposed to the same environment, both had to struggle with a severe climate and an

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42 Pennington, *The Destiny of Canada* 289. See also: Liberal party member John Haser’s letter to Lady Laurier, “I firmly believe that the day will never come in Canada on which the question of race will be of vital importance in the selection of the Liberal leader.” 24 November 1900, NAC, Laurier Papers, Volumes 809, 814 A-B.

43 As Carl Berger has observed, “Descriptions of Canadians as a northern people were particularly insistent upon including the French Canadians…’creating a homogeneous race’ sturdy in frame and stable in character…[in their] racial background….[there were] no vital differences…majority of French settlers…from Brittany and Normandy…Normans were descendent of Scandinavian invaders of the 9th and 10th centuries who had gone on to conquer Britain, it could be claimed that both British and French contained elements of the northern strain.” Berger, *The Sense of Power*, 131.

44 Robert Grant Haliburton, *The Men of the North and Their Place in History* (Montreal: J. Lovell, 1869), 2.

45 Colclough, “Imperial Nationalism”, 114.
often grueling terrain. Both in consequence were Canadian.” In the early twentieth century, Canadian historians Isabel and Oscar Skelton picked up on this thesis of bicultural national identity and “directed their talents towards creating a nation freed from British Imperialism….they acclaimed a country whose distinctive heritage was rooted in the cultural duality of its two principle linguistic groups.”

Nevertheless, despite attempts to define Canadian nationalism from a bicultural perspective, as Arthur Silver explains, “French Canadians saw Canada as a bilingual country; while English Canadians saw it as an English country with a bilingual province.” By the 1890s, it was becoming increasingly clear that the Riel debacle and the controversy surrounding Roman Catholic French language rights in Manitoba schools underscored the larger problem that a bicultural partnership of French and English Canada was not what some Anglo-Canadian nationalists had in mind. As J. R. Miller has argued, “it was evident that Canadians were not prepared to foster the expansion of this limited pragmatic recognition of French into a great principle of duality throughout the land.” Elizabeth Kirkland’s examination of elite women in Montreal during the years 1890-1914 underscores Anglo-Canadian hegemony where “questions of race would hardly have entered onto the radar of Montreal’s elite consciousness yet was one of the barriers that was hardest to breach.”

Dalton McCarthy, president of the Imperial Federation League, representing the climate of opinion among many English Canadians, dismissed any notion of a bilingual/bicultural Canada as a matter of race feeling, arguing that Canada is a Protestant country with an English Queen and it was Sir John A.


47 Terry Crowley, Marriage of minds: Isabel and Oscar Skelton reinventing Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 267.

48 Arthur Silver, The French-Canadian idea of Confederation, 1864-1900 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 244.

49 J.R. Miller, “Unity/Diversity: The Canadian Experience from Confederation to the First World War” in Francis and Smith, editors, Readings in Canadian History, 36; Arthur Silver has reasoned that, “as English Canadians became increasingly agitated, French Canadian leaders became frightened.” Silver, The French-Canadian idea of Confederation, 222.

Macdonald’s legacy to build a great nation within the British Empire.\textsuperscript{51} As Miller has shown, McCarthy charged that French nationalism was increasing, arguing that the French “in the province of Quebec are more French than when they were conquered by Wolfe upon the Plains of Abraham” and thus posed a “great danger to the Confederacy.”\textsuperscript{52} McCarthy’s vision of Canada as one of Protestant Anglo-Saxon conformity resonated with the escalating imperialist fervor in Canada. Moreover, Miller’s examination of anti-Catholic liberal hegemonic discourse reveals a tendency to regard Anglo-Protestantism as a force for liberty and progress while perceiving French Roman Catholic society as idolatrous and superstitious, exploiting the people and threatening the advancement of civilization. Anti-French Catholic attitude undermined any measure of tolerance for a vision of Canada as a bicultural nation.\textsuperscript{53} Even Lord Minto, who was Aberdeen’s successor as Governor General to Canada, and an ardent Imperialist, was resoundingly critical of the “absolute cold shoulder that the English give to the French.”\textsuperscript{54} That ‘cold shoulder’ was most evident in the opening ceremonies of parliament in Ottawa that underscored the notion of national, imperial Anglo-Saxon superiority.

In Canada, the Opening of Parliament, the performance of the Usher of the Black Rod, the Speech from the Throne and the State Dinner that followed strictly conformed to the British parliamentary model. In Ottawa, Canadians were commanded to adhere to standards of formal dress set by the example of the English Monarchical Court. An edict during the Marquis of Lorne’s tenure as Governor General (1878-1883) emphasizes the point. “In an effort to hold Canadians to the standard of the monarchical court” it


\textsuperscript{52} Miller, “Unity/Diversity”.

\textsuperscript{53} J.R. Miller, “Anti-Catholic Thought in Victorian Canada” Canadian Historical Review, Volume 66, No.4, December 1985: 474-494. Additionally, Joseph Schull has described the common Protestant view among Anglo-Protestant Canadians that Roman Catholicism reinforced “a blind, reckless, backward looking absolutism that seemed to inform the ultramontane mind.” Schull, Laurier, 328.

commanded “all ladies to appear in low cut dresses”\textsuperscript{55} When Isabel Skelton attended the Governor General’s Drawing Room before the Opening of Parliament in 1926 the Marquis of Lorne’s edict remained the rule. Isabel was as “astounded at the elaborate dress and military uniforms as she was at the rigid presentation by rank and seniority.”\textsuperscript{56} This was one way in which women’s role underscored the visual language of political ceremony. Since the “location and organization of difference are crucial to a culture’s self-representation and its distribution of power,” feminine participation in political ceremony created a vivid symbol of civilized society, thus emphasizing racial superiority and the imperial connection.\textsuperscript{57} Feminine formal attire effectively emphasized the civilized nature of the British Diaspora and signifies how “gender always underscored the project of imperialism…and played a crucial role in organizing ideas of race and civilization.”\textsuperscript{58} During these years the press reported the ceremonial opening of Parliament with “unprecedented immediacy and interest” focusing on the costumes, the feathers, the diamonds, the ornaments, the fabric and colour of the ladies’ dress.\textsuperscript{59} The Ottawa \textit{Evening Journal} describes the, “ladies on the floor of the House, [attired in] very beautiful gowns, [and] Galleries overflowing with sightseers filled with pretty women in light afternoon costumes but without hats.”\textsuperscript{60} Reports in the Montreal \textit{Gazette} refer to the “costumes of the ladies, as charming as usual.”\textsuperscript{61} The account from the Ottawa \textit{Citizen} indicates that the ceremonial opening of Parliament was a popular event that held much interest for


\textsuperscript{56} Crowley, \textit{Marriage of Minds}, 175.


\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Ottawa Evening Journal}, 18 April 1895, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Montreal Gazettte}, 19 April 1895, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.
women. “The seats on the floor were not sufficient for the number of ladies present, and the youngest ones were sitting on the steps leading to the raised part of the [Senate] Chamber. Gowns…extremely handsome and chic.”⁶² As contemporary political society columnist, Amaryllis, reported in her weekly column in Saturday Night magazine, ‘Society at the Capital’: “At the opening ceremonies of Parliament, over seven hundred people were present and the gowns and jewels were the finest ever seen at the Capital.”⁶³ Not simply about ladies fashions, these reports are more indicative that women participated, watched, reported on and read about parliamentary pageantry.

Bonnie Huskins’ work on the ceremonial space of women demonstrates that “women’s role as spectator must not be dismissed as merely neutral or passive.”⁶⁴ Political wives, dressed in their finest jewels and gowns, lent an air of ornamental romance and splendor to the pageantry. Feminine formal apparel viewed as an indicator of male achievement, rank and position served to emphasize the pyramid of status from vice regal representatives downward to political party backbenchers. Elegant carriages and clothes provided further visual confirmation of political and social status.⁶⁵ The regal gown and jewels of the wife of the Governor General clearly represented the pinnacle of social and political order in the Capital. The vice-regal consort was expected to display her superior status with the purposefully dazzling opulence of her attire. By the close of the nineteenth century, women played a key visual role in political ceremony in Canada that served to reinforce political and social hierarchy, as well as, hegemonic national and imperial ideology.

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⁶² Ottawa Citizen, 26 March 1897, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 25.

⁶³ Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” Saturday Night, 12 February 1898. As Gwyn reveals, Amaryllis was the nom de plume of the impecunious but influentially connected Ottawa socialite Agnes Scott, who also wrote a thrice weekly column in the Ottawa Free Press under the pseudonym ‘The Marchioness’ Gwyn, The Private Capital, 505.


⁶⁵ James D. Edgar, Canada and its Capital with Sketches of Political and Social Life in Ottawa (Toronto: Morang, 1898)
The late nineteenth century was a time of renegotiation of women’s position in society, of Canada’s identity as a nation, its place in the Imperial order and of the relationship between French and English Canada. For social and political historians, the opening of parliament provides a window into the political culture of late Victorian Canada and how it correlates with these themes. The ritual opening of Parliament was intended to be beautiful, symbolically reinforcing notions of political order and stability while provoking intensity of national and racial pride. Women’s participation not only enhanced the splendor of the event, it also revealed the ways that domestic ideology both supported and limited women’s participation in ceremonial political space. Huskins identifies “the more frequent inclusion of women in public processions in the late Victorian period” as an indicator that “the boundaries of separate spheres were changing.” Gail Campbell reaches a similar conclusion in her examination of women petitioners in mid-nineteenth century New Brunswick. Despite being disenfranchised, “women like men were involved in creating the political culture of their society.” They played a part in developing a concrete form of visual language in political and social institutions, national identity and imperial connection. Montreal socialite and political wife, Julia Parker Drummond, described the effect of this visual language. “Your opportunity for beautiful dressing and fine living” she said, “gives you at once a peculiar power to lead.”

The Political Role of Gender in National Identity

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66 As Kirkland has argued, “1890-1914 was a very exciting time of change for women…it signaled a time of significant growth both in the number of women involved in political activism as well as the degree of sophistication employed by these women and their organizations.” Kirkland, “Mothering Citizen”, 151.


The idealized position of women, expressed visually in political ceremonies, was a central theme in nationalistic claims of English superiority and accentuated the notion that women were vital to the future of the Empire.\textsuperscript{70} In her wide-ranging examination of race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest, Anne McClintock emphasizes that, “gender dynamics were fundamental to the securing and maintenance of the Imperial enterprise.”\textsuperscript{71} Consider for example the paradox of the gendered nature of political life and Queen Victoria as head of the Imperial state. As McKillop makes clear, “In Florence Deek’s view the ascension of Victoria to the English throne was the ‘fairest day’ since the ‘close of the matriarchate’ at the dawn of history…Hers was a reign governed by the principles of ‘domestic virtue’ learning, ‘nobility of purpose’ and ‘intelligent activity.’”\textsuperscript{72} Victoria’s role was twofold. First, the Queen was the living symbol of Britannia, a greater Britain to whom all members of the Imperial state paid allegiance. She was the living embodiment of the “one element of politics that remained beyond challenge for most English Canadians in the period … the monarchy.”\textsuperscript{73} Additionally, through her royal personage, she symbolized the elevation and glorification of the domestic ideal of Anglo-Saxon womanhood. As Longford points out, “She replenished not only the nurseries of Windsor but also the thrones of Europe.”\textsuperscript{74} As Ian Radforth explains, “Victoria’s service to the people, and their support for her, were reinforced by images of her as a good wife to an equally industrious husband and as a model mother to an ever growing family. She was the mother to the nation and the nation’s most potent and ubiquitous symbol.”\textsuperscript{75}

Queen Victoria’s representation of ideal domesticated womanhood set the apparent civilized treatment of British women apart in stark contrast to the position of women in


\textsuperscript{71} Ann McClintock, \textit{Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest} (New York: Routledge, 1995), 6-7.  

\textsuperscript{72} A. Brian McKillop, \textit{The Spinster and the Prophet: Florence Deeks and H.G. Wells and the Mystery of the Purloined Past} (Toronto: MacFarlane, Walter and Ross, 2000), 107.  


\textsuperscript{75} Radforth, \textit{Royal spectacle}, 24
other societies. Lurid accounts of the ubiquitous practice of suttee in India, wherein a woman’s supreme act of marital fidelity and female piety was self-immolation seemed tangible proof to the civilized mind of the degradation of Indian women and the degeneracy of Indian culture.\textsuperscript{76} Similarly, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall note that the “idealized position of women was a central theme of English superiority compared to the French and accusations that the French used women as soldiers.”\textsuperscript{77} More recent historical research by Vron Ware and Adele Perry has served to emphasize the ways that gender, race and civilization serve to emphasize global imperial stewardship.\textsuperscript{78} Vron Ware makes the case for white women as the symbol of British imperial civilization in stark relief to women in ‘primitive’ societies. She concludes that, “By the 1870s…the dominant image of Indian women in the minds of the British public can be characterized as one of intense suffering…the world of Hindu and Muslim women …provoked suspicion too awful to name…as victims of barbaric cultural practices.”\textsuperscript{79} The participation of political wives in the ceremonial opening of Canada’s Parliament was an allegorical display of a superior imperial civilization that apotheosized an elevated respect for women, as recognized and respected participants in political culture.\textsuperscript{80} Radforth’s assessment of the royal visit of the Prince of Wales to Canada in 1860

\textsuperscript{76} Ferguson, Empire, 142. See also Vron Ware who has suggested that Queen Victoria, “was glad that the suttee had been abolished and showed great concern for the condition of Hindu women.” Vron Ware, Beyond the Pale, 133: Ware citing Sophia Dobson Collette, editor, Keshub Chunder Sen’s English Visits, (London: Strahan, 1871), 481-2.

\textsuperscript{77} As Davidoff and Hall have argued “the effeminacy of the French was held up to derision, including the accusation that they had used women as soldiers.” Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family Fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 19.

\textsuperscript{78} Kirkand, “Mothering Citizens”, 209. As Vron Ware has suggested “gender played a crucial role in organizing ideas of race and civilization and women were involved in many ways in the expansion and maintenance of the Empire… the way in which women were treated was an index of a nation’s racial purity and strength;” Ware, Beyond the Pale, 37 & 149. More recently Adele Perry has argued that, “white women were routinely expected to serve as boundary markers between races and as symbols of imperial authority.” Adele Perry, On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871 ((Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 193.

\textsuperscript{79} Ware, Beyond the Pale, 129.

\textsuperscript{80} According to Julia Bush, “sound gender relations underpinned the Empire’s moral and political future. Worthy and enduring Imperialism depended upon a due respect for both sexes and for their different roles. It also depended upon a defense of social class boundaries, closely identified with the civilizing values which characterized some members of the British race more than others…women were vital to the Empire’s future.” Bush, Edwardian Ladies, 12.
emphasizes the participation of native peoples as “convenient foils in their primitiveness” in stark contrast to the display of civilized femininity that served as an allegorical display of the triumphant march of civilization.\textsuperscript{81} In this way, women were performers in the creation of a Canadian nationality by providing comprehensible markers that supported a discourse of social, political and racial superiority, and unity with a greater Britain.\textsuperscript{82} More than simply ‘window dressing,’ the participation of political wives in the ceremonial opening of parliament was, as Kirkland has argued, “crucial to the ceremony and pageantry that surrounded government.”\textsuperscript{83}

The opening of Parliament and the official State Drawing Room that followed was a formal display of political and social hierarchy that reinforced Canada’s colonial position and Imperial connection.\textsuperscript{84} Official protocol served as a public reminder that the Governor General and his Consort, the Prime Minister, the Cabinet Ministers, the Leader of the Opposition, the senior and junior government officials and their wives represented precedence, privilege and rank in the Dominion Capital.\textsuperscript{85} It was a symbolic performance

\textsuperscript{81} Phillip Buckner, “The Invention of Tradition” 18-43 in Colin M. Coates, editor. Majesty in Canada, 24
Buckner citing, Radforth “Aboriginal People and the 1860 Royal Tour”, 4-5.

\textsuperscript{82} As Bilkey has remarked “the English have glorified their institutions, their heroes and have asserted their pride of race upon a scale unequalled by any other nation.”Paul Bilkey, Persons, Papers and Things (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1940), 195. See also Margaret MacMillan, Marjorie Harris and Ann L. Desjardins have determined that “In the nineteenth century we were proud – at least much of Canada was – to be part of the British Empire, at the time, the greatest power in the world.” Margaret MacMillan, Marjorie Harris and Ann L. Desjardins, Canada House: Rideau Hall and the Invention of the Canadian Home (Toronto: Knopf, 2004), 3.

\textsuperscript{83} Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 226, author citing Montreal Gazette 23 November 1906: “The floor of the Senate was occupied by ladies in evening dress...the galleries were also crowded with ladies. Those accorded places on the floor included Her Excellency, Lady Grey, Lady Laurier and the wives of the Ministers, Mrs. R. L. Bordon, Madame Dandurand, Lady Drummond and the wives and daughters of Senators and their friends.”

\textsuperscript{84} As Benedict Anderson has argued “Colonial racism was a major element in that conception of ‘Empire,’ which attempted to weld dynastic legitimacy and national community. It did so by generalizing a principle of innate, inherited superiority on which its own domestic position was (however shakily) based to the vastness of the overseas possessions, covertly (or not so covertly) conveying the idea that if, say English Lords were naturally superior to other Englishmen, no matter: these other Englishmen were no less superior to the subjected natives. Indeed, one is tempted to argue that the existence of late colonial empires even served to shore up domestic aristocratic bastions, since they appeared to confirm on a global modern stage antique conceptions of power and privilege.” Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities, 150.

\textsuperscript{85} Ian Radforth cites “William M. Kuhn (Democratic Royalism, 1996) [who] analyses the ‘high politics of symbolic representation’ by showing how leading figures in English public life during the period 1861-
of nationhood that reflected the continuance of the connection with a greater British civilization. During the official State Drawing Room, the Governor General and his Consort, “stood regally on a dais while the citizens ranked in strict order of precedence, as a signifier of caste paraded past in single file and bowed and curtseyed once.”86 Lady Aberdeen described the protocol that distinguished the superior social position of the vice-regal couple.

It seems to me a worse ordeal than at home. The custom is that we should shake hands with absolutely no one. We therefore not only stand on the step in front of the Throne but a sort of low platform intervenes between us and those passing. So that it is quite from a distance that the bows are made…first there is the entrée to which but very few have right, - then senators and their wives – then MPs and then everyone else…I think that veils and feathers would make the ceremony look more in keeping and we hear people would like this.87

As evidenced throughout this discussion, the ceremonial participation of political wives provided the necessary accoutrement to the ‘dignified magnificence of the grandeur” in official political events, and in the process emphasized the imperial connection.88 Although it is tempting to dismiss women’s participation in political pageantry as simply an example of their role as decorative signifiers of male status, as this discussion unfolds a preponderance of evidence suggests that women were indeed politically influential.

1911 devised ceremonies of monarchy that reinforced class hierarchies and a sense of national community at the same time. Kuhn argues that these ceremonies helped to make monarch relevant in an increasingly urban, industrial and democratic polity.” Radforth, Royal Spectacle, 13.

86 Cynthia Cooper, Magnificent Entertainments: Fancy Dress Balls of Canada’s Governors General, 1876-1898 (Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1997), xvi.

87 Journal, 28 April 1894. Additionally Isabel Skelton’s curtsy at the Governor General’s drawing room in 1926 illustrates the continuance of courtly tradition and social stratification of the metropolis in the dominion capital. She writes, “How glad I was to have gone for the lesson in the art of making a curtsy.” Crowley, Marriage of Minds, 175.

Political Wife, Signifier of Political Status

As a discourse of a greater Canada was associated increasingly with an ideology of Imperial unity, access rituals were constantly being reinvented and women were participants as creators as well as bearers of social and political status.\(^{89}\) For example, Mme. Thibaudeau, wife of Senator Rosaire Thibaudeau, was a frequent guest at Government House during the Aberdeen years, and exhibited her social and political status, as one of the leaders of Montreal society by dressing “beautifully and becomingly,” exhibiting “good taste and the means to gratify it.”\(^{90}\) Some observers may view women’s luxurious apparel solely as an expression of male achievement, rank and position that emphasized their strictly decorative role in political pageantry and thus provides further evidence of women’s political impotence. However, as the following chapters will show women were indeed influential in Canadian political culture. Their participation in political pageantry served as an indicator of an advanced civilization that emphasized the pyramid of status from the vice regal representatives downward.\(^{91}\)

Set apart from political wives by her vice-regal position, Lady Aberdeen’s beautiful clothes and jewels served to emphasize her superior social and political status, as the representative of the Crown. Thus, while she declared it “too ridiculous to be driving through this very colonial town dressed up in diamonds and evening dress in full daylight” to attend Parliament;\(^{92}\) in her role as vicereine, Lady Aberdeen displayed a sophisticated perception of the meaning of costume. She understood that the wife of the

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\(^{89}\) As Davidoff and Hall have argued “Women in their association with consumption are often seen as creators as well as bearers of status.” Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 30. See also news reports of the period that described “The Opening Ceremonies at Ottawa Yesterday: To the left of the Throne were seated Her Excellency Lady Aberdeen, costumed in green; Lady Tweedmouth, wife of one of Lord Rosebery’s Ministers; Mme. Thibaudeau [sic]; immediately behind Her Excellency was Mme. Laurier” *Toronto Globe* 19 April 1895, NAC Aberdeen Papers Volume 19. Additionally, the *Ottawa Evening Journal* reported that, “Mme. Thibaudeau [sic] who is one of the acknowledged leaders of Montreal society is the guest of Their Excellencies at Government House.” *Ottawa Journal* 2 April 1895.NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.

\(^{90}\) Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 335. See also *Ottawa Evening Journal* 22 April 1895 NAC Aberdeen Papers Volume 19.


\(^{92}\) Journal, 20 August 1896.
Governor General must dress the part in order to be “an effective symbol” of an advanced civilization and its social and political hierarchy. At the first State dinner given by Governor General Aberdeen in Ottawa in 1893, Lady Aberdeen utilized dress, not only of herself but of her attendants as well, to emphasize her superior status and maintain an air of regal pre-eminence. Hubbard describes the scene, “With the Foot Guards band in attendance and a piper in Gordon tartan to lead the way to the ballroom, Lady Aberdeen wearing her beryls and star tiara had her blue satin train carried by her small sons in full dress kilts.” To further emphasize her vice regal position, Her Excellency sat at dinner always with “pretty pages” behind her chair. Throughout her tenure as vice regal consort, Lady Aberdeen maintained a impressive tone of pre-eminence. In her weekly column, Amaryllis described Ishbel Aberdeen’s majestic performance: “Her Excellency always has a little page, sometimes two, dressed in costumes of Louis XIV. They carry her train and run about during dinner carrying notes and messages. Lady Aberdeen’s costume and those of her attendants was performance art that symbolized her superior social and political position: “I wore my blue velvet made to look very pretty combined with my white and gold embroidered poplin,” she wrote, “and the pages where in white and gold and much admired.” It was precisely this sort of feminine imperial presentation that enhanced the impression of an advanced civilization and pre-eminent authority that sustained notions of hierarchy in the Capital.

93 As Hobsbawn and Ranger have argued “To be a symbol and an effective symbol you must be vividly and often seen.” Hobsbawm and Ranger, editors, *The Invention of Tradition*, 119: See also: James D. Edgar who described the accoutrements that emphasized the Governor General’s dominant position in the social and political hierarchy. “Driven in a dashing four in hand with liveried postilions and surrounded by a troop of cavalry to open or prorogue parliament.” Edgar, *Canada and Its Capital*, 113. For further discussion of aristocracy and social hierarchy in turn-of-the-century small town Ottawa in which “the fifty significant families of Ottawa took their tone and learned the order of their precedence.” See H. S. Ferns and B. Ostrey, *The Age of Mackenzie King: The Rise of the Leader*. (London: William Heinemann, 1955), 48.


95 Lady Russell to Lady Aberdeen, 6 September, 1896. NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 2.

96 Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” *Saturday Night*.

97 *Journal*, 2 January 1896. See also letter to Lady Aberdeen from Lady E. Russell, Postmarked Chateau Frontenac, Quebec City “Dear Lady Aberdeen. I think we shall always remember our week at Government House…I shall often picture to myself Your Excellency at dinner, with your pretty pages behind your chair.” 6 September 1896. NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 4.
Among the elite of Ottawa, status was divided into two clearly defined categories: meritocracy and aristocracy. Here it must be noted that thirty years after Confederation, Ottawa was still in the midst of its transformation from a rough lumber town into a national capital. Self-made men (who earned their positions at the top of the political and social order) commingled with appointed aristocratic British representatives of the Crown with personal ties to their sovereign. Prime Ministers Sir John Thompson and Sir Wilfrid Laurier, and Speaker of the House Sir James Edgar rose from humble backgrounds to the pinnacle of political power on merit alone. Understandably, despite political and social achievement, a self-made man such as Thompson might feel somewhat apprehensive about presenting an appropriately dignified image. Lady Aberdeen reported in her journal that Thompson “began life as a poor man… educated at the common school - studying law and eking out a living as a stenographer and reporter.” His political success epitomized the fundamental principle of Victorian middle-class ideology: “a man could rise in the world through effort, talent and initiative and as a result, achieve social status.” All the same, when he instructed his wife to prepare for the opening ceremonies of Parliament, he was obviously concerned that she would convey a dignified image suitable to his elevated position in the political hierarchy. Thompson wrote:

You must come a week before the opening. You are to make sure that you get yourself nice dresses for the opening, for evening and for the hotel. You may use them or not as you like but you know there is nothing so embarrassing as to feel that one is shabby and there will be enough to embarrass even with all in one’s favour.

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99 *Journal*, 13 December 1894.


101 *Journal*, 13 December 1894.

102 Thompson to Annie Thompson, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 288.
Annie Thompson, evidently ill at ease at the prospect of attending, chose to arrive the day after the opening of Parliament, telling her husband that she “would not like to have to go to the opening, which might be awkward. If I could only go just to be a comfort to you and not have to go out and get dresses that would be expensive and useless after.”

Thompson’s concern to present a dignified image and to not feel embarrassed and Lady Thompson’s corresponding desire to avoid the opening of Parliament emphasizes the social divide between rank due to merit, and position due to aristocratic connection to the monarchy.

The maintenance of precedence, privilege and rank was a symbolic act reflecting the continuance of the connection with a greater British civilization in general and the British Crown in particular. Significantly, the backgrounds of Governor General Aberdeen and his predecessors, as well as his successor Lord Minto, were of similar aristocratic pedigree, far removed from the humble beginnings of even the mightiest of Ottawa’s social and political elite. The essential qualification for the position of Governor General seems to have been an aristocratic connection to the British Monarch. Lord and Lady Aberdeen and Lord and Lady Minto enjoyed personal ties to Queen Victoria. Aberdeen’s successor to the post of Governor General of Canada, Gilbert John Elliot Murray Kynynmound, the 4th Earl of Minto was the inherited Lord of an estate in the Scottish lowlands. Lady Minto was born at Windsor Castle and lived for most of her childhood there. Her father was equerry to Queen Victoria from the time of her ascension.

103 Annie Thompson to Thompson, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.

104 “If there was one political institution that Goldwin Smith disliked more than another it was the office of the Governor General... The vice-regal court at Ottawa struck him as a childish parody of British Monarchy which wasted money and encouraged the worst type of social snobbery.” J.T. Saywell, editor, Journal, 408, citing Elizabeth Wallace, Goldwin Smith: Victorian Liberal (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 234-236.

105 Hubbard, Rideau Hall, 66.

106 Stevens and Saywell, editors, Lord Minto’s Canadian Papers, xv.
in 1837 and later to His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales. Similarly, Lord Aberdeen, John Campbell Hamilton Gordon, seventh Earl and first Marquis of Aberdeen and Temair, was the sixth Governor General since Confederation. His grandfather, George Hamilton Gordon, the 4th Earl of Aberdeen had been British Prime Minister (1852-1855) and his uncle, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, was Governor of New Brunswick before Confederation. Additionally, Queen Victoria purchased land from the Aberdeen estate on which Balmoral Castle was built as a holiday home for British royalty. As a result of the Aberdeen family association with Royalty, one of the functions of John Campbell Hamilton Gordon as Lord Lieutenant of Aberdeenshire was to preside over the Queen’s arrivals and departures from Balmoral Castle. Lady Aberdeen and Lady Minto traveled in the same elite social circles and shared the same pleasurable past-times riding in London’s Rotten Row and attending balls in the great historic houses, where only “a very exclusive society met.” Lady Aberdeen’s memoir, Musings of a Scottish Granny provides further evidence of the exclusive nature of elite British society. Lady Grey wife of the Governor General Lord Grey (1904-1911) was the sister-in-law of Lady Minto. The three successive Governors General of Canada, Earl of Aberdeen (1893-1898), Earl of Minto, (1898-1904) and Earl Grey, 1904-1911 were socially connected. As Lady Aberdeen recounted in her memoir, during an evening party at Dorchester House, her father congratulated Earl Grey, the brother of Mary Grey, Lady Minto, “on his engagement to one of the daughters of the house.” The daughter was


110 “Mary Minto describes ‘riding in Rotten Row at twelve o’clock, or at five in the evening was the fashion …the brilliance of the balls in the great historic houses…of a very exclusive society …a hostess never invited anyone with whom she was not personally acquainted and one rarely saw a face that was not familiar.’” Oxford, Myself When Young, 227. See also Lady Aberdeen’s description of exclusive London society: “As we grew older, we joined the crowd which would be found taking in the air in ‘the Row’ as it was always called, …between noon and one thirty in the spring and between 5:30 and 7:30 in the summer.” See also Lady Aberdeen’s discussion of fashionable society in Rotten Row: “The Marjoribanks family was among the most devoted habitués of Rotten Row in my time…In the seventies and eighties, London society embraced a very definite and limited class.” Ishbel Marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair, The musings of a Scottish granny (London: Heath Cranton, 1936), 21-31.

111 Aberdeen and Temair, The musings of a Scottish granny, 22.
Alice Holford of Dorchester House who was to become Lady Grey, wife of Albert the fourth Earl Grey, eighth Governor General of Canada since Confederation and the brother of Lady Minto.112 Three successive Governors General of Canada during the years 1893-1911 were closely connected and part of a very small and exclusive society. In each case they inhabited the aristocratic middle rung of British social hierarchy.113

Generally, within the narrow world of the British elite, both spouses came from a similar class.114 The daughter of a self made man, Lady Aberdeen represents an increasing exception to this pattern, having married into a landed family of aristocratic rank.115 Born Ishbel Maria Marjoribanks, she was the youngest daughter of 1st Lord Tweedsmouth, Dudley Coutts Marjoribanks. Her father was a wealthy brewery owner, representing a new breed of gentlemen who derived their income from “trade rather than land and could afford to buy and support country mansions and vast sporting estates.”116 Beside her


113 Rating the British aristocracy according to hierarchy from high to low status: Duke, Marquess, Earl, Viscount, and Baron.

114 Discussing social hierarchy and marriage, Pamela Horn has determined “that most marriages involving landed families were ‘in marriages’ with both spouses coming from a similar class.” However “Heiress Hunters: “became an increasing trend when the effects of agricultural depression led to a decline in rental income for many landed families…and an increasingly luxurious and pleasure seeking social life were adding to the pressures to find extra revenue…[that] led to a number of marriages between well-to-do American girls and British peers in the half century before the first world war.” Pamela Horn, Ladies of the Manor: Wives and Daughters in Country House Society, 1830-1918. (Wolfeboro Falls, New Hampshire: A Sutton, 1991), 20-21. It must be noted here as Kirkland has pointed out, “marriages between ‘new money’ families and titled but poor families were increasingly common during the Victorian era in England.” Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 77. However, this was not the circumstance in the Aberdeen marriage. Aberdeen was not one of the increasingly poor but titled families who arranged marriages out of economic necessity.

115 St, John N.B. Globe 21 September 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 14. Additionally, Leonore Davidoff points to the widening membership of elite British society so that by the 1880s men such as Marjoribanks of “industrial and commercial backgrounds were being elevated to the peerage.” Davidoff, Best Circles, 59.

116 As Flora Fraser has observed, “Families deriving their income from trade rather than land prospered and could afford to buy and support country mansions and vast sporting estates in Scotland.” Flora Fraser, The English Gentlewoman (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1987), 179. Additionally, as Pat Jalland has observed, “an alliance between an aristocrat and a successful industrialist’s daughter wa considered perfectly suitable…but social mobility was kept within careful limits by the rules of Society.” Pat Jalland, Women, Marriage and Politics, 1860-1914 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 52.
nouveau aristocratic social position, Lady Aberdeen claimed descent from a distinguished ancestry. Her paternal family history alleged ancestry of the illustrious Scottish King, Robert the Bruce.\textsuperscript{117} Her maternal family history professed an “unbroken descent from Edward I, the first Plantagenet King of England.”\textsuperscript{118} Additionally, her grandfather, Edward Marjoribanks, senior partner of Coutts’ Bank, had been the Queen’s banker. During Ishbel Marjoribanks presentation at Court, in an apparently extraordinary act of special favour the Queen kissed her on the cheek.\textsuperscript{119} In the Aberdeen’s shared autobiography, \textit{We Twa}, Lady Aberdeen revealed a filial sense of obligation to her socially superior forebears: “I at least was profoundly convinced,” she wrote, “that if I were to fail in any task set me, I should be the first of my race to set my family on the downgrade.”\textsuperscript{120}

The purportedly exceptional lineages of Lord and Lady Aberdeen would most naturally sustain in them a sense of noble superiority over Ottawa society that was beautifully and artfully expressed. After all, “even the cream of Ottawa society was not known for its good manners.”\textsuperscript{121} Not surprisingly, Lady Aberdeen revealed a patronizing attitude when she described in her journal her first experience with Ottawa elite society:

We had our first regular entertainment tonight, consisting of a concert, to which we invited the elite of Ottawa. …We think people enjoyed the entertainment and they do not seem to have had a regular concert before. The ladies behaved somewhat boisterously in the cloakroom and quite upset our calculations by vaulting over tables arranged for giving out the cloaks and insisted on going for their bundles themselves, and no

\textsuperscript{117} Aberdeen, \textit{We Twa: Reminiscences of Lord and Lady Aberdeen} Volume 1 (London: W. Collins, 1925), 65 & 94. For further background on Robert Bruce, champion of Scottish nationalism, see: Alan Young and Michael J. Stead, \textit{In the Footsteps of Robert Bruce}. (Phoenix Mill, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999); James A. Mackay, \textit{Robert Bruce, King of Scots} (London: Robert Hale, 1974)


\textsuperscript{119} Aberdeen and Temair, \textit{Musings}, 19.

\textsuperscript{120} Aberdeen, \textit{We Twa}, Volume 1, 94.

\textsuperscript{121} Cooper, \textit{Magnificent Entertainments}, xvii. Sandra Gwyn has described Ottawa during this period as “rough and ready” town that “maintained its reputation as a town that more often than not walked with an unsteady gait…in 1898…the numerous bars.” Gwyn, \textit{The Private Capital}, 228-229.
reasonings [sic] or entreaties would make them abstain from this, of course there was dire confusion. We think of sending out a little printed note explaining cloakroom arrangements next time with the invitation.\footnote{Journal, 20 December 1893.}

To avoid further "scrimmages" a new cloakroom was built.\footnote{As the Marchioness reported in her column: “There is a splendid new cloak room which will render impossible the awful scrimmage for wraps that so frequently followed large entertainments at Government House.” Marchioness, “Society at the Capital,” Ottawa Free Press, 14 May 1897. See also Lady Aberdeen’s remarks in her Journal, 8 December 1893.} On another occasion, Lady Aberdeen’s description of a meeting of the Children’s Aid Society provides further evidence of the chasm between the vice-regal representatives and Ottawa society:

The meeting appeared cold but we are told that Ottawa audiences are always very irresponsive. (sic) I asked an old clergyman why they did not respond. He said there were so many ladies. I pointed out that there were a large number of men. ‘Oh’ says he, ‘they would not like to applaud before the ladies.’\footnote{As Davidoff has observed “the new wealth which could buy properties had to work hard socially for these prizes” such as “service in the magistry, or marriage alliances with county families.” Davidoff, The Best Circles, 15-17, 27.}

The vice-regal couple displayed a natural superiority to the elite of Ottawa society, who were definitely from another social stratum entirely. Leonore Davidoff’s revealing study of British elite society during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, documents the gradual shift from a society in which “patronage, familial or client relationship were the norm to a system where individual achievement was rewarded with great wealth and power;” nevertheless, “access rituals were strictly structured,” and social entrée remained a constant according to ‘claims of status honour.’\footnote{Jalland, Women, Marriage and Politics, 288.} The difference between political culture in London and Ottawa was glaring. In the imperial capital “wealth and social status” were requisite to membership in elite social and political circles.\footnote{Jalland, Women, Marriage and Politics, 288.} In Ottawa, elite society for the most part was comprised of people of ordinary and often humble beginnings. Prime Ministers Thompson, Bowell and Laurier began life
in humble circumstances. Laurier was the son of a farmer and surveyor. In his youth, Bowell, the son of a cabinet-maker, had been apprenticed as a printer. Thompson’s modest origins are evident in his father’s letter to creditors in which he lamented that due to his impecunious predicament, he had “no monied [sic] means” to pay his debts. Senator Richard W. Scott, (1825-1913) was a Liberal Cabinet Minister and former Mayor of Bytown. As Gwyn explains, “The Scotts by the 1890s were one of the most consequential families in the city” but “they were not rich at all.” In her memoir, Ottawa society matron Lilian Scott Desbarats described family life as quite ordinary. “It was only in 1896, when my father was made Secretary of State” she wrote, “that we could afford a telephone.” Senator Scott’s wife (and the mother of Lilian Scott Desbarats) Mary Heron Scott, had been a singer and actress as a member of the Heron family traveling players before her marriage.

127 According to Schull, Laurier’s father, Carolus was a “village farmer, a little set off from his kind because he was a surveyor as well.” Schull, Laurier, 17.

128 “The son of a cabinet maker, Mackenzie Bowell (1823-1917) “he was apprenticed as a printer to the owner of the Belleville Intelligencer and later owned that paper along with his brother-in-law.” P.B. Waite, Sir Mackenzie Bowell, DCB Volume, XIV: 120-124. See also Lady Aberdeen complained in her Journal of Bowell’s “inability to write letters, which he openly admits (he was a printer in his younger days) makes communication with HE when away very laborious to him and in the end he drops it altogether.” Journal, 18 July 1895.

129 As Waite has reported, Thompson’s father wrote to his creditors to explain his precarious financial situation. “I need not say how much I have tried to prevent the difficulty, and how bitterly I have lamented it...Within a few years I have been met with disappointment and loss, and have been trying with industry and economy, to meet daily absolute requirements. I have no monied means beyond what I describe, and no other property except a little furniture, etc., and a kind of nominal ownership of the house which I occupy...if that were sold it might deprive my family of a valuable refuge, without perhaps realizing 50 pounds beyond encumbrances...a few months later Thompson’s father died ...thus at nearly twenty-two [Thompson] was left with a house to keep going and two women to support.” P.B. Waite, The Man from Halifax: Sir John Thompson, Prime Minister (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 13-18.

130 Gwyn, The Private Capital, 477. See also Bilkey’s description of R.W. Scott: “Over in the Senate was the patriarchal Richard Scott, hale and vigorous at seventy-eight. He had been Commissioner of Crown Lands in Ontario under the Blake and Mowat administrations, had served in the Mackenzie Government in the 1870s, had gone out with Mackenzie and come in again with Laurier. But as a member of the Senate from 1874, he had escaped the worst consequences of ministerial defeat. This political veteran was the author of two very important statutes, the Separate School Law of Ontario and the Canada Temperance Act, better known as the Scott Act.” Bilkey, Persons, Papers and Things, 103-104.

131 Scott Desbarats, Recollections (Ottawa, 1957)

In contrast to the “imperial metropolis” London, Ottawa before Confederation and its conversion to the national capital was a rough lumber town with a reputation “for being one of the toughest, booziest towns.” According to Sandra Gwyn, it was not until 1865 that a rudimentary police force was organized. Polite society, as existed at all in Ottawa before 1865, was comprised of only a handful of professional men and merchants and the more couth among the sawmill operators.”

Goldwin Smith dismissed the choice of Ottawa as the national capital, labeling it, “a sub-arctic village converted by Royal mandate into a political cockpit.” Five years after Confederation, Governor General Lord Dufferin (1872-1878) described the new capital as “very desolate, a jumble of brand new houses and shops, and a wilderness of wooden shanties, spread along either side of long broad strips of mud.” Lady Dufferin viewed the new national capital as a “small town with incongruously beautiful buildings crowning its insignificance.” Rideau Hall, the designated official residence of the Governor General and the center of vice-regal splendor, was built originally as the private residence of Thomas McKay, a Scottish stonemason and contractor in the construction of the Rideau Canal. Lady Dufferin recorded in her Journal her profound disappointment on first view of Rideau Hall. “Rideau Hall did lower our spirits just a little,” she wrote, “we have come through hundreds of miles of splendid scenery to get to it…for the first time I have left my own

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133 Jonathan Schneer has described “the imperial metropolis …[as] a machine for making imperialist minded citizens.” Schneer, London 1900, the imperial metropolis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 13.


135 Gwyn, The Private Capital, 40.

136 Goldwin Smith (1823-1910) Historian and Controversialist; Victorian Liberal; regius professor at Oxford, 1858-1866; Professor Cornell University, 1868-1871; moved to Toronto 1871; in 1875 he married Harriet Elizabeth Mann, widow of Henry Boulton. Smith was an advocate of union with the United States. Saywell, editor, Journal, 500; Sandra Gwyn has described Goldwin Smith as somewhat of an opportunistic social climber, who, “having taken up roost as a permanent citizen of Toronto, soon feathered his nest by marrying a Family Compact widow.” Gwyn, The Private Capital, 36.


139 Hubbard, Rideau Hall, 3-6.
home for many years – and this is the substitute!” Lady Aberdeen’s inspection of Rideau Hall provoked a mixed reaction. She pronounced the dining-room ‘gloomy and smells of kitchen’ and the residence too small, providing “little accommodation for visitors.” Still, in her customary manner, she resolved to make the best of the situation and determined that they would be “very comfy” in the vice-regal residence while devising “methods whereby this accommodation can be stretched.” Originally built as an elaborate regency villa, Rideau Hall provided merely adequate accommodation for English aristocrats accustomed to grander abodes.

Just thirty years after its designation as the Dominion capital, Ottawa society compared unfavourably with late nineteenth century Montreal and Toronto, which were the economic and social centers of Canadian life. The difference lay in the history of the cities. Montreal was “the largest city in Canada and an important urban center in the British Empire” comprising an elite society “that was shaping itself - not being bound by traditional aristocratic customs that shaped elite culture elsewhere.” Without a “firmly established aristocratic heritage” elite society in late nineteenth century Montreal was, “dynamic and constantly in flux”; however, even those who stood at the center of the city’s “elite circles …had to negotiate their way into that position.” Quite the opposite to Ottawa and Montreal, elite society in Toronto considered itself “the center of the Dominion,” although Lady Aberdeen regarded the city as “very provincial.”

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140 Walker, Lady Dufferin, 4.

141 Journal, 26 September, 1893.

142 Hubbard, Rideau Hall, 4.


144 Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 25.

145 ibid.

146 Journal, 7 September 1897. As Gwyn has argued “Ottawa [had a] distinctly Irish flavour…that lent to official Ottawa a somewhat less dour and more tolerant tone than prevailed either at Montreal, where although the Irish were numerous, Scotch-Presbyterianism and mercantilism ruled the roost, or at Toronto where Irishness [sic] tended to be of narrow spirited northern variety…as exemplified in persons of the politician D’Alton McCarthy and the merchant Timothy Eaton.” Gwyn, The Private Capital, 41.
years earlier, Anna Jameson viewed Toronto in similarly critical terms. Toronto society is composed, she said, of a “petty colonial oligarchy, a self constituted aristocracy based upon nothing real, nor even upon anything imaginary.”\textsuperscript{147} The fact that Family Compact and United Empire Loyalist pedigree was highly valued as a requisite for membership in Toronto elite society will be explored further in Chapter Four. In fact, Montreal and Toronto possessed a much stronger demographic and economic base with well-established families than Ottawa where social boundaries were flexible according to meritocracy based on individual achievement.\textsuperscript{148}

Gender boundaries, ostensibly strictly drawn, appear to have been mutable and flexible in late Victorian political culture of Ottawa. Women as the chief purveyors of beauty, were both “players and stage managers” in the romance and splendor of political pageantry.\textsuperscript{149} The presence of beautifully gowned political wives served to visually articulate a “coherent ceremonial language” of imperial connection and emphasized the symbolic difference between the civilized British Empire and primitive societies that resonated with the growing imperialist sentiment in Canada.\textsuperscript{150} In his examination of imperialism and Canadian nationalism, Carl Berger asserts that Canadians “believed Canada could attain national status only by maintaining its connection with the Empire.”\textsuperscript{151} Thus, by

\textsuperscript{147} Anna Jameson, \textit{Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada}, Volume 1 (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838), 98.

\textsuperscript{148} Lady Aberdeen described in her Journal the formalized hierarchical nature of society in the Capital: “First there is the entrée to which very few have the right – then Senators and their wives – then MPs and then everyone else. Mr. Kimber, the Black Rod who has watched over this for many years, was ill and so there were some irregularities…some few came in by Entrée who should not; some passed in wrong order of precedence. (In Entrée here everyone is supposed to pass in exact order of official precedence.) Some people in evening dress got up to the Gallery without passing. (The rule has been that no one goes to Gallery unless they have passed.)” \textit{Journal}, 28 April 1894.

\textsuperscript{149} Bush, \textit{Edwardian Ladies}, 17.

\textsuperscript{150} Lukes, “Political Ritual and Social Integration” in Lukes, editor. \textit{Essays on Social Theory}: 62-73. As Mary Agnes Fitzgibbon claimed in her address to the National Council of Women of Canada, “Canada has been called a keystone of the arch of Imperial Federation, for without Canada the Empire would not encircle the globe…. ” Keshen and Morton, \textit{Material Memory}, 107

\textsuperscript{151} As Carl Berger has argued, “in the later 1880s and early 1890s imperial unity found its main support in the older section of English Canada and particularly among the descendents of the UEL.” Carl Berger, “Imperialism and Nationalism, 1884-1914: A Conflict in Canadian Thought” in Francis and Smith, editors. \textit{Readings in Canadian History}: 97-100. More recently, Kevin Colclough has argued that “the pomp and
showcasing the civilized position of women, Canadian political pageantry served to provide comprehensible markers that supported a national discourse of social, political and racial superiority and unity with a greater Britain.

**The Domestic Ideal and the Politics of Marriage**

The ceremonial presence of political wives performed an essential role as valid emblems of the two primary discourses of the age: “the discourse on progress and degeneration and the invented tradition of the white father at the head of the global family of man.” The public feminine role underscored the “crucial relationship quality of masculinity.” The exalted position of women in the imperial enterprise was commensurate with a paradigm of dependent womanhood and intertwined with concepts of manliness predicated upon notions of masculine independence and authority. The late Victorian concept of true manliness required stewardship of both the public and domestic sphere and emphasized the role of gender as a microcosm of political life. Political life and family life were closely connected. As both Lynne Marks and Joy Parr have argued, marital status was

ceremony of imperial occasions, the institutions of government, the symbol of the Governor General and his Lieutenant Governors and above all the symbolism of the Monarchy helped to maintain a British identity. In the new world, this British identity would be transformed…into a British Canadian identity.” Colclough, “Imperial Nationalism”, 192.

152 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 234.


154 Kimmel, “The Contemporary ‘Crisis’ of Masculinity in Historical Perspective”: 122-152.


156 As Lynne Marks has argued, “by attending church with their families married men affirmed their role as head of a Christian household…it is also likely that the public profile and respectable image as a church leader would be sought by those with political ambitions. The contemporary social commentator, C.S. Clark asserted that in Toronto ‘aspiring politicians used offices in the church as ammunition in election campaigns.’” Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure and Identity in Late Nineteenth Century Small Town Ontario.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 54. See also Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 188, 205.
often a key factor in attaining political office. William Lyon Mackenzie King was a bachelor who enjoyed a singularly successful political career as Canada’s longest serving Prime Minister; still, he considered a “suitable marriage and a happy home” to be “essential ingredients to success in politics.” Popular discourse stressed that “only in the role of husband, could a man achieve his full manhood. If the household really was a microcosm of the body politic, it followed that those who governed their households well, possessed political virtue and should be recognized accordingly.” As the moral reform movement achieved preeminence in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, male respectability was associated with male stewardship of domesticity, and played an increasingly important role in political advancement. Any deviations from the moral code and social order associated with marriage were regarded as a much broader attack on the integrity of the nation. In turn, the participation of women in parliamentary pageantry helped to confer respectability upon politicians and confirmed their masculinity as heads of households, their position in the hierarchical political structure and their moral ability to rule.

The dominant discourse of the relational construct that associated moral manly leadership with a virtuous wife was a factor that served, at least in part, to block men such as George Foster and John Haggart from reaching the pinnacle of political power.

157 As Joy Parr has concluded, “fine distinctions were drawn in eligibility for municipal office and municipal support between males who were family men and males who were not.” Parr, The Gender of Breadwinners, 205.


159 As John Tosh makes the case, “those men who had the least regard for home, or no domestic circle at all, made the worst citizens because they lacked those daily reminders of the necessity for responsible authority…after 1832, domesticity quickly became a talisman of civic virtue and a means of demonstrating middle class superiority over the morally lax aristocracy.” John Tosh, A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-class Home in Victorian England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 139. As Davidoff and Hall have argued “it is only when a woman was placed beside a man that she could ‘make sense’ and her husband achieve his full manhood…” Davidoff and Hall, Family Fortunes, 452.

Lady Aberdeen recorded her assessment of the situation in her journal: “Mr. Foster is an able man and a good man but that clique against him and his wife, because they married in the United States after she divorced her husband, makes a difficulty. And Mr. Haggart who is the strongest man is admittedly a bohemian.”

George Foster, a former professor of classics at the University of New Brunswick, was a respectable man with a highly regarded personal history as the Minister of Finance but even the most prominent members of society found that their positions could not withstand the stigma of divorce. Consequently, although he retained his cabinet post, he was blocked from the party leadership because his wife was a divorced woman. At the same time, John Haggart, Minister of Railways and Canals, was blocked from further political advancement to a certain extent because his wife, Caroline Douglas, was a reputedly bad tempered “wild virago of a woman.” Neither Mrs. Foster nor Mrs. Haggart possessed the virtuous image expected of the wife of the Prime Minister. Their public images were at odds with the domestic idyll of the admirable influence of a wife acquired through her “amiable conduct and self command.”

Foster and Haggart were unsuited for the leadership of their party and the role of Prime Minister in some measure because their marriages did not reflect contemporary hegemonic definitions of masculine respectability, ones that implied a commitment to leadership in the domestic sphere as well as the preservation of the marital and moral bonds of society. Of course there were other factors that

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161 *Journal*, 13 December 1894.

162 Schull, *Laurier*, 291. Gwyn described the degree to which Mrs. Foster was socially ostracized. “Mrs. George Foster, wife of Sir John’s Minister of Fisheries, who though the totally innocent party, had been divorced from a previous husband. Nor, because of Lady Macdonald’s interdiction, could the unfortunate Mrs. Foster be received anywhere. It was not until 1894, with Macdonald dead and Agnes [Lady Macdonald] abroad, that Lady Aberdeen, herself no lax moralist, dared lift the ban and invited Mrs. Foster to Rideau Hall.” Gwyn, *The Private Capital*, 202.


165 As Pat Jalland has argued “Perhaps the ultimate evidence of a wife’s centrality came when her conduct made her husband’s professional advancement impossible.” Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics*, 195. Schull has determined that Foster, “who was not mediocre but who was almost completely ruled out because he was married to a woman who had been divorced…Haggart, the Minister of Railways and Canals, might have been a strong man if it were not for weak women.” Schull, *Laurier*, 291-2.
prevented these two men from becoming Thompson’s successor as Prime Minister. P.B. Waite describes Foster as “waspish and lacking the capacity to draw support” and Haggart as “strong in the House because he was a good man at getting campaign funds” but “lazy” and with a “penchant for plump and available lady typists.”\textsuperscript{166} In any case, neither Foster nor Haggart were willing to serve under the other. Here again, while not the only reason for the elimination of these men as candidates for the position of Prime Minister, the evidence supports, at least in part, the ideological impact of the domestic sphere upon the Canadian political arena in the late nineteenth century.

Further to the point, the career of Dr. Charles Tupper serves to substantiate the important role of domesticity in Canadian political culture. Despite his reputation as a notorious womanizer, Doctor Charles Tupper - Canada’s High Commissioner to London, former Premier of Nova Scotia, Father of Confederation and longtime Cabinet Minister under Sir John A. Macdonald, - was able to maintain an image of conjugal morality. Tupper’s ignominious reputation has been well documented by numerous accounts of his predatory behaviour toward women, which included a lawsuit by a Miss Josephine Bailey, who claimed to have become pregnant by him. Nevertheless, he was able to preserve an image of respectability primarily because of his enduring sixty-five year marriage to the always dignified and gracious Amelia Morse Tupper.\textsuperscript{167} The Tupper marriage provides a

\textsuperscript{166} Waite, The Man from Halifax, 253.

\textsuperscript{167} According to the \textit{New York Morning Journal}, “It is unclear whether the suit was abandoned or settled out of Court.” \textit{New York Morning Journal} 6 February 1891, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 122. Phillip Buckner has presented a different view of Tupper, contending that he has been unjustly characterized as a womanizer. Buckner has argued instead that although, “he certainly enjoyed the companionship of women, there is no evidence that he was anything more than mildly flirtatious and his affection for his wife was genuine.” Phillip Buckner, “Sir Charles Tupper” \textit{Dictionary of Canadian Biography} Volume XIV: 1014-1022. All the same, accounts of Tupper’s predatory behaviour are well documented. See Hector Charlesworth’s account of Tupper’s ardent flirtations with a woman during a train trip, in Hector Charlesworth, \textit{Candid Chronicles: Leaves from the Notebook of a Canadian Journalist} (Toronto: Macmillan, 1925), 208-9. See Thompson described to his wife with evident disgust, Tupper’s attempt to enlist him as a ‘gooseberry’ in aid of his endeavor to seduce an unsuspecting woman. 12 February 1891, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 122. See also Ottawa socialite, Lilian Scott Desbarats description in her memoir of Tupper’s aggressive pursuit of her mother-in-law, Mme. Desbarats, wife of the Queen’s Printer in Ottawa. NAC Scott Desbarats, \textit{Recollections}, 57. Possibly Sir Charles Tupper was the inspiration for the lecherous politician Rufus Sullivan in Macbeth’s satire about Canadian political culture, set in late nineteenth century Ottawa. Macbeth writes that his “formula was simple, follow the quarry about at all times, even if her husband is with her. She will ultimately be compromised or flattered enough to give way.” Macbeth, \textit{The Land of Afternoon}, 89.
particular example of the functioning of the sexual double standard, which is discussed more fully in Chapter Five. For the purpose of this discussion, it is relevant to note that Lady Tupper personified the archetype of a discourse that celebrated supportive femininity and harmonious domesticity. Their relationship served to confer respectability upon her husband and in turn to benefit his political ambition. The constant to be noted here is the importance of the behaviour of the wife in projecting a solid image of respectable domesticity, which in turn mediated masculine behavior and masculine public image.

Like Lady Tupper, Mme. Laurier personified the ideal image of the political wife. Always quiet, tactful and gentle, and “gifted with a gracious personality,” she presented an appealingly iconic “noblesse” that effectively buttressed her husband’s assumed role as the chivalrous gentleman. As Marc Girouard explains, “the aim of the revival of the chivalric tradition was to produce a ruling class, which deserved to rule because it possessed moral qualities necessary to rulers. Gentlemen were to run the country because they were morally superior” Canadian novelist and travel writer Madge Macbeth described her initial impression upon meeting Sir Wilfrid Laurier. He was a man who expertly finessed the role of the chivalrous gentleman. As he “rose from his chair,” he greeted Macbeth, “with a bow suggesting the sweeping off of a hat heavy with plumes.” In view of the fact that the Laurier marriage was childless, thus diminishing his authoritative domestic image as the paterfamilias, the creation of a chivalrous persona emphasized his superior moral qualifications necessary for political leadership.


Private family life was generally regarded as a determinant of a politician’s moral authority to govern.\textsuperscript{171} Not surprisingly then, when public announcement was made in 1892 that John Thompson was chosen by his party to succeed John J. Abbott as Conservative Prime Minister, a reporter hurried to Thompson’s home for an impromptu interview. Obviously what was desired was an inside view of the Prime Minister’s life. Without a doubt, the inside view created a most favourable impression. Thompson was at home with his wife, hosting a children’s party and spending the evening “in the most ordinary domestic scene imaginable.”\textsuperscript{172} Here again, we can see the relational quality between the sexes. A man’s moral qualification to govern was contingent upon “not only an exacting code of behaviour in public, but in a properly ordered household, which in turn required of men a commitment to family life.”\textsuperscript{173} This key element of late Victorian male respectability, the upholding of domestic virtue, was a powerful indicator, for this reporter at least, that Thompson was the right man to govern the country.\textsuperscript{174} Canadian newspaper journalist Faith Fenton spent part of the Thompsons’ summer vacation with them in 1894. Writing about her time spent with the family, Fenton remarked to her readers, “thank God for the happy homes that gird the private lives of our most exalted officials.”\textsuperscript{175} For political wives, the way in which they were presented suggested their influence was wielded in the public sphere from the location of the private sphere in what Hammerton has described as “the tension between subordination and influence, between moral power and political silence.”\textsuperscript{176}

\textsuperscript{171} Elizabeth Langland, \textit{Nobody’s Angels: Middle-class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture} (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 25. As Davidoff and Hall have argued “the concept of manhood had political as well as sexual connotations…Manhood was to become a central part of claims to legitimate middle-class leadership.” Davidoff and Hall, \textit{Family Fortunes}, 199.

\textsuperscript{172} J. Castell Hopkins, \textit{The Life and Work of Sir John Thompson} (Brantford: Bradley-Garretson & Co., 1895), 243.

\textsuperscript{173} Roper and Tosh, \textit{Manful Assertions}, 45.

\textsuperscript{174} As John Tosh has asserted “domestic affections were almost \textit{de rigeur} for the reputation of a virtuous public man…” John Tosh, “New Men? The Bourgeois Cult of the Home” \textit{Gender and History} Volume 46 Issue 12 (December, 1996): 9-15.


\textsuperscript{176} Hammerton, \textit{Cruelty and Companionship}, 75.
The following chapters explore the various ways that women played a crucial part in the creation and adaptation of political culture in Ottawa. How did the domestic ideal frame the role of the political wife? What sort of influence did she have? How did she achieve it? Did the emerging image of the ‘new woman’ have an impact on the public persona and private life of the political wife? What can be determined is that the evidence supports the argument that the ceremonial role of women in political culture was an influential one. On one level it can be argued that their ceremonial role provided the crux to male claims of moral suitability for political office. \(^\text{177}\) On another level, feminine political influence was conferred through a religious and social ideology that authenticated a discourse of female subordination, which was really at the heart of political ceremony. Ostensibly a woman had no political power in a culture that apotheosized her as the domestic angel; yet that same domestic ideology conferred a measure of political influence upon political wives. Gail Cuthbert Brandt identifies the Charlottetown Conference of 1864, where “a significant interconnection [existed] between the social and the political...[due in large part to] the significant role women played...which facilitated political accommodation.” \(^\text{178}\) Their “accustomed roles as hostesses and tension managers” leaves “little doubt that the women’s social graces were pressed into service to help forge new political alliances.” \(^\text{179}\) Chapter Two examines the impact of the private/public aspects of domesticity in the capital and of women’s social graces upon political culture in Ottawa in the final decade of the nineteenth century.

The formal display of political wives in political pageantry serves to illustrate the growing complexity at the close of the nineteenth century of separate spheres ideology and emphasizes the flexibility of gender boundaries that effectively politicized the

\(^{177}\) Langland, *Nobody’s Angels*, 25.


\(^{179}\) Cuthbert Brandt, “National Unity and the Politics of History”, 3-11.
domestic sphere. Women’s participation in the apparently andocentric nature of the ceremonial opening of parliament buttressed the entire imperialist discourse of the gendered and racial hierarchy of power. The visual meaning endorsed a paradigm of dependent womanhood as proof of a civilized society. It was beautiful pageantry that gave imperial ideology its concrete form. Civilization, political order, nationalism and imperialism were tied neatly together with the concept of beauty that was fully articulated only when women were participants in political pageantry.

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181 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 236.
Chapter Two
Married to Political Culture: The Public Domestic Woman

She delighted in the sensation of being the comet instead of the tail, instead of the trailer, the cart.¹

The private and semi private encounters between politically knowledgeable men and women form a hidden chapter in the history of women’s influence upon governments before they were permitted to vote.²

The previous chapter examined how political ceremony politicized the domestic world. The effect was to locate the political wife in the public eye, where she occupied a paradoxical position. On the one hand, she was expected to project the domestic ideal of womanhood by presenting a dignified image of “selfless devotion and loving dedication” to her husband and family, which were ostensibly her only interests.³ On the other hand, simply by “the chance of marriage” the political wife became a public woman, incorporated into the business of her husband’s political career.⁴ Disenfranchised and unelected, she was expected to serve in a public role nevertheless. Those women who were married to men at the summit of Canadian political life were continually in the public eye. The frequent reporting of their activities in newspapers and journals, made them “veritable celebrities” which served to emphasize their identity as ‘exceptional’ or ‘great ladies’ and provided them with “some measure of liberty” that set them apart from the more circumspect lives of most Canadian women.⁵

¹ Madge Macbeth, The Land of Afternoon (Ottawa, Laurentian Press Syndicate, 1924), 104.
⁴ Kali Israel, Names and Stories: Emilia Dilke and Victorian Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 66-68.
⁵ Jo Margadant, editor, The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth Century France Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1-2; Israel, Names and Stories, 66-68. As the Chicago Herald reported “Lady Aberdeen’s first month in Ottawa will be fully employed in State ceremonies.” Chicago Herald, 24 September 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 4. Lady Aberdeen’s celebrity status is evident in her Journal entry “It is a weary grind, this process of being received at the station by Mayor,
Two of the four women in this study, Annie Thompson and Zoë Laurier were not prominent citizens in their own right and were not born into the “socially elite.” However, because they were married to politically influential men, they “had to craft a feminine self legible to the public that might also win approval in at least some influential circles.”\(^6\) Jo Margadant has identified the sort of phenomenon under which women in the public eye operated as “performing feminine personae under public scrutiny.”\(^7\) In her public role, the political wife was expected to “perpetually entertain and be entertained,” and “show interest in every form of public activity” with the placid fascination of a political accessory.\(^8\) Lady Aberdeen described the stress of always being on display as the wife of the Governor General, whose public role included visiting a wide variety of hospitals, schools and churches:

> We live our days to the tune of *God Save the Queen* … and one sometimes wonders inwardly whether the moment will not arrive when instead of keeping up an inane smile, we will not seize someone and turn them around and shake them to do something desperate.\(^9\)

This examination of the public and private lived experience of these four women, Ishbel Marjoribanks Gordon, Lady Aberdeen, Lady Annie Affleck Thompson, Lady Zoë Alderman and perhaps a guard of honor – then a solemn drive around the town – presentation of addresses, interminable luncheons.” *Journal*, 18 September, 1896: See also Amaryllis’ weekly column, “Society at the Capital” *Saturday Night* for regular reports of the activities of political wives for example: “Lady Thompson and the Misses Thompson, Mrs. and Miss Edgar”, 7 November 1897; “Mrs. Edgar the Speaker’s popular wife…”, 19 February 1898; “Among the many present were Lady Laurier and Lady Edgar” 28 May 1898; “Lady Thompson and Misses Thompson who have been guests at Rideau Hall leave for home this week.” 18 June 1898.


\(^7\) Margadant, *The New Biography*, 25.


\(^9\) *Journal*, 26, September 1896. See also the report in the *Toronto Mail* “Vice Regal Doings: The Earl and Countess still before the public. The Governor General and the Countess of Aberdeen occupied the morning by visiting the Normal school and Sick Children’s Hospital…over 2500 extended a warm greeting to the Countess of Aberdeen who arrived soon after 3:00 o’clock.” *Toronto Mail* 8 October 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 13.
Lafontaine Laurier and Lady Matilda Ridout Edgar produces new insights into the gendered nature of late Victorian Canadian political culture.\textsuperscript{10}

As consort to the Governor General, Lady Aberdeen’s highly visible and demanding public role as the Queen’s representative set her apart from even those political wives who were married to the most prominent elected officials. Nevertheless, these women shared more similarities than differences in their public role. This chapter will bring to light the ways women who operated at the highest level of political culture in late nineteenth century Canada represent a subtle adaptation of the prescribed ideal of domestic womanhood, one coupled with the actual reality of women’s evolving position in late Victorian society. Their public self-representation of the supportive wife and the domestic ideal indicates a symbiotic relationship between the public and the domestic that functioned as a “talisman of civic virtue” and thus served to substantiate their husband’s qualification for political office.\textsuperscript{11}

The central premise of this chapter makes the case that these four political wives used the social or what Georgina Hickey has termed the “in between space” to regulate and influence political culture.\textsuperscript{12} Thus the focus here is the connection among the domestic, social and public spheres and the ability of political wives to achieve a measure of political and social influence. Admittedly, the use of terms such a ‘domestic,’ ‘private’ and ‘public’ invokes a problematic analysis. Many historians view a binary analysis of gender roles as theoretically and empirically limiting.\textsuperscript{13} As Linda Kerber argues, the “language of separate spheres is vulnerable to sloppy use...historians referred often

\textsuperscript{10}My work draws on the insights of Kali Israel who has argued that through biography the historian can “make them into subjects of knowledge...as a site for an analysis of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.” Israel, Names and Stories, 7.


interchangeably to an ideology imposed on women, a culture created by women, a set of boundaries expected to be observed by women.”  

Whether separate spheres ideology functioned as a control to keep women subordinate or as Carol Smith Rosenberg argues, as a useful ideology that sustained a distinct women’s culture; in fact, separate spheres ideology conceals a more complex social reality. As the work of John Tosh reveals “Victorian domesticity was shot through with contradictions.” Leonore Davidoff and Barbara Hall, in their seminal work on the making of the English middle class, *Family Fortunes*, arrive at a similar conclusion. They “attempted to move beyond separate spheres” ideology, and concluded that “public is not really public and private is not really private despite potent imagery.” From their research, Davidoff and Hall reasoned that separate spheres ideology “was constantly being tested, challenged and reworked” and that “property forms as well as direct ideological imperatives” functioned as the weft and warp of middle-class society. A similar picture emerges in Kirkland’s analysis of late Victorian Montreal where the “social network [was] based upon political involvement” thus making it possible for political wives to cross and unite ideological boundaries based upon gender. Viewed through the prism of political culture in Ottawa, the lived experience of the political wives in this study provides a micro history that illustrates how change and continuity work together to advance their social and political influence.

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15 As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has argued “radical causes and loving female friendships constituted the woof and warp of the tapestry of female power and orchestrated social change which the New Woman wove between the 1890s and the First World War.” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 255.


18 Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 450.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century in Canada, political wives stood at the crossroads of women’s advancement that was manifest in a shift to more liberal views of womanhood and by contrast, the adherence of an ideology of conventional domestic womanhood. Canadians were reading about women such as Annie Londonderry, whose astonishing solo bicycle ride around the world represented a new breed of autonomous womanhood that “both perturbed and excited the minds of all classes of the community.”

For the more conservative elements of society, the emergence of the ‘new woman’ and ‘the woman question’ were viewed as a direct challenge to patriarchal beliefs and, in turn, to masculine authority. Political wives were ‘front and center’ in the social and political spectacle of political culture while paying homage to the domestic ideal. The women in this study exhibit a ‘new woman’ way of thinking as they expanded their personal autonomy and sphere of influence while at the same time they clung to feminine dependence as the main feature of their genteel female identity. These women, like those in Elizabeth Kirkland’s examination of elite women in Montreal, “created an important and influential role for themselves.”

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20 Toronto Monetary Times, 10 November 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers Volume 4. For further discussion of the impact of several 19th century cycling heroines: from Annie Londonderry, first woman to ride around the world on a bicycle in 1895, to women’s rights activist Frances Willard, author of “A Wheel within a Wheel: How I learned to Ride a Bicycle” (1895), to Amelia Bloomer, name-sake of the forerunner of pants. See Peter Zheutlin, Around the world on two wheels: Annie Londonderry’s extraordinary ride (New York: Citadel Press, 2007); Frances Willard, edited by Carol O’Hare, How I learned to ride the bicycle: reflections of an influential 19th century woman (Sunnyvale, California: Fair Oaks Publishing, 1991).

21 As Gwendolyn Davies has argued, the ‘new woman’ “reflected the intellectuality and independence afforded women by new opportunities in education and the professions.” Gwendolyn Davies, “The Literary ‘New Woman’ and Social Activism in Maritime Literature, 1880-1920” in Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton, Separate Spheres: Women’s Worlds in the 19th Century Maritimes (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1994): 233-252. Additionally, Carroll Smith Rosenberg has summarized late nineteenth century popular discourse regarding the new woman. “Women and men debated the social and sexual legitimacy of the New Woman,” she says, and “through her they argued about the ‘naturalness’ of gender and the legitimacy of the bourgeois social order. They agreed on only one point: the New Woman challenged existing gender relations and the distribution of power. By defining her as physiologically ‘unnatural,’ the symptom of a diseased society, those whom she threatened reaffirmed the legitimacy and the naturalness of the bourgeois order.” Smith Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct, 246.

22 My work builds upon Margandant’s examination of the ways women “accepted the duality of sexual differences...[but the] use of accepted notions of femininity in unconventional places did more than create new opportunities for themselves however, since other women inspired by their examples could imagine new possible selves as well.” Margadant, The New Biography, 10.

explored in the following chapters. Here it is noteworthy that Lady Aberdeen was publicly recognized as a “polished orator and somewhat of a politician” which certainly expressed a ‘new woman’ approach to her role as public wife; while the highest praise was reserved for “the home life of this brilliant sympathetic woman” who “accomplishes all of her charities quietly, is domestic in her tastes and thoroughly devoted to her children.”

Thus, continuity and change worked in tandem to maintain Victorian values about women’s role and status in society.

Up to the time when Lady Aberdeen delivered her first public address in Canada, it had “not been the ‘correct thing’ from a Canadian society standpoint for a woman to speak upon a public platform.” A report in the Toronto Empire described “How much good she had accomplished” and “how much encouragement she had given [to Canadian women] in this one thing alone” and that her public address would help every woman to the courage of her own convictions.

Still, despite the emergence of the ‘new woman’ at the close of the nineteenth century, not much had changed when Isabel Skelton, an acknowledged historian in her own right and the wife of a senior civil servant, arrived in Ottawa in the 1920s. As Crowley writes, “She was expected to subordinate herself to her husband’s material wants and support his career through extensive entertaining …as a wife dependent on her husband’s income and as a woman deriving status from his position, she had little alternative.” In the course of this chapter, the evidence presented through the lived experience of four political wives will show the significant role that they played in the interconnectedness between the social and the political, a role that

24 St. Louis Globe, 4 February 1897, NAC Aberdeen Papers Volume 24.

25 Toronto Empire, 4 November 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 13. As Veronica Strong Boag has argued, “not until 1893 at least, if not later, was it considered correct from a ‘society standpoint’ for a woman to speak from a public platform. Lady Aberdeen was, it seems, the first Governor General’s wife to present a public address, an act for which she was often criticized.” Veronica Strong Boag, Parliament of Women (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1976), 42.

26 As Terry Crowley has observed, Isabel Skelton “produced Canada’s first women’s history and assumed a broad cultural approach that only re-entered historical scholarship much later in the century.” Terry Crowley, Marriage of Minds: Isabel and Oscar Skelton Reinventing Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 76.

27 Crowley, Marriage of Minds, 157.
served to facilitate political friendships and political accommodation and overcome partisan politics while they continued to pay allegiance to popular discourse regarding gender norms and hegemonic definitions of femininity.  

The political wives presented here possess the qualifications essential to a dignified image of late Victorian domestic happiness. They were women who willingly took on a variety of roles in the private and the public realm in order to assist the needs of their husbands. In the case of the wife of the Governor General, as “the ceremonial and social aspects of the office grew” her expanding role required “a woman of more than ordinary endowments” to fill the post. As vice-regal consort, Lady Aberdeen set about to assist her husband in every way possible while taking for her example to emulate, Catherine Gladstone, wife of the venerable four time British Liberal Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone. Lady Aberdeen admired the Gladstone marriage as the ideal example of “a wedded couple whose lives were so absolutely one.” “Few people,” she wrote, “realized Mrs. Gladstone’s remarkable ability and real knowledge of affairs. The role that she assigned to herself was to appear as the devoted wife, the kindly philanthropist...little versed in public affairs.” Catherine Gladstone exemplified the Victorian feminine ideal of an unobtrusive woman who is devoted to her husband’s career and serving his political ambitions, while remaining firmly within the domestic sphere.

At the close of the nineteenth century, a constellation of factors had a profound impact on the public role of the political wife. As Pat Jalland observes in her wide-ranging study

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28 Gail Cuthbert Brandt has shown the “significant role of women” in the constitutional talks. It was “their social skills” she argued, “which facilitated political accommodation.” Gail Cuthbert Brandt, “National Unity and the Politics of History” Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Volume 3, (1992): 3-11.


31 As Elizabeth Longford has observed, “Towards the end of the century, there was a fairly widespread change in ideas of ‘womanliness.’” Elizabeth Longford, Eminent Victorian Women (New York: Knopf, 1981), 21.
of English political wives, “their supportive roles became more demanding in the second half of the nineteenth century with the growth of democracy and the women’s movement.”

The same was true for political wives in Canada of the 1890s. A social change of momentous proportions was underway. The rise of imperialism; women’s access to higher education; the declining birth rate; the appearance of the ‘new woman;’ along with the growing number of single women; the increasing secularization of Canadian society; and the social purity movement which was intended to regulate behaviour and moralize society: all these developments had an impact on the role of the political wife. Bonnie Huskins points to the “frequent inclusion of women in public processions” during the late Victorian period, as evidence that “the boundaries of separate spheres were changing.”

Thus, when Laurier was ill, Mme. Laurier went in his place “to smile, accept flowers and utter general thank yous and bring his regrets,” without undermining her status as the archetypal domestic woman. In effect, the few words of thanks spoken by Mme. Laurier on behalf of her husband represented a groundswell of changing public opinion regarding gender roles and relations. Lady Aberdeen, the first wife of a Governor General in Canada to give a public address, provided a model that supported hegemonic domesticity while expanding the public role for political wives.

The social changes that were underway directly affected women’s role in the increasing formality of the public sphere. Fifty years earlier, during a time when the “cult of domesticity had crystallized” Upper Canadian merchant and politician, Marcus Child depended on his wife, Lydia, to run the family business and to keep his “constituents

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32 Jalland, Women, Marriage and Politics, 90.

33 Barbara Ehrereich and Deidre English, For Her Own Good: One Hundred Years of Expert’s Advice to Women (New York: Anchor Press, 1979), 128; Lynne Marks and Chad Gaffield, “Women at Queen’s University, 1895-1905: A ‘Little Shere’ of Their Own?” Ontario History Volume LXXVIII, Number 4 (December, 1986): 331-350; Jalland, Women, Marriage and Politics, 175.


informed of his activities in the absence of local news coverage.” 36 Joy Parr has addressed the historicity of separate spheres ideology calling for the need to ‘break down this male/public, female/private divide’ in order to appreciate “the extent to which the private forms, informs, constrains and directs” men’s relation to work and political life. 37 Despite the ostensibly strict discursive barriers erected between private and public life, there was a blurring of gendered boundaries as public men relied upon their wives to provide support from the private sphere. By the close of the nineteenth century, the political wife was a fully incorporated wife married to her husband’s public identity. Typically, “his appointment to a post was her appointment too.” 38 They were a one-career family with the political wife operating as a support for her husband’s political ambitions from both the domestic and public sphere. This meant assuming the role of a public woman, always on display, while presenting a dignified image of domestic happiness and taking on a variety of roles to assist his needs. Lady Annie Thompson’s reluctance to accept a public role in the ceremonial opening of Parliament did not preclude her from supporting and directing her husband’s career from the domestic sphere. Chapter Six examines the extent of her active involvement in her husband’s political advancement.

Letter writing was one strategic responsibility of the political wife, undertaken to assist her husband to further cultivate good will, especially in delicate situations in which a woman could provide the tender refinement necessary to make the communication gentler and more of a personal missive than a political message written by a parliamentary secretary. For this reason, John Thompson as Minister of Justice in the Conservative government, instructed his wife to write to Lady Macdonald, as Sir John lay dying. “I think,” he tells her, “you should write to Lady Macdonald something like this: ‘You have my heartfelt sympathy and prayers in this great affliction that has fallen upon


38 According to Peterson’s research, “these were single career families but both husband and wife partook of that single career.” M. Jeanne Peterson, *Family, Love and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 166.
you and upon the whole country.” Then again, at times public men relied upon their wives to diplomatically decline invitations on their behalf, especially if they disagreed so strongly with one another that they were unwilling to observe even the most innocuous of social niceties. When Sir Charles Tupper was embroiled in a bitter political disagreement with Lord Aberdeen, charging that the Governor General was biased against his government, it was Lady Aberdeen and Lady Tupper who engaged in diplomatic letter writing of a personal nature.

At the outset, Lady Aberdeen wrote directly to Sir Charles exhorting him, regardless of their political differences, to “observe the usual form of ceremonial respect towards the Governor General by attending the State Dinner, [and] the Drawing Room.” Her attempts at reconciliation failed. Tupper continued to resist all of Lady Aberdeen’s invitations to Government House. Rather than continuing to respond directly, Tupper had his wife write a polite but firm refusal that left no suggestion of possible future social intercourse. “Dear Lady Aberdeen,” she writes, “many thanks for your kind note and inquiries. My husband fears that the pressure of the business of the House will make it impossible to do himself the honor of attending at dinner at Government House on any evening next week… and without him, Miss Tupper is also unable to avail herself of Your Excellency’s very kind invitation. Believe me Yours very sincerely, Frances Tupper.”

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39 3 June 1891, NAC Thompson Papers Volume 285.

40 Lady Aberdeen to Sir Charles Tupper, 8 March 1897, NAC Aberdeen Correspondence, Volume 5.

41 In his letter to Lady Aberdeen Tupper stated his position clearly: “I regret to be compelled to say after careful consideration that the unconstitutional and unprecedented actions of the Governor General towards my late government, of which I was a member, make it impossible for me to take advantage of the social relations your note suggests without compromising my self respect and losing the confidence of the political party to which I belong.” 8 March 1897, NAC, Aberdeen Correspondence, Volume 5. Aberdeen and Temair, We Twa, Volume 2, 37: See also Journal, 4 July 1896. As Saunders has shown Tupper contended that Aberdeen “violated the Imperial Practice and that of Canada, by refusing to allow appointments by a defeated Government, as had been done by Sir John Macdonald in 1873 and by the Hon. Alexander Mackenzie in 1878.” E.M. Saunders, D.D., ed., The Life and Letters of the Right Hon. Sir Charles Tupper, Bart., K.C.M.G. Volume 2 (London: Cassell and Company, 1916), 214.

42 Lady Tupper to Lady Aberdeen, no date, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 5.
possible her husband’s determination to avoid all social contact with the Governor General whom he regarded as his nemesis.43

Similarly, Mary Chamberlain, wife of the British Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, wrote to Lady Laurier to cancel a social engagement at the time when the two men were locked in political disagreement. An enthusiastic imperialist, Chamberlain resented Laurier’s more cautious approach to balancing imperialist sentiments in Canada with Quebec alienation and the development of a Canadian national identity.44 Whatever the reason for the canceled social engagement, genuine illness or political disagreement, Lady Chamberlain closes her letter with the possibility of “seeing you there on some future occasion.”45 Perhaps for Chamberlain, the future possibility of social engagement was contingent upon political agreement. Notwithstanding the fact that it is impossible to discern motives for cancelled social interaction, it is clear that political wives were responsible for extending and declining social invitations on behalf of their husbands. The result was to obscure the boundaries between domestic and political life.

The blurring of the public/private boundary is most apparent in the ceremonial and social aspects of political culture in the residence of political men, which functioned both as a private home and a ‘public institution.’46 In their work, Public Lives: Women, Family and

43 Sir Charles Tupper to Lady Aberdeen: “I dissent however from this doctrine running through your Excellency’s letter….” 9 March 1897 NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 5.

44 As Michael Bliss has argued “Laurier would not endorse the imperialist agenda…in his principled determination to walk a political tightrope towards an independent Canada.” Michael Bliss, Right Honorable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 43-46. See also Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain who argued that, “‘The time has come when the defense of the Empire and its military and naval resources, have become the common concern of the whole Empire and not of the Mother country alone, and that joint action or at least joint organization, with regard to this subject should be organized on a permanent footing.’…Laurier however, refused to accept a consolidated Imperial defense…” R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones, Donald B. Smith, Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2012), 101.

45 Mary Chamberlain to Lady Laurier, 13 July 1902. NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 809.

46 As Mary S. Hartman has reasoned “When we sever the equivalence drawn between public life and formal politics and expand our notion of the public to include life in civil society, links between women’s public and private roles become obvious and the family’s status as both a public and private institution becomes clear.” Mary S. Hartman, The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 267.
Society in Victorian Britain, Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair conclude that “despite the claims about privacy, middle-class domestic life had to be paraded and ostentatiously displayed in order to vaunt its superiority and become the model of home life.”47 Kirkland’s study of elite women of Montreal during the same period draws a similar conclusion. Their magnificent homes “were far more ‘public’ than the simplistic private/public rhetoric acknowledged” and “served to display wealth and social prominence” as well as to “physically reinforce class formation.”48 Even more so, the private residences of the Governor General, the Prime Minister and the Speaker of the House, were public theatres, that represented the pinnacle of social and political status. A properly appointed residence was used to ‘dress the set’ and underscore not only political status but also the hegemonic domestic ideal of its occupants. The front entrance of Rideau Hall, for example, with its “massive pediment [that] bears the royal coat of arms” accentuates the superior status of the Governor General’s official residence. Moreover, to designate further the pre-eminence of the vice-regal inhabitants, if the Governor General is in residence “the standard with its gold lion on a blue field flies from the flag pole.”49 Nevertheless, Rideau Hall provided insufficient accommodation for British aristocrats accustomed to greater luxury. As the letters between the departing Lady Aberdeen and her vice-regal successor Lady Minto make clear, Government House was a private family home with children and servants to accommodate as well as a public venue for official state functions and political entertaining. When viewing the plans of the house, Lady Minto expressed her dismay “at finding how little room there is.” After discovering that there was limited separation between the public and private rooms of Government House, she complained further that the Governor General’s residence was simply too small to properly accommodate visiting “friends and relations.” As well, the “great drawback” of

49 Margaret MacMillan, Marjorie Harris and An L. Desjardins, Canada’s House: Rideau Hall and the Invention of a Canadian Home (Toronto: Knopf, 2004), 7.
not having a separate wing for the Minto children was a particular source of irritation for the vice-rein.  

In her examination of the financial and social elite of Montreal, Kirkland argues that elite women experienced the domestic sphere as both “a physical space and an ideological construct” that incorporated “crucial meanings” about “the discourse and the behaviour” of the women who inhabited them. The links between the public and the domestic realm were equally clear in the residences of the Conservative Prime Minister Sir John Thompson and the Liberal Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier. While Annie Thompson was caring for her youngest daughter, Frankie, who had contracted a permanently crippling disease of the hip, she continued to fulfill the duties of a political wife. Lady Aberdeen describes the situation in her *Canadian Journal*: “Poor little Frankie’s illness was causing them great expense, …to eke out their income, while she was nursing Frankie, Lady T cooked all the dinners for all the members who dined with her husband, 250 in number, instead of getting a good cook. They only kept two servants.” One can imagine Lady Thompson playing the part of the charming hostess while excusing herself to nurse her handicapped child. Lady Thompson’s laudable performance as the loving mother devoted to her disabled child and supportive political wife underscores Davidoff and Hall’s observation that in practice “public was not really public and private was not

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50 Lady Minto to Lady Aberdeen: “Thank you for sending the plans of the House. I am rather horrified at finding how little room there is. I forgot there were no upstairs rooms. We have so many friends and relations who have promised to come and see us and I don’t see how we can possibly manage…it is a great drawback not to have a separate wing for the children…we shall have as you have arranged also maids’ rooms – I am not hiring a housekeeper but a most efficient lower maid- also we shall have 6 in the kitchen - but all women- otherwise, the same number of servants as you were kind enough to take as was necessary.” No date, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 3.

51 Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 36.

52 Lady Aberdeen described young Frankie Thompson. “She is a sweet brave little thing. She developed hip disease some three years ago and has been given up again and again. For although the hip is better, abscesses keep on forming and she has to have perpetual operations performed – 15 operations in two years. Both father and mother are wrapped up in her.” *Journal*, 14 December 1893. See also Thompson to Annie Thompson: “My dear Pet, I shall be able to get the particulars on Frank. Her condition seems very discouraging.” 27 July 1891; “I hope that the crisis with Frank’s case will then be well over.”, 15 August 1891, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 288.

really private despite the potent imagery of separate spheres both were ideological constructs” with flexible boundaries.54

In the same way, as a contemporary newspaper article makes clear, Zoë Laurier was the ideal combination of the domestic and political wife who made a valuable contribution to her husband’s political career by maintaining “an establishment suitable to her husband’s position” and, in keeping with the image of the ideal domestic woman, she managed to do so “without exceeding the limits of his income.”55 Mme. Laurier created a “congenial domestic atmosphere, overflowing with music, birds, cats and dogs.”56 Moreover, although supposedly a private ‘bon femme,’ in addition to planned parties Lady Laurier frequently accommodated her husband’s habit of inviting various party members to their home for dinner with short notice.57 In both their homes in Arthabaska and Ottawa, Laurier depended upon his wife to be ever at the ready for a diverse and constant stream of guests.58 Chapter Five explores more fully the ways that Zoë Laurier utilized the domestic sphere to create a political identity for herself and a locale for her commitment to social activism. The specific duties of the political wife, then, were not unlike the responsibilities of women married to prominent businessmen. Indeed, Kirkland’s work reveals many prevailing similarities. Whether wives of business leaders or politicians, in many ways elite women’s lives paralleled each other. They were married to influential men, lived in impressive homes, wore beautiful gowns and attended balls that emphasized their social position. In the case of Lady Laurier, she lived in a generously proportioned home that Laurier had had built on seven acres in Arthabaska, “where often

54 Davidoff and Hall, Family Fortunes, 33.
56 Madge Macbeth, Over My Shoulder (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1953), 47.
57 “The atmosphere of Laurier House …was informal…while the house did serve some political functions these were only informal in nature and usually took the form of casual meetings and discussions with Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament. It was in the fullest sense of the word, a house of hospitality.” Saturday Night, 14 October 1922..
58 Cathy Vye, A Social and Use History of Laurier House during the Laurier Residence, 1897-1921 (Government of Canada, Ontario Service Center of Parks Canada)
important visitors were to be entertained.” After her husband became Prime Minister, the Liberal Party acquired for him a substantial home at 335 Theodore Street (now Laurier Avenue) in Ottawa. For her new position as the wife of the Prime Minister, Zoë Laurier acquired “a first rate dressmaker” that further enabled her to emphasize through her apparel her social and political status. Elite women, whether they were the wives of prominent businessmen or politicians, possessed a social capital in which they were expected to dress the part and entertain on a grand scale in support of their husband’s careers. Kirkland makes the case that wealthy women worked in the same way as political wives “to create a realm of social and political influence for themselves.” The difference in what was expected of elite women lay in the locale. As she argues, “In Ottawa life was very much based on politics and politics invaded every aspect of life.” As a result, it was paramount that political wives in Ottawa learned to “understand the political issues of the day and who stood on which side of the issues,” especially when entertaining. Their designated task was to be always a charming and politically aware hostess.

McLean and Stamp describe the “warm friendship” that developed between Matilda Edgar and Lady Lucy Van Horne. Their friendship reflects the parallel social responsibilities of women who were married to social, political and business leaders. When William Van Horne, president of the CPR “distanced his company from the Conservatives and turned to James Edgar as a go-between with Laurier and the Liberals” the two men relied upon their wives to consolidate the budding relationship that would confirm Van Horne’s decision to abandon his support for the Conservatives. A letter from Lady Van Horne to Matilda Edgar set the date for the Edgars to visit William and Lucy

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Van Horne. A “few weeks after” James and Matilda Edgar’s protracted visit to the Van Horne’s residence in Montreal, the railway tycoon announced that the CPR “would play no part in the coming election” thus helping to pave the way for a Liberal victory. As a political wife, Matilda Edgar straddled the public/private divide. When James Edgar was appointed Speaker of the House of Commons in 1896, the position provided generous sized living quarters in the Center Block of the Parliament Buildings. As a result, it was possible for Matilda Edgar and her two youngest daughters to join her husband in Ottawa for the entire Parliamentary Session. As part of the traditional responsibilities of the post, the Speaker and his wife were expected to host numerous receptions and dinners in their residential quarters, thus making their private quarters a semi-public venue for the political and social elite and the subject of commentary by society and political journalists. Ottawa society journalist Amaryllis described an ‘At Home’ hosted by “Mrs. Edgar, the Speaker’s popular wife” in which she received “over three hundred callers.”

The Women’s Canadian Historical Society, of which Matilda Edgar was a founding member, described her “sweetness of manner, her energy and her talent” as the factor that “contributed to making the Speakership [sic] memorable and subtly different.”

The political wife straddled the intersection of public/domestic boundaries. She was accountable in the domestic sphere for the daily needs of the family and the smooth operation of the home, often two homes: a residence in the Capital and another in their home base constituency. Moreover, a political career meant not only the expense and responsibility of maintaining two residences, but the loneliness of long separations as well. Fifty years earlier Marcus Child’s letters exposed a deep attachment to home and the nature of political life that requires his personal sacrifice of being away from his family. He “frequently expressed the hope that the session would end soon, so that he

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65 As Amaryllis reported in her weekly column, “Mr. Speaker and Mrs. Edgar gave two large dinners lately and several luncheon parties. Mrs. Edgar, the Speakers popular wife, was ‘At Home’ on Thursday afternoon and received, assisted by her two charming daughters, over three hundred callers.” Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” 19 February 1898, *Saturday Night*.

66 PAO Women’s Canadian Historical Society of Toronto: Reports and Transactions, 1896-1914.
could return home.” As the following chapters reveal, the same sense of personal sacrifice of being away from home and family is evident a half a century later in the letters of John Thompson and James Edgar, in which they complain frequently of the loneliness of political life and of a longing to be home. Nevertheless, despite the geographic distance between husband and wife when parliament was in session, by the 1890s, whether in the capital or the constituency, political wives were actively engaged in assisting their husband’s careers through, “their social roles as political hostesses.”

The importance of political entertaining becomes clear when we consider the relationship of James and Matilda Edgar. He directed his wife’s political entertaining in Toronto, while he was a Liberal Member of Parliament in Ottawa. “I think that you are right about giving a tea instead of a lunch, cheaper and just as good – but do give something” he tells her and then adds the reminder, “don’t forget to call on Mrs. Kingsmill and Mrs. Lount.” Edgar directed his wife’s social calls in order to assist his political aims. As Keith Walden has argued in his informative study of teas in Toronto, which addresses the meaning behind the popularity of the afternoon ‘tea,’ which “was very much a ritual of circulation with one’s social set” as well as a way of “demonstrating acceptance and expanding acquaintanceship,” one “tied inextricably to quests for influence and success.” All of which was of course a benefit to Edgar’s political career, as it reinforced and expanded his circle of socio-political connections and repayed social debts. Moreover giving ‘a tea’ was a “convenient and inexpensive way to handle social duties.” In addition to giving teas and luncheons for political wives, Matilda Edgar

67 “It is very lonely to be without a letter from you.” Little, Child Letters, 68.

68 As Jalland has argued, “their social roles as political hostesses and mistresses of households were important to their husbands’ careers.” Jalland, Women, Marriage and Politics, 189.

69 James Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 9 March 1894, PAO Edgar Papers.


hosted Young Liberal gatherings in their home in Toronto. Gail Cuthbert Brandt has argued that women played “a significant role” in the “success of the political discussions at Charlottetown” by “doing much of the preparatory work for the social occasion in not only preparing for them but hosting in them.” In the same way, Elizabeth Kirkland points out that “women managed the process [of political entertaining] from issuing the invitations to the post event clean up” as well as by “entertaining elite women” through events such as teas, at homes and dinners. In this way, they “established powerful connections for political action.”

What is more, the job of a political wife was to cultivate good will while suppressing her own personal likes and dislikes. In their biography of James and Matilda Edgar, Maude J. McLean and Robert M. Stamp emphasize the significance of Matilda Edgar’s role as political hostess during Laurier’s first visit to Ontario as the new leader of the Liberal party, accompanied by Mme. Laurier. The Edgars “cordially welcomed the new Liberal Party leader and his wife to their home in Toronto and to their summer home, Roache’s Point on Lake Simcoe.” This was a momentous occasion since Laurier continued to doubt his ability to lead the party as a French Canadian Roman Catholic. “I know I have not the aptitude for it,” he wrote, “and I have a sad apprehension that it must end in disaster.” In the meantime, it was Matilda Edgar’s responsibility to make Zoë Laurier feel especially welcome on her first political tour of Protestant Ontario, the lion’s den of the anti-French, anti-Roman Catholic, Protestant Protective Association.

Elaborate entertaining was part of the job description of the political wife, particularly for those at the apex of political culture. In his analysis of the Prince of Wales’ visit to

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72 Matilda Edgar to Aunt Carry, “Tomorrow evening, we have a gathering here of young Liberals – a club to which Jamie (aged 21 born 1866) belongs to meet their leaders, Edward Blake and Oliver Mowat.” 2 July 1887, PAO Edgar Papers.


74 Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 95-96.

75 As McLean and Stamp have suggested, “despite her shyness and her difficulties with English, she seemed to relax in their company.” McLean and Stamp, My Dearest Wife, 189.

76 Schull, Laurier, 198.
Canada in 1860, Ian Radforth emphasized the way that monarchical ceremonies “reinforced class hierarchies and a sense of national community at the same time.”

As representatives of the monarchy, the Governor General and his wife were expected to give formal dinner parties for members of parliament two or three times per week. Before Lord and Lady Aberdeen’s arrival in Ottawa, vice-regal invitations were issued only to well known political and social leaders, and “the wives and daughters of prominent officials,” effectively reinforcing class hierarchies. However, under Lady Aberdeen’s tenure small, select and elegant dinner parties were replaced by large receptions held two or three times per week at Rideau Hall. In their efforts to “familiarize themselves” with all Canadians, “regardless of race and creed”, Lady Aberdeen and her husband the Governor General exercised a more democratic approach to entertaining than their predecessors by inviting “all callers at their receptions to bring their children along with them.”

It was what Veronica Strong Boag describes as Lady Aberdeen’s attempts in “bringing together in kindly personal intercourse with people of different races, creeds, and political views, cementing the ties of common citizenship, both of Canada and of the Empire.” Ottawa society journalist Amaryllis described the crush that ensued at the weekly receptions at Government House:

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77 Radforth citing “William M. Kuhn (Democratic Royalism, 1996) analyses the ‘high politics of symbolic representation’ by showing how leading figures in English public life during the period 1861-1911 devised ceremonies of monarchy that reinforced class hierarchies and a sense of national community at the same time. Ian Radforth, Royal spectacle: the 1860 visit of the Prince of Wales to Canada and the United States (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 13.

78 Messamore, Canada’s Governors General, 10-11.

79 Ottawa Evening Journal, 22 April 1895, NAC Aberdeen papers, Volume 19.

80 An article in the Daily Telegraph stated that “Their Excellencies are leaving no stone unturned to familiarize themselves with our people and their institutions, regardless of race and creed and to render themselves popular with all classes by their sympathy and goodness of heart, which last has even betrayed itself in their kindly invitations to all callers at their receptions to bring their children along with them.” Quebec Daily Telegraph 6 October 1893, Aberdeen papers, Volume 13. See also: “Raining again more or less all day, so the garden party did not come off, and as today we had asked parents to bring along their children with them, we had prepared extra large supplies of refreshments. We were all ready in case any came and the racquet court empty for games – however, only twelve people in all turned up including seven children.” Journal, 19 May 1894.

Seventy or eighty guests are bidden. The staff receives the guests and it takes nearly an hour for the anxious ADC in waiting to identify everybody, and make the necessary introductions. The scene is an amusing one - that is if you have the man who is to take you in well in sight, and have no fear of being left alone at the last minute. 82

There were many who believed that the good name of Government House lay in its select guest list, and any attempt at broadening the restrictions devalued the exclusiveness of the vice-regal court. Lady Aberdeen described in her Journals the problem of how to decide whom to invite. “The number of people in society increases, and the city grows larger and more prosperous,” she writes, “how to decide who is to be asked and to what is a problem. The dividing line is so faint.” 83 Lady Aberdeen’s determination to broaden the guest list to Government House was viewed with disdain by much of Ottawa society that was “confined principally to families connected with the government offices and law courts.” 84 The democratic leanings of the vice regal couple were unpopular with many of Ottawa’s social elite. Consequently, by the second year of their vice-regal tenure, the St. John Telegraph reported, “the Ottawa four hundred have boycotted the Governor General and the Countess of Aberdeen.” 85 Celebrated Canadian novelist Ralph Connor described his visit to Government House and commented on the criticism heaped upon the Governor General and his consort. As he described, “The spirit of this home is democracy of a very simple kind and also very beautiful type, a type that some Canadians apparently could not understand during the Aberdeen regime in Ottawa.” 86


83 Journal, 9 August 1894.

84 Aberdeen and Temair, We Twa Volume 2, 47. As Peterson has argued “We must recognize that the distinction between gentlefolk and the rest of Victorian society is the largest rift in the Victorian social structure.” Peterson, Family, Love and Work, x: See also Flora Fraser, The English Gentlewoman (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1987), 7.

85 As the St. John Telegraph reported “the Ottawa correspondents make public the awful fact that the Ottawa 400 have boycotted the GG and the Countess of Aberdeen...all Ottawa stays home and declines to recognize the Aberdeens either officially or otherwise...there are many compensations in life and the GG and his wife may console themselves with this reflection that if they have lost the favour of the Ottawa 400, they have made gains in other respects, in time and perhaps in money by this very circumstance.” St. John Telegraph, 1 May 1895, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.

Lady Aberdeen disturbed further the elite social order of Ottawa by continuing to extend invitations to Government House to ordinary citizens and lower level civil servants. Ethel Chadwick, the daughter of the Deputy Clerk of the Crown in Chancery, recalled that her family received their first invitation to Government House in 1893, after Lord and Lady Aberdeen had taken up their vice regal duties. Aberdeen’s successor, Lord Minto complained in a letter to his brother, that the Aberdeens had made it a practice to invite “everybody who wrote their names in the visitors book”, although most were “quite unentitled to official recognition.”

S. J. R. Noel has described political culture as “a conglomerate of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments that broadly govern political behaviour and persists even through radical changes of regimes.” The Aberdeen regime and the Minto regime serve to illustrate this point. The nature of the vice regal post permitted the “personalities who held the position” to adapt the role to suit their own proclivities. Thus, the style in which the vice regal women played their part as social leaders was conspicuously different. For example, during both Lady Aberdeen and Lady Minto’s vice-regal tenures, weekly skating parties during the winter were a popular feature of Government House social life; the difference lay in the guest list. The Aberdeens’ democratic leanings influenced their choice of entertainments and guests, much to the chagrin of those who subscribed to hierarchical ideologies. Thus, Lady Aberdeen regarded the social dividing line as ‘faint;” while her

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87 The Chadwick family received their first invitation to Government House in 1893. Lady Aberdeen was a friend of Ethel Chadwick’s mother. Chadwick’s father Francis Chadwick held the position of Deputy Clerk of the Crown in Chancery. NAC Ethel Chadwick Papers, Volume 2.

88 Minto to his brother. Paul Stevens and John T Saywell eds, Lord Minto’s Canadian Papers: A Selection of the Public and Private Papers of the Fourth Earl of Minto (Toronto: Champlain, 1891), 41.


90 As Cooper has argued “The vice-regal role was not sharply defined and the character of the office holder was an important variable” Cynthia Cooper, Magnificent Entertainments: Fancy Dress Balls of Canada’s Governors General (Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1997), 214. However, more recently Barbara Messamore has contended that “the interplay of character and circumstance served to shape the vice regal role.” Messamore, Canada’s Governors General, 220.
successor to the position, Lady Minto determined that her mandate as vice-rein was to “restore order and decorum to the social life at Government House.”\textsuperscript{91} As a result, she substantially reduced the guest list to a select few and the inclusion of lower level government officials or ordinary citizens was conscientiously omitted. Once again and strictly by precedent, only the privileged elite were welcome into the glittering world of Government House.\textsuperscript{92} Thus while Lady Aberdeen used her elite position to relax the rules of social engagement in Canadian political culture, many of her efforts at reform were met with a reluctance to change by those who applauded Lady Minto’s reinstatement of exclusivity and the good name of Government House which they presumed lay in its select guest list.

Lady Aberdeen’s efforts to promote a more democratic political culture in the capital were frequently met with reluctance by those who wanted to maintain the existing social hierarchy. The construction and consolidation of political culture was an “in between space” where political wives advanced and cemented their husbands’ preeminent position in the political hierarchy. One of the ways was through the socio-professional responsibility of ‘calling.’\textsuperscript{93} As Cuthbert Brandt explains, the “increasingly important social domain that connected the public world of politics and the home” provided women with some measure of political influence.\textsuperscript{94} Any attempt at loosening social restrictions threatened to undercut that influence. Kirkland’s work underscores the ways that elite “class boundaries were patrolled” and reveals that social capital increased with the “profession enhanced status” of “political appointments and positions [that] carried a great deal of influence and authority and could significantly propel one up the social

\textsuperscript{91} Gwyn, \textit{The Private Capital}, 302.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{93} Leonore Davidoff, \textit{The Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season} (London: Croom Helm, 1973), 16. As Georgina Hickey has suggested, “one way of formalizing a social institution is to use specialized personnel to carry out its function...women were used to maintain the fabric of society.” See also Hickey, “Social Seasons and Settlement Houses, 464.

\textsuperscript{94} Gail Cuthbert Brandt, “Postmodern Patchwork: Some Recent Trends in the Writing of Women’s History” \textit{Canadian Historical Review} LXXII 4, (1991), 453.
ladder.” Social exclusivity among a select set included the wives of the Cabinet Ministers, and the wives of the Speaker of the Senate and the Commons. Author and Ottawa socialite Madge Macbeth served as Lady Aberdeen’s social secretary from 1895-1898. Her satirical novel set in turn of the century Ottawa political culture, *Land of Afternoon*, describes “a social code quite as remorseless in its way as the tribal etiquette which governed the Algonquins when Champlain visited its site three hundred years before.” Further to the point, Faith Fenton a columnist for the Toronto *Empire*, reminded her readers that “the social factor is not one to be ignored in politics, for it is stronger than men and even women are aware.” Etiquette rules of elite society in the capital were quite definite. A lady was obliged to call on a “regular reception day, after a lunch, dinner or ball” or “to welcome a newcomer to the neighborhood.” Additionally, “if the mistress of the house was not ‘at home’ when a lady came to call, a married lady was required to leave three cards: one of her own and two of her husband’s; her card is left for the mistress of the house and his for both master and mistress.” Directed by a complex code of etiquette, ‘the call’ was an “effective instrument of social control” that specified the way cards were to be left, the official timetable for visiting, as well as the duration and content of the calls. In practice, the call effectively established and solidified social hierarchy while creating barriers to entry and effectively making political wives ‘custodians of society.’ Through an intricate system of calling and card leaving,

95 *Dau’s Society Blue Book* (1898) “identifying itself as an ‘Elite Family Directory’…indicates that negotiation of inclusion and exclusion was ongoing and could be contested.” Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 29.


political wives “decided whether or not to call on the newcomer, whether cards should be left and whether further introduction would be made...this meant that women had the power to exclude anyone they did not like”. In this way, political wives were able to police and maintain the social borders of the capital by evaluating and excluding newcomers and those seeking to advance their political and social standing.

Seeking to relax the intricacies of the call, Lady Aberdeen “suggested having a conference among the leaders of society with a view to lightening the intolerable burden imposed by the strict rules of calling, leaving cards personally and never calling except on the day ‘at home’ and always asking for the people.” Three decades later not much had changed. Kathleen Skelton, daughter-in-law to prominent Ottawa mandarin Oscar Skelton and his wife, historian Isabel Skelton, “took to print in Saturday Night magazine parodying Ottawa as a company town where etiquette demanded only that ‘you call on your superiors and your inferiors call on you.’” Here again we can see change and continuity working together in tandem. Local society leaders commenting on the “burden of social life,” by and large chose to maintain the complex system of calling with only a few incidental changes. Lady Laurier supported some of the suggested changes but only for the convenience of visitors to Ottawa; otherwise, she felt that no easing of the rules of etiquette should apply to residents. Lady Edgar approved of most of the changes suggested. Mme. Lavergne, wife of Mr. Justice Lavergne and a prominent leader of French Canadian society considered change unnecessary, nor did she think, “the French element would wish to see any laxity in the matter creep in.” This reaction reaffirmed a

102 Perkin, Victorian Women, 78.

103 As Davidoff has argued “women were used to maintain the fabric of society.” Davidoff, The Best Circles, 16.

104 Journal, 23 February 1895.

105 Crowley, Marriage of Minds, 249, Crowley citing Saturday Night article by Kathleen Skelton, “Looking Glass City”


107 Ibid.
way of thinking that sustained the maintenance of exclusivity at Government House and the hierarchical nature of political culture. What Lady Aberdeen considered as the intolerable burden of the intricate conventions of social life in the capital had its benefits by empowering women to police the social and political boundaries and to determine “who was eligible for social recognition.” In this instance, the wife of the Governor General failed to recognize the strict need to maintain social boundaries in the capital’s emerging elite culture where “antecedents were more diverse” and social status had often progressed from humble beginnings, was continually under construction and not firmly rooted over centuries, as in imperial London. According to Walden, Lady Tupper’s willingness to mix together people who met by chance during afternoon calls at her home [in Ottawa] was considered scandalous by some. Toward the close of the nineteenth century and thirty years after confederation, Ottawa remained a capital newly emerged from a “small northern frontier town.” Ottawa like Montreal was a city in which elite society was “dynamic and constantly in flux.” While Lady Aberdeen considered the capital’s social dividing line “faint” its nascent elite jealously guarded their position with a system of etiquette that served to regulate and formalize membership in the political culture of the capital.

**Social Season in the Capital**

The Social Season began with the opening of Parliament and continued until the close of the session. During the Season, the work of political wives was one of frenzied social activity. In one of her thrice-weekly reports, Capital society columnist, ‘the Marchioness’ described the Season’s activities as “fairly humming” with “teas galore, dinners,

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108 Walden, “Tea in Toronto,” 1-24

109 ibid

110 ibid


luncheons, the Opening [of Parliament], the Reception at Government House and several small affairs.”

These types of social activities were consonant with late nineteenth century notions of women’s role that served to regulate and formalize membership in the political culture of the capital. Emily Cummings, writing for the Toronto Globe, described one day in the social calendar of a Cabinet Minister’s wife’s efforts to fit in all of the gaiety and the variety of informal intercourse that oiled the political machinery: “This includes two ‘at homes’ a dinner party and a dance at Government House. ‘I also have to try to get in a few Tuesday visits’ she added, ‘and above all, I wish that I could get up to the House to hear Mr. Fielding’s speech.’”

Fenton described the extent of political wives’ socio-professional activity in Ottawa: “In their endeavor to fulfill their social obligations, the best known sessional ladies are really much harder worked than are their husbands in the House.”

During the Season, the occupation of the political wife was one of “perpetual entertainment” and the subject of society columnists’ reports. Emily Cummings’ report during the Season of 1895, illustrates the point. “His Excellency, the Governor General and the Countess of Aberdeen,” she informed her readers, “have been entertaining the Senators and their wives and friends lavishly this season, having given four large dinner parties and a garden party last week with two dinners, a large luncheon party and a garden party, the two latter which took place on Thursday being in honor of the members of the Royal Society.”

Heather Robertson describes Annie Thompson as a woman who “shunned fashionable society in Halifax” and “loathed pompous parties.”

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113 As she reported in her column “The Season has begun, we may expect things to be fairly humming in the line of festivities…teas galore, dinners, luncheons, the Opening, the Reception at Government House and several small affairs.” ‘The Marchioness’ Ottawa Free Press, 27 March 1897.

114 “Mrs. Cummings is a widow and a lady of good connections in Toronto …she is writing the weekly Women’s Page for the Globe.” Journal, 27 October 1893.

115 Downie, Passionate Pen, 200-201.

116 Journal, 9 May 1897.

117 Toronto Globe, May 18th 1895. NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.

Nevertheless, when her husband became Conservative Prime Minister Lady Thompson recognized and fulfilled her socio-political responsibility, giving dinners every Monday and Tuesday and ‘at home’ receptions on Wednesdays, “personal aversion notwithstanding.”\(^{119}\) Her motto for a successful party was simple: “feed them, feed them, feed them.”\(^ {120}\)

As the wife of the Liberal Prime Minister, Lady Laurier hosted her regular ‘at home’ on Mondays, gave formal dinners every Wednesday and Saturday, luncheons on Sunday and musical evenings and afternoon concerts.\(^ {121}\) These events, including the ‘at home’ receptions were not for women only and reveal that the social milieu of political culture crossed party lines in a complex network of social process and political interaction. Ottawa socialite and daughter of Liberal Senator and former Mayor of Ottawa, R.W. Scott, Lilian Scott Desbarats explains in her memoir that she was frequently asked to help at Lady Laurier’s ‘at home’ receptions. “I enjoyed them ever so much,” she writes. “One afternoon, Lord Strathcona (who was a long time Conservative party member) called and it was my good fortune to converse with him.”\(^ {122}\) Additionally, Zoë Laurier gave a card party “nearly every afternoon.”\(^ {123}\) Madge Macbeth described her friend Lady Laurier as a "fervent card player" who was "never happier than when at the card table."\(^ {124}\) Her enormous network of card playing friends included the likes of Sir William Mulock, Post Master General in Laurier’s government, who introduced ‘penny postage’ within the

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120 “Long talk about Ottawa Society and its ways and its wishes. Lady Thompson sums up its chief demand in saying, ‘feed them, feed them, feed them – nothing else will satisfy them’” *Journal*, 28 March 1895.

121 An article in the *Montreal Witness* described Mme. Laurier’s sociopolitical responsibilities since her husband had become Prime Minister. “As his wife she realizes that a great deal of social responsibility falls upon her, so she accepts the duty. She entertains always a great deal in Ottawa and is a most delightful hostess.” *Montreal Witness* 12 July 1896, NAC, Aberdeen Papers, Volume 27.

122 NAC Lilian Scott Desbarats, *Recollections* (Ottawa, 1957)

123 Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” *Saturday Night*.

124 MacBeth, *Over My Shoulder*, 47.
Empire and was knighted for doing so. He used to have an “inflexible program of three games of piquet with Lady Laurier every day after lunch.”

Matilda Edgar was equally as busy with her social obligations. Society columnist Amaryllis reported that over the course of one week Mrs. Edgar gave two large dinner parties and several luncheon parties, as well as a “most successful soiree musicale.” All of these social events served to create a sense of political culture as a distinct community and enhance a cooperative spirit among its members; thus “smoothing the process of discussion and debate” and possibly facilitating political accommodation.

The politics of socializing gave political wives the opportunity to help to create political culture as well as to acquire political knowledge and possibly political influence without leaving the private sphere. Indeed, Susan Williams maintains that, “being a political hostess was a serious alternative to high political office for women” and as such, they “could have a serious impact on national affairs,” simply by creating a social sphere that produced a congenial atmosphere for political accommodation. Lady Aberdeen possessed a sophisticated understanding that dinner parties could function as a social means to a political end. From an early age she learned by her parents’ example that one could socialize enjoyably with those who subscribed to opposing political doctrines. She would bring that way of thinking to her vice regal position, exhibiting a non-partisan

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128 Jonathan Schneer, London 1900, the imperial metropolis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 134.
129 A Susan Williams, Ladies of Influence: Women of the Elite in Interwar Britain (London: Allen Lane, 2000), 4; As Gail Cuthbert Brandt has argued women’s “social skills facilitated political accommodation.” Cuthbert Brandt, “National Unity”: 3-11.
54. Aberdeen, We Twa, Volume 1, 199.
diplomacy in her social and political connections, thereby further authenticating the Governor General’s constitutional role of “strict neutrality.”\textsuperscript{131} As a result, dinner parties hosted by the Governor General and Lady Aberdeen frequently included D’Alton McCarthy, whom she regarded as a “charming and able man” despite his vocal opposition to a bilingual and bicultural Canada and her equally determined conviction that religious and racial conflict could have a detrimental affect on the sustainability of Confederation as well as the “grave effects it may have on the Empire at large.”\textsuperscript{132} All the same, McCarthy’s defense of the Governor General “against Tupper’s charges of unconstitutional interference following the Conservative defeat of 1896,” the basis of Tupper’s unreserved animosity towards Lord Aberdeen, served to strengthen Lady Aberdeen’s esteem for the man.\textsuperscript{133} Moreover, McCarthy’s public praise for Laurier’s “bold and statesmanlike course” on the Manitoba school question provided Lady Aberdeen with the opportunity to effect a role as political intermediary through dinner party diplomacy, a fitting example of Pamela Horn’s contention that, “the influence of political hostesses remained an important feature of parliamentary life.”\textsuperscript{134} Elegant dinners hosted by Lord and Lady Aberdeen at Government House were intended to create a congenial atmosphere that could facilitate the apparently incongruous political alliance between French Canadian Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier and D’Alton McCarthy, a politician adamantly opposed to what he believed was “French encroachment on the true nationality of Canada.” Lady Aberdeen recorded in her \textit{Journal} that McCarthy “contemplated joining the Liberals” while according to Larry Kulisek, “after protracted negotiations were concluded, McCarthy consented to enter Laurier’s Cabinet, probably as

\textsuperscript{131} Messamore, \textit{Canada’s Governors General}, 25.

\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Journal}, 19 February 1898 See also 2 August 1895.


\textsuperscript{134} Horn, \textit{Ladies of the Manor}, 170.
Minister of Justice.” However, before any official announcement, Dalton McCarthy was fatally injured in a carriage accident.

Female Friendship and Female Power: A Synergistic Exchange

The social milieu thus had an effect upon political culture. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the friendship that developed among the four women presented in this study. Carroll Smith Rosenberg has concluded in her study of women in Victorian America that, “women routinely formed emotional ties with other women” that were “deeply felt same-sex friendships.” Similarly, Janice Raymond describes the friendship that can develop between women as a “social trust” and an understanding that “women have constructed with and for each other.” Moreover, she argues that “when political activity proceeds from a shared affection, vision and spirit” that friendship has a more “expansive political effect.” At first glance the four political wives presented here are more different than similar to one another and yet their relationship represents what late nineteenth century political columnist Faith Fenton describes as “the friendship that springs up between a woman and a woman [that] is born of an inward participation” and rises above social and political differences. Their exceptional position at the summit of political culture set them apart from other political wives and brought them together, but the enduring friendships that developed were born of a profound personal empathy. Throughout this and the following chapters, it becomes increasingly clear how their friendship crossed and united political and domestic lines.


136 As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her Journal “Mr. McCarthy’s death was much felt. He was universally respected and a most charming and able man. He contemplated joining the Liberals for good and had talked it over with Laurier very recently.” Journal, February to July 1898, 456.

137 Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct, 53.


139 Raymond, A Passion for Friends, 19.

140 Downie, A Passionate Pen, 183.
“Throughout most of this period, political differences did not prohibit social friendships”; nevertheless, the close familiarity that developed between Lady Aberdeen and Lady Thompson was extraordinary.\(^{141}\) The wife of Conservative Prime Minister John Thompson, Annie Affleck Thompson, a former shop clerk from Halifax, was the eldest of eight children born to James Affleck, a ship’s captain and his wife Catherine Saunders.\(^{142}\) It was Thompson who supplemented Annie Affleck’s limited Roman Catholic convent school education, teaching her French and shorthand.\(^{143}\) Under any other circumstances, Annie Affleck Thompson, Roman Catholic Conservative of modest background, was unlikely to have the opportunity to fraternize with a Protestant Liberal British aristocrat. Nevertheless, regardless of their class, cultural and religious differences, their similarities helped overcome their differences and were the basis for an enduring friendship, in which Ishbel Gordon, Countess of Aberdeen described Annie Thompson as “a true, true friend.”\(^{144}\)

The captain’s daughter and the Governor General’s wife were dynamic, strong-minded, capable and kind-hearted women. Lady Aberdeen was charmed by Annie Thompson’s unsophisticated, plainspoken manner, political savvy and unquestionable devotion to her husband. She described her friend as a woman who, “has a clear head and good judgment and has been of infinite use to Sir John.”\(^{145}\) Political culture brought them together but their intimate friendship lasted for a lifetime. Lady Thompson is mentioned repeatedly

\(^{141}\) Jalland, Women, Marriage and Politics, 90.

\(^{142}\) As Schull has said, Thompson “had to accept the snubs that Ottawa society administered to a wife who had once been a shop assistant, even though she was sufficiently well-bred to charm a Governor General’s lady.” Schull, Laurier, 290.

\(^{143}\) Waite, The Man from Halifax, 22.

\(^{144}\) The enduring friendship between Ladies Thompson and Aberdeen is evident in the letter from Annie Thompson’s daughter Helena Thompson MacGregor to Lady Aberdeen in which she wrote: “We want to thank Your Excellency for sending the cablegram of sympathy at the time of my mother’s death…I am glad my mother saw Your Excellency during the winter; she always counted so much on Your [sic] friendship and it certainly never failed her.” Helena Thompson MacGregor to Lady Aberdeen, 22 April 1909, NAC Aberdeen Correspondence Volume 4. See also Journal 19 November 1898. French described the relationship as, “Lady Annie Thompson who had become her dear friend.” Doris French, Ishbel and the Empire: A Biography of Lady Aberdeen (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1988), 164.

\(^{145}\) Journal, 13 December 1894.
throughout Lady Aberdeen’s *Journal.* For example, when the Governor General and the Countess of Aberdeen were traveling in British Columbia, they stopped to visit Lady Thompson who was staying with a friend on the west coast.

Additionally, to further highlight their enduring friendship, after Annie Thompson was no longer formally associated with the political culture of the capital, Ottawa society columnist Amaryllis frequently informed her readers of Lady Thompson’s stay at Government House throughout the period of Aberdeen’s tenure as Governor General.

After she left Canada at the end of her term as vice-regal representative, Lady Aberdeen maintained “very close relations with her friends including Julia Parker Drummond, [the wife of Senator George Alexander Drummond] and Josephine Marchand Dandurand [the wife of Senator Raoul Dandurand] Marguerite (Loulou) Thibaudeau, [the wife of Senator Rosaire Thibaudeau] and Kate Hayter Reed, [the wife of Hayter Reed, Esq., Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs.] According to Jane Rendall, “female

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146 *Journal,* 16 August 1895.

147 There were regular reports in Amaryllis’ column of Lady Thompson visiting Rideau Hall, either alone or with her daughters. For example; “Lady Thompson is at present the guest of Their Excellencies at Government House. She will return to Toronto next week.” 29 May 1897; “Lady Thompson at present Their Excellencies’ guest is accompanied by her youngest daughter, Miss Frankie.” 28 May 1898; “Lady Thompson and the Misses Thompson, who have been guests at Rideau Hall, leave for home this week.” Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” *Saturday Night.* 18 June 1898.


149 Aberdeen, *We Twa,* Volume 2, 104. See also: Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 319-326.

150 Henry Morgan, *Types of Canadian Women* Volume 1, (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1903)

151 Further evidence of Lady Aberdeen’s ‘very close relations with her friends’ is evident in Kate Hayter Reed’s letter to Lady Aberdeen: “My dear Lady Aberdeen we were deeply touched by your kind letter this morning…thank you for your kind sympathy, we will never forget it and I hope to avail myself of the great pleasure of talking to you again. It will all be settled soon I hope and then instead of talking about our troubles, we will talk about those poor people who have such greater woes and whom You are so nobly trying to help. Until then and always with affection and respect Kate Reed.” NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 4, 1 March 1897. As Henry Morgan has summarized Mrs. Hayter Reed was the “eldest daughter of the Hon. John Douglas Armour, the late Chief Justice of Ontario and now a Judge of the Supreme Court of Canada and his wife Eliza…was born at Cobourg…married 1894 Hayter Reed Esq., late Deputy Superintendent –General of Indian Affairs” Morgan, *Types of Canadian Women,* 280: In her biography of her mother, Lady Aberdeen, Marjorie Pentland has provided further evidence of her mother’s ability to create lasting friendships. As Pentland has reported: “Twenty-five years later … Mrs. Kate Hayter Reed” and Lady Aberdeen continued to correspond frequently. Marjorie Pentland, *A Bonnie Fechter: The life of*
friendship …could be the basis of a wider pattern of association among women with a political purpose.”

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes “loving female friendships” as “the woof and warp of the tapestry of female power and orchestrated social change.” Chapter Three examines the ways that these semi-formal friendships were useful to Lady Aberdeen’s construction of national philanthropic organizations such as the National Council of Women, the Victorian Order of Nurses and the Aberdeen Association. The nature of Lady Aberdeen’s friendship with many of these women was built upon their usefulness to her as “acknowledged leaders of society”. She made use of her network of female friendships “to forge a network of reformers and social innovators into a singularly effective political machine.” The difference in the intimate friendship that developed between Lady Thompson and Lady Aberdeen seems remarkable. So too was her friendship with Zoë Laurier.

Lady Laurier’s life experience is in marked contrast to that of Lady Aberdeen. Like Lady Thompson, Zoë Laurier owed her social position to her husband’s political achievement alone that raised her from the respectable but impecunious lower middle class to a position of influence in Canadian political culture. Just as in her relationship with Lady

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153 Smith Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 255.


155 Smith Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 255.

156 As Lord and Lady Aberdeen stated in their combined autobiography “Happily, we had many opportunities of intercourse with these dear friends with whom we had so much in common.” Aberdeen and Temair, *We Twa* Volume 2, 43. The numerous letters that were written by Lady Laurier to Lady Aberdeen express a fond friendship. See for example Lady Laurier to Lady Aberdeen, “There is no word to express our feeling and our gratitude for the kind way in which we were received by both Your Excellencies at the Vice Regal Lodge…Thanking you and Lord Aberdeen for the great pleasure that you have given us in spending two very happy days with you…Yours affectionately Zoë L. Laurier” July 11 1907, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 3. See also letter from Lady Laurier to Lady Aberdeen, “Dear Lady Aberdeen, I wish to tell you my sincere gratitude for the expression of your devotion and sympathy in this hour of cruel sorrow. If he can read our thoughts, he will be happy of your homage to him, as well as your touching message to the one he has left behind.” 5 March 1919. NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.
Thompson, there was no basis for Lady Aberdeen to develop anything other than a formal relationship with Zoë Lafontaine Laurier amid the environment of Ottawa political culture. The exceptionally privileged childhood of Lady Aberdeen was notably different from that of Lady Laurier. The difficult childhood that Zoë Lafontaine endured after her father apparently deserted his wife and daughter contrasts sharply with Lady Aberdeen’s childhood sense of her own “importance” when she fell ill with rheumatic fever and discovered that straw was being laid on the street outside of her London home, to deaden the noise so that she would not be disturbed during her illness. 

Moreover, while the young Ishbel Marjoribanks was introduced to the world of politics, and fascinated by it from an early age, Zoë Lafontaine’s childhood experience was considerably different. A Swiss governess educated the young Ishbel. She was not permitted to attend school because her mother “did not approve of school girl friends and thought that such friendships only led to foolish gossip.”

According to Pamela Horn’s research, this attitude was prevalent among parents of the landed class in the “desire to protect them from striking up undesirable friendships with social inferiors.” Zoë Lafontaine experienced a notably different education, attending the School of the Bon Pasteur and the convent of the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul in Montreal, possibly “as a charity child.” The indigent Roman Catholic convent girl apparently had no interest in

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157 Aberdeen and Temair, We Twá, Volume 1, 142.

158 As Lady Aberdeen explained, “At Guisachan, my parents loved to entertain their friends of all political parties...It was the custom of the house for my sister and myself to act as guides to those visitors who wished to ride on ponies through the mountains.” Aberdeen and Temair, Musings of a Scottish Granny, 95. See also Doris French who has argued that these social exchanges often were instructive for the young Ishbel. “At dinner one night in her late teens, the elderly John Bright instructed her in the principles of making a public speech.” Doris French (Ishbel), 27. As the Utica Globe reported Lady Aberdeen had enjoyed a culturally and politically enriched childhood. “Reared upon her ancestral estate, as a child she came in contact with and was a favourite of such men as Gladstone and Disraeli.” Utica Globe, 1 June 1895, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.

159 As Pamela Horn has argued the only purpose to the education of upper-class girls was a ‘relentless diet of accomplishments thus administered to equip girls to be most amusing companions to the young men they would meet outside the classroom.” Horn, Ladies of the Manor, 44. See also Marjorie Pentland, A Bonnie Fechter, 10. Aberdeen and Temair, We Twá, Volume 1, 105-106, 119.

160 Horn, Ladies of the Manor, 45.

politics, and as Joseph Schull suggests was poorly equipped for political life. Additionally, the two women did not share an intellectual connection. Lady Aberdeen preferred “objectively and constructively discussing things and plans rather than emotions and acquaintances.” Zoë Laurier apparently “had no intellectual pretensions, but she played the piano well.” Yet, despite their differences, they shared a belief in the “great cause” of liberalism, and during Aberdeen’s term of office the two women grew to be “dear friends.” It too was a friendship that would last a lifetime.

Lady Aberdeen recorded her initial impression of the wife of the Liberal leader: “Madame Laurier is shy and prefers talking French,” she writes, “but is very pleasant when one comes to talk to her.” Judging from her Journal, and their subsequent relationship, it seems that Lady Aberdeen felt an immediate empathy for Mme. Laurier, what Janice Raymond has termed “Gyn/affection” for an innate and emotional connection between women. Caroll Smith Rosenberg has identified a psychosocial interpretation of women’s bonding as “factors that may have permitted women to form a variety of close emotional relationships with other women” within which they “could share sorrows, anxieties and joys confident that other women had experienced similar emotions.” Regardless of their obvious differences, just as in her relationship with

162 Schull, Laurier, 91. See also Carol McLeod, Wives, 75-76.
163 Pentland, A Bonnie Fechter, 221.
164 Robertson, More than a Rose, 128.
165 Aberdeen and Temair, We Twa Volume 2, 43. In Lady Aberdeen’s farewell address to the NCWC, she expressed her affection and respect for Lady Laurier: “How could I try to thank Lady Laurier for the affectionate kindness and co-operation which I have always received from her at all times and at all seasons, however busy she might be? Her presence here tonight adds greatly to the gratification which I experience.” 13 June 1898, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 5. See also: Lady Laurier to Lady Aberdeen, “I know that you have always taken such a great interest in the good cause – if our friends are rejoicing, our adversaries are devastated … Our side was certain of victory. As for myself, I did not worry a moment.” NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 809, 6 June 1901.
166 Lady Laurier wrote to Lady Aberdeen regarding Laurier’s death: “Your kind letter of sympathy has done me so much good in my sad loneliness. God is kind to have associated tender and loyal friendship to grief and sorrow…” NAC Laurier papers, Volume 809, 5 March 1919.
167 Journal, 19 May 1894.
168 Raymond, A Passion for Friends, 6; Smith Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct, 60-63 & 75.
Annie Thompson, Ishbel Aberdeen and Zoë Laurier had “much in common.” Lady Laurier was the quintessential domestic woman. Her unpretentious, gracious, kindhearted manner, cultivated air of gentility and evident devotion to her husband mirrored the vicereine’s maternal feminist sensibilities. Although Sandra Gwyn describes the Countess of Aberdeen as “the most remarkable New Woman of them all” in fact, the Governor General’s wife continued to adhere to a domestic ideology that asserted, “the strength and grace of a woman have their best expression in the home.” During the course of their friendship, Lady Aberdeen would draw Mme. Laurier into her public orbit.

While the close relationships that Lady Aberdeen enjoyed with Lady Thompson and Lady Laurier were extraordinary, it is not surprising that she found a friend in Matilda Ridout Edgar, the archetypal upper middle-class woman of genteel antecedent and refined accomplishment. Educated by governesses and later at private school, as a member of the Upper Canadian provincial gentry Matilda had the benefit of an affluent childhood that included summer vacations away from the city in places such as Niagara-on-the-Lake, Massachusetts and England. Typical of her gender and class, Matilda Edgar enjoyed reading, writing, drawing and painting. It was her scholarly work that established firmly her identity not simply as an author but, more significantly, as a

169 Aberdeen and Temair, We Twa Volume 2, 43.

170 A newspaper article about Mme. Laurier stated: “Her home and her husband, her charities and plenty of young people around her, that is her happiness.” Montreal Witness, 12 July 1896, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 27. See also John Willison who has described Mme. Laurier’s “unaffected charm and grace of manners.” John Willison, Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the Liberal Party: a political history (Toronto, Morang, 1903), 119: In a similar tone, an article in the Utica Globe described Lady Laurier as “modest and womanly.” Utica Globe 2 January 1897, Aberdeen Papers, Volume 24. An article in the St. Louis Globe provided a similar womanly ideal of Lady Aberdeen’s domestic role. “The home of this brilliant sympathetic woman is as admirable as her public life…domestic in her tastes and thoroughly devoted to her children.” St Louis Globe February 4th 1897. As popular historian Heather Robertson has argued “Zoë was the kind of natural sensitive woman without ‘side’ who appealed to Lady Aberdeen...they would develop a personal friendship that went beyond politics.” Robertson, More Than a Rose, 136.


172 McLean and Stamp, My Dearest Wife, 62-71.

173 Letter from James Edgar to Aunt Caroline, PAO Edgar Papers, 22 September 1891.
daughter of the “United Empire Loyalists who fancied themselves as members of a native Canadian aristocracy.” Matilda Edgar’s distinctiveness as a colonial aristocrat in the hereditary, landowning hierarchical sense, “lay in language; naming, categorizing and assigning meaning…rather than in experience itself.” In his recent study of Robert Baldwin, Michael S. Cross further substantiates the notion of a colonial aristocracy. Cross describes a wealthy Torontonian, contemporary and social equal of Matilda Ridout as “the young aristocrat.” What is more, Lady Edgar had the unique experience of Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone’s glowing recommendation of her book, Ten Years of Upper Canada to Lady Aberdeen, calling it “the most interesting work that I have read on the subject.” This was high praise indeed, from a man whom Lady Aberdeen regarded reverently as ‘the grand old man.’ As Pat Jalland has determined, “the political elite of the Victorian and Edwardian eras was closely identified with the social and intellectual aristocracy of the country.” Even before they met, Matilda Edgar effectively established her social and intellectual credentials with Lady Aberdeen through her writing of history. Not surprisingly, Lady Aberdeen conceived of an admiration for Lady Edgar and her highly acclaimed historical work a full two years before they met. In fact, the two women had much in common personally: their immutable Liberal convictions, aristocratic pride and scholarly pursuits. While Matilda Edgar was


175 Margadant, The New Biography, 5.


177 As Lady Aberdeen wrote in her journal, “Both he and Mrs. Edgar are literary and Mrs. Edgar wrote the book, Ten Years of Upper Canada, which Mr. Gladstone gave me and thought so much of.” Journal, 21 August 1896. See also Gladstone to Lady Aberdeen re Matilda Edgar’s book: “I have here for you and Aberdeen’s perusal a book about Upper Canada. I would not have done it had it not been that you have such a deep and genuine interest in Canada. This is far and away the most interesting book that I have read about it. It has interesting English details and gives a noble account of the thin U.C. population during the war of 1812.” PAO, Edgar Papers.

178 Lady Aberdeen described her childhood as having been “nurtured under the shadow of Mr. Gladstone’s high idealism.” Aberdeen, We Twa Volume 1, 106.

179 Jalland, Women, Marriage and Politics, 2.
establishing her reputation as an historian of Upper Canada, the Montreal *Daily Witness* described Lady Aberdeen as an “easy and voluminous writer.”

They were probably introduced at formal events such as the opening of parliament; however, the close relationship between Lady Aberdeen and Matilda Ridout Edgar appears to have developed after Edgar’s appointment as Speaker of the House of Commons in July of 1896, when the Liberal Party achieved power. From that point, they were in constant contact, socially and politically. The Edgars were frequently invited to Government House and Lady Aberdeen would often leave her seat on the floor of the House to wander into the Speaker’s quarters for tea with her friend Matilda Edgar. The congenial association between the two women was enduring. Until her death in 1910, Matilda Edgar remained “one of Ishbel’s most faithful Canadian correspondents.”

Lady Aberdeen was the catalyst for the “very true and real friendships” that she developed among these four women. Archival research for this study has failed to turn up any letters between Lady Thompson, Lady Laurier and Lady Edgar; nevertheless, as Smith Rosenberg argues in her examination of the nature of female friendships in Victorian America, “friends did not form isolated dyads but were normally part of highly integrated networks.” Lady Aberdeen stood at the center and was the driving force of the integrated friendship that developed among the four women in this study. Judging from newspaper columns of the period and *Journal* entries, it is evident that Lady Aberdeen and Temair, *We Twa* Volume 2, 102.

McLean and Stamp, *My Dearest Wife*, 223-228. See also the diary of Beatrice Edgar, PAO Edgar Papers.

French, *Ishbel*, 266.

Journal, 19 November 1898.

Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 62.
Aberdeen encouraged and nurtured the synergistic female political culture that developed by frequently inviting Lady Thompson and Lady Edgar and their daughters to stay at Government House for days or weeks at a time. Moreover, we can see the socio-political machinations of the Governor General’s wife when she describes in her Journal the levee that she gave for the recently widowed Lady Thompson and adds, “She particularly appreciated Mme. Laurier coming and being very warm to her.” By actively working to create relationships among these women, Lady Aberdeen nurtured a female political culture in Ottawa that crossed and united political boundaries.

Lady Aberdeen “made special exception to ordinary rules” of vice-regal conduct by bestowing special favour upon these women, emphasizing further the close relationship that she shared with them. After Prime Minister John Thompson’s tragically sudden death, Lady Aberdeen assisted Lady Thompson’s move to Toronto, held intimate family birthdays for the Thompson children and ‘coming out’ parties for the Thompson daughters. Lady Aberdeen reports in her Journal that when she and the Governor

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186 As Smith-Rosenberg has argued, “Such mutual dependency and deep affection are a central existential reality coloring the world of supportive networks and rituals.” Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct, 73

187 The frequency with which their names appeared in the society columns reveals the close relationship between the Aberdeen and Thompson families. “Miss Thompson and Miss Lena Thompson, daughters of the late Sir John Thompson, are guests at Rideau Hall. Miss Thompson, who is being brought out this season under the chaperonage [sic] of Her Excellency Lady Aberdeen, made her debut at the Drawing Room last Saturday night. NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 27, Ottawa Citizen 17 January 1896; “Quite a touching scene was enacted at Government House on Thursday, morning when the Executive of the National Council presented to Her Excellency, the Countess of Aberdeen the farewell address of the Council….The duty of reading and presenting the address devolved upon Lady Thompson. It was not an easy task, for none among the women could feel more keenly than does Lady Thompson, the sorrow of parting with Her Excellency, but Lady Thompson read the address in a clear distinct voice, that while it trembled now and again, kept on bravely to the end, and the true simple words of affection found an echo in every heart…Her Excellency was silent but then stooped forward and with real affection kissed Lady Thompson.” The Marchioness, Ottawa Free Press, 15 October 1898, Aberdeen Papers Volume 13.

188 Aberdeen, We Twa, Volume 2, 26. Lady Aberdeen described a party that she gave for Babe Thompson and Lady Thompson, “It was quite a success. The elite of Ottawa took possession of the scene, two cabinet ministers, and some MPs and a number of Babe’s admirers assisted us by their presence and Lady Thompson had quite a levee, which she enjoyed. She particularly appreciated Mme. Laurier coming and being very warm to her.” Journal, 12 March 1896. See Robertson, More than a Rose, 103; See Also ‘The Marchioness’, “Society Notes” Ottawa Free Journal 23 January 1897, and Amaryllis “Society at the Capital” Saturday Night, 17 November 1897, 18 June 1898 and 22 October 1898. NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.

189 Lady Aberdeen recorded in her Journal that she was “house hunting” with Lady Thompson in Toronto, Journal, 6 March 1895. That same month Lady Aberdeen gave a party for “Lena Thompson’s birthday and
General were in Toronto, “Lady Thompson lent us her house…and H.E. and I honeymooned.”¹⁹⁰ When Lord and Lady Aberdeen were traveling in British Columbia, they invited the three Thompson daughters to stay with them, whom she described approvingly as “a very bright presence in the house, and through their tact and nice manners are never de trop.”¹⁹¹ In another of numerous Journal entries concerning Annie Thompson, Lady Aberdeen emphasizes their intimate and informal relationship. “Lady Thompson and her three girls returned home to Toronto in our car tonight,” she writes. “The house will feel very empty without them – they have been very bright and very considerate and do not require to be treated with any ceremony, and so become quite of our own party.”¹⁹²

Her relationship with Lady Laurier and Sir Wilfrid was equally intimate and lacking in ceremony. Here again, they relaxed the rigid rules of their vice-regal position and dined casually “au famille” with the Lauriers.¹⁹³ Further to the point, Lady Aberdeen described an informal afternoon spent at the Laurier home in Arthabaskaville where they “had a most enjoyable quiet day” with a “nice simple lunch in the most perfect good taste alone with themselves.”¹⁹⁴ “And by the way, Sir Wilfrid was a lover of cats and Lady Laurier of dogs. Lady Aberdeen was proud to supply both with companions according to their

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¹⁹⁰ Journal, 26 May 1895.

¹⁹¹ Journal, 31 August 1895.

¹⁹² Journal, 13 March 1896.

¹⁹³ In both her Journal and autobiography Lady Aberdeen has made clear the intimate friendship that she and her husband shared with the Lauriers. She described “a delightful day spent with Sir Wilfrid and Lady Laurier at their home in Arthabaskaville. Everything was as might have been anticipated in an ideal French country house, distinguished in simplicity, combine with the most perfect good taste…Before leaving Ottawa, we dined en famille with Sir Wilfrid and Lady Laurier and a few special friends.” Aberdeen and Temair, We Twa Volume 2, 43. See also “The night before, we made a special exception to ordinary rules and dined with Sir Wilfrid and Lady Laurier – just our own party.” Journal, 19 November 1898.

¹⁹⁴ Journal, 19 November 1898.
liking, of her own breeding.”¹⁹⁵ Political culture and a commitment to Liberal ideology were the forces that brought them together. However, their friendship proved to be sustainable beyond politics and was one of genuine affection. A year after Aberdeen’s appointment as Governor General had come to an end, Lady Aberdeen returned to Canada for the General Meeting of the National Council of Women, at which time Laurier provided his private railway car for her use. Here again, her letter of thanks suggests further a close personal friendship with Lady Laurier. “Dear Lady Laurier, I must send you a word of affection and grateful thanks,” she writes. “I had such a happy time with you and was so sorry to leave.”¹⁹⁶ Eight years later, in 1907, Zoë Laurier wrote to Ishbel Aberdeen a word of gratitude for their stay at the Vice-Regal lodge in Scotland, which she describes as “one of the best reminiscences of our trip…and one never to be forgotten” and closes with “love for yourself, yours affectionately.”¹⁹⁷

Like Lady Thompson and Lady Laurier, Lady Edgar enjoyed an intimate friendship with Lady Aberdeen. Matilda Edgar’s daughter Beatrice described in her diary the mark of distinction that her parents enjoyed in the intimate dinners with the vice-regal couple. “Papa and Mama sat as usual at the little round table,” she wrote. “His Excellency took Mama in and Papa sat on Her Excellency’s right.” Matilda Edgar’s friendship with Lady

¹⁹⁵ Aberdeen and Temair, We Twa Volume 2, 43. See Also Laurier’s letter of thanks to Lady Laurier: “Dear Lady Aberdeen, I did not show but I feel very much flattered by the knowledge that you are familiar with my pet weaknesses. I confess to a strong devotion to the cat; it has a bad reputation; it has sharp claws and can use them, but it has so much beauty and grace that I overlook its faults. Nothing is so pretty as a cat, except a kitten and nothing so pretty as my kitten, which I owe to the considerate attention of Your Excellency. You will not doubt therefore that my gratitude is very warm and sincere and I beg Your Excellency to accept the truest expression of it.” 2 June 1898, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 3.

¹⁹⁶ Lady Aberdeen to Lady Laurier: “My Dear Lady Laurier, I am just going aboard the Compania but before doing so must send you and Sir Wilfrid a word of affection and grateful thanks for all your considerate kindness. I had such a happy time with you and was so sorry to leave. With all best wishes both for now and the future, believe me affectionately Ishbel Aberdeen” 3 November 1899, NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 809.

¹⁹⁷ Lady Laurier to Lady Aberdeen, My dear Lady Aberdeen, There is no word to express our feeling & our gratitude for the kind way in which we were received by both Your Excellencies at the Vice Regal Lodge. It will be one of the best reminiscences of our trip on this side of the water & one never to be forgotten…Thanking you & Lord Aberdeen for the great pleasure you have given us in spending two very happy days with you… With love for yourself and kind regards for your entourage in which my husband joins. Yours affectionately, Zoë L. Laurier. 11 July 1907, Hotel Cecil, London. NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 809.
Aberdeen would continue until the end of her life. Ten years after her vice-regal term had ended, Lady Aberdeen stayed at Lady Edgar’s summer home, Roaches Point on Lake Simcoe; in turn, Lady Edgar stayed with the Aberdeens at their Scottish estate, Haddo House, and in their London home at 58 Grosvenor Square.\textsuperscript{198}

The following chapters will show how the congenial relationship that developed among Ladies Aberdeen, Thompson, Laurier and Edgar provides a concrete example of how female friendship could have an “expansive political effect.”\textsuperscript{199} Through their biographies, we can learn about the ways that gender and political culture intersected during this period. Jean Barman’s work serves to “remind us that the achievement and sustenance of nationhood are far more complex than political acts and government decrees” and that women’s “contribution to the nation are more difficult to detect than men who had access to podium and pulpit.”\textsuperscript{200} Nevertheless, Smith-Rosenberg’s observation is reflected in the lives of the four women in this micro-history: when women “valued one another they possessed status and power in the lives and world of other women.”\textsuperscript{201} As a result of their friendship and political connection, Lady Aberdeen drew each of these women, together and separately, into her sphere of socio-political activity and in the process further crossed and united public and domestic spaces by mirroring male political ‘clientelism.’ Clientelism is best understood as a process in which the patron, in this case Lady Aberdeen, is able “to bestow upon a client some tangible benefit” such as in the case of these women, political or social influence; in return the client provides political and social support. In a similar fashion to Ontario Premier Sir Oliver Mowat’s orthodox political machine that created its own network of client/patron exchange, so too Lady Aberdeen drew support for her efforts by recruiting “for the most part from among the ranks of the respectable, progressive, upwardly mobile members of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{198} McLean and Stamp, \textit{My Dearest Wife}, 252.
\item \textsuperscript{199} Mendus and Rendall, \textit{Sexuality and Subordination}, 137; Raymond, \textit{A Passion for Friends}, 8.
\item \textsuperscript{200} Jean Barman, \textit{Sojourning Sisters: the lives and letters of Jessie and Annie McQueen} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 4.
\item \textsuperscript{201} Smith-Rosenberg, \textit{Disorderly Conduct}, 64.
\end{itemize}
the community, [and] their connections to the highest levels of government. In doing so, she placed her close friends in key positions of the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC) and later the Victorian Order of Nurses and insured that Matilda Edgar succeeded her as President of the NCWC to carry on her vision of ‘service’ to those in need. Additionally, she gave support to Matilda Edgar’s Women’s Canadian Historical Society and later helped her to acquire access to the historical archives at Windsor Castle, in order to research James Edgar’s Stuart ancestors.

Recognizing that social and political culture operate in tandem, Lady Aberdeen exploited her role as social and cultural leader to advance “Canadian civilization, Canadian values, Canadian interests” and the imperial connection. She drew her friends Lady Thompson, Lady Laurier and Lady Edgar into the planning and organization of three elaborate events that served to emphasize this principle. As Eric Hobsbawm explains, in order to sustain a sense of the permanence of national stability and strength, “historic continuity had to be invented.” Not only did the three grand balls that Lady Aberdeen organized suit that purpose, they serve to illustrate the gendered nature of historical commemoration. While, “dominant-collective memory was most heavily influenced by what men thought;” as Terry Crowley says it was women who “organized to commemorate or to foster an

202 Noel, *Patrons, Clients and Brokers*, 63.

203 Noel, *Patrons, Clients and Brokers*, 316. As McLean and Stamp have observed “through the 1890s, Lady Aberdeen increasingly drew Tillie Edgar into the work of the Council and its affiliates – the Aberdeen Association and the Victorian Order of Nurses. As the wife of the Speaker of the House of Commons, she was a logical and non-controversial choice to serve as ‘acting president’ following Lady Aberdeen’s departure for Britain in late 1898.” McLean and Stamp, *My Dearest Wife*, 249. As Lady Aberdeen explained Lady Edgar possessed the qualifications necessary to lead the NCWC. “Lady Edgar was a scholarly woman of many interests. But she was also the center of an idyllic family life and her knowledge of public affairs combined with her home happiness marked her out for the Presidency of the National Council.” Aberdeen and Temair, *We Twa*, Volume 2, 115.


205 MacMillan, Harris and Desjardins, *Canada’s House: Rideau Hall*, 42.

appreciation of history.” In her Journal, Lady Aberdeen explains the reasons behind the plan:

To tell the honest truth” she writes, “we started this idea of having a Ball representing the outstanding periods of Canadian history with the hope that it might lead to the young people reading up a bit and that it might divert Ottawa gossip at least into past times, away from all the painful and humiliating episodes of the present political situation and the everlasting discussion of hockey and winter sports varied with Ottawa society scandal.  

These elaborate social events were intended purposely as vehicles not only for “socialization, [but for the] inculcation of beliefs, [and] values system” and in the process, to enhance Canadian nationalism and underscore the imperial connection with the ‘mother country.’

The first grand Ball hosted by Lord and Lady Aberdeen was held in Montreal in 1895. It was specifically designed to be an edifying and morally elevating experience celebrating the history of the French presence in Canada through a series of beautiful historical scenes and tableaux vivants that raised funds to assist the poor of that city. In his examination of “pageantry, spectacle and nation building,” H.V. Nelles shows how history has been constructed to “make a nation and that history could best be understood in a performance.”  

In this, the first of the three grand balls, the imperial connection was a silent presence that underscored the significance of British magnanimity in the continuing accommodation of the ‘French fact.’ The second and more extravagant grand

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207 Crowley, Marriage of minds, 75.

208 Journal, 3 February 1896; As Nelles has argued, “history would make a nation and that history could best be understood in a performance” H.V. Nelles, The art of nation-building: pageantry and spectacle at Quebec’s tercentenary (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 11-12.


210 Montreal papers reported on the grand event. “The Vice Regal Ball over 800 people had a good time.” Montreal Gazette, 6 June 1895, NAC, Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19. As reported in the Montreal Herald: “an event to be long remembered by those who had the privilege of attending.” 6 June 1895, NAC, Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19. See also: James Noonan, Canada’s Governors General At Play: Culture and Rideau Hall from Monck to Grey, with an After word on Their Successors, Connaught and leBlanc (Ottawa: Borealis, 2002), 208.

211 Nelles, The Art of Nation-Building, 11-12.
historical fancy dress Ball was held in Ottawa the following year. Intended as an homage to the French and English founding cultures of Canada, the affair held in the Senate Chamber, which was decorated in gold fleurs-de-lis and Union Jacks, included ten groups depicting historical scenes in dance.\textsuperscript{212} In the second grand Ball, just as in the Quebec tercentenary celebrations that took place twenty years later, “the English too could claim Quebec as theirs and … French Canadians in turn could claim British liberties confident in their record of loyalty in time of trial.”\textsuperscript{213} Lady Aberdeen enlisted Zoë Laurier, who was at that time the wife of the Liberal opposition leader, to organize a presentation dance as one of several groups presenting scenes “from Canada’s past and performing dances characteristic of the period.”\textsuperscript{214} Although the decoration of the Senate Chamber and the subjects of the tableaux celebrated the bicultural history of the country, the gorgeous display of Lady Aberdeen in court feathers and veil with her two young sons wearing powdered wigs and, acting as her pages, carrying her train effectively accentuated her vice-regal position and symbolically emphasized the imperial connection, thereby buttressing and acknowledging English Canada’s increasing imperial sentiment.\textsuperscript{215} The final grand event, the Victorian Era Ball, was held in Toronto in 1897 toward the close of the Aberdeens’ appointment to Canada, as a celebration of Queen Victoria’s jubilee. With a guest list of 2500 people, it was also the largest of the three glorious social events.\textsuperscript{216} Lady Thompson, Lady Edgar and their daughters were among the principal organizers of the Victorian Ball.\textsuperscript{217}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Cooper, \textit{Magnificent Entertainments: Fancy Dress Balls of Canada's Governors General}; See also: Noonan, Canada’s Governors General At Play, 210.
\item Nelles, \textit{The art of nation-building}, 48.
\item See Lady Aberdeen’s \textit{Journal} entry re Historical fancy dress ball: “The days of Maisonneuve and the founders of Montreal – Madame Laurier, wife of the leader of the Opposition. Dance – Bourree. \textit{Journal}, 3 February 1896. See also Aberdeen \textit{We Twa}, Volume 2, 56.
\item Cooper, \textit{Magnificent Entertainments}, 74.
\item \textit{Journal}, 8 December 1897.
\item Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” \textit{Saturday Night}, 17 November 1897.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
While the first Ball celebrated the French origins of the Dominion and the second Ball served to emphasize a bicultural history of Canada, imperialism was a subtext throughout both. The final event however was an unabashed, full-blown celebration of the imperial connection and the Victorian era, depicted in six historical scenes. The first scene focused on Canada and her resources. The following scenes were a celebration of the Empire (including India, Australia and New Zealand) and its achievements observed through the development of literature and music, science and invention, art and finally sports and amusements. All of these displays celebrated the idea of a greater Britain and an advanced civilization under Queen Victoria, who represented a monarchy that was “above politics and that could unify communities peopled by a variety of ethnic groups and factionalized by religious sectarianism.”

Lady Aberdeen, gorgeously attired in jeweled regalia, accentuated her vice-regal position and the imperial connection to Canada. She utilized what David Cannadine describes as “deliberate ceremonial presentation [as a] unifying symbol of permanence and national community.” Her “royal blue velvet dress edged with ermine … trimmed with Irish lace [and]… her train lined with crimson satin [was] borne by six pages.” Her jewels consisted of “necklace, tiara and earrings of ancient emeralds, diamonds, rubies with pearls and enamel and other Celtic gold ornaments” The underlying theme of the program, restated in the vice regal costume, stressed the Canadian connection to the glory of a greater Imperial Britain.

Throughout this chapter, we have seen the various ways that political wives, particularly those at the summit of political culture, used the “in between space” of political culture to cross and unite public and domestic boundaries, thereby influencing political culture and national identity. Moreover there was a significant role that political wives played


220 Cooper, Magnificent Entertainments, 102; Toronto Mail and Empire, 30 December 1897, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 22.
connecting the social and the political, one that served to facilitate political friendships and political accommodation to overcome partisan politics.\textsuperscript{221}

The following chapters discuss how the synergistic friendship that developed among these four women had a direct influence on government and political culture; and, in the process how gender ideology both restrained and supported women’s political influence. This work examines how the politically astute Lady Aberdeen made decisions about which women she was going to support, the degree to which she mentored Lady Laurier’s political development, and how the friendship between Lady Thompson and Lady Aberdeen frustrated Sir Charles Tupper’s efforts to become Prime Minister. By expanding their personal autonomy and sphere of influence they exhibited a ‘new woman’ way of thinking, while continuing to pay homage to the domestic ideal of Victorian womanhood.

\textsuperscript{221} Cuthbert Brandt, “National Unity”: 3-11.
Chapter Three
Learning By Example: Lady Aberdeen’s Legacy

_Her mission is not to preserve a manmade world but to create a human world by the infusion of the feminine element into all of its activities_1

_The solution to all of life’s difficulties can be put in one word – SERVICE ... as soon as we come back to that grand universal principle and recognize that our life in our home and in society is part of a life of service, everything rights itself and we need fear no adverse influences..._

Ishbel Gordon, Lady Aberdeen2

By any standard, Ishbel Marjoribanks Gordon, Lady Aberdeen was a remarkable woman. Often described as Canada’s first “Governess General,” she has become an iconic figure, an impressive emblem of dynamic womanhood in the narrative of late nineteenth century Canadian political culture and social reform.3 Canadian historian and editor of _Lady Aberdeen’s Canadian Journal_, J.T. Saywell, characterized her as a “power that could not be overlooked.”4 Still others have invariably described her as a formidable woman, who by means of her dominant personality and vice-regal position, overcame intense opposition from traditionalist factors in the country and almost single handedly established the National Council of Women of Canada and the Victorian Order of Nurses. Both organizations made a vital impact on public policy issues affecting women, their families and communities, almost from the moment of inception through to the present day. While others have focussed upon Lady Aberdeen’s dominant personality and

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2 See Lady Aberdeen’s address to the inaugural meeting of the May Court Club, Ottawa, 1898. Edwina von Baeyer, _The May Court Club: One Hundred Years of Community Service_ (Ottawa:May Court Club, 1998), introduction.

3 Doris French, _Ishbel and the Empire: A Biography of Lady Aberdeen_ (Toronto, 1988); Desmond Morton, _A Short History of Canada_ 3rd edition (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006)

viceregal position as significant factors in her achievements, this work signals Lady Aberdeen’s pragmatic use of maternal feminism as an effective response to conservative discourse surrounding issues of working women and female respectability.

Veronica Strong Boag has written extensively about Lady Aberdeen’s leadership in the development and growth of the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC). She concludes that Lady Aberdeen was the ideal person to “lend the fledgling organization the prestige it would need to overcome the rivalries and divisions of the Canadian club movement, not to mention the hostility of the anti-feminists.” There was, she argues, simply “no one else who had the social rank or the organizing abilities to give the NCWC a sound start.” As a contemporary article in the Toronto Empire stated in describing the Council’s inaugural meeting, “in view of her prestige of rank and her high official position among us, this fact alone removes any stumbling blocks from the path of the public spirited women of this country.”

“Under her tutelage,” writes Strong-Boag, the NCWC “pioneered Canada’s persisting experiment with a sometimes inclusive, pragmatic and liberal feminism.” Lady Aberdeen’s pragmatic brand of feminism, expressed in a maternal feminist discourse, was intended to build a positive consensus among Canadians in support of the NCWC. Carol Bacchi has noted that under Lady Aberdeen’s leadership the NCWC “deliberately disassociated itself from [being] too closely associated with the suffragists” and “to reassure men that their women were not ‘fanatics’ [and that] they had no intention of marching into man’s territory.” Their

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6 Toronto Empire, 4 November 1893 NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 14.


message was clear. Women were not “abandoning their traditional sphere”: rather, their goal was “to bring their maternal influence into the wider world where it was needed.”

In order to avoid what was clearly a controversial issue among Canadians, Lady Aberdeen articulated a maternal feminist way of thinking that was built upon domestic ideology, one that effectively strengthened women’s claims to participate in the public sphere as ‘mothering citizens’ taking on the work of social reform. In her analysis of *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*, Catherine Cleverdon draws attention to the fact that although some suffrage groups became affiliated with the NCWC, “it was never a suffrage organization and made that very clear from the outset.” Additionally, Mariana Valverde points out that Council “women justified their claims to political and social right” not by suffragist demands for equality but rather “by reference to their quasi-maternal public and private roles.” Moreover, Janice Newton’s examination of woman suffrage on an international scale concludes that although it was a “prominent issue,” nevertheless, due to its controversial nature “the international socialist movement was hesitant to support woman suffrage, viewing women as politically conservative bound by religious views [and so decided to refuse] to include woman suffrage in its platform.”

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9 As Carol L. Bacchi has argued “women...extended the realms of motherly responsibility ...a muted way of enhancing the autonomy of women.” Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred?*, 57; Linda Kealey, *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto: Women’s Educational Press, 1972), 18.

10 Mothering Citizens is a term used by Elizabeth Kirkland that aptly describes the maternal feminist ideology articulated by Ishbel Aberdeen. See Elizabeth Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens: Elite Women in Montreal, 1890 – 1914”(PhD diss., Montreal: McGill University, unpublished PhD, 2011); Linda Kealey has cited the NCWC records to show that “an 1898 resolution specifically repudiated the notion of a woman’s sphere limited to the family, and insisted that ‘woman’s sphere like that of man’s embraces the whole realm of mind.’” Kealey, *A Not Unreasonable Claim*, 21.


13 Janice Newton, “The Alchemy of Politicization: Socialist Women and the Early Left” in Iacovetta and Valverde, editors. *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women’s History*; 118-148. Moreover, as Pat Jalland has pointed out: “At a more fundamental level many [British] political wives in the 1880s and 1890s still viewed the female suffrage campaign as controversial and not yet respectable...even radical and socialist
As Strong-Boag writes, on the whole, Canadian women did not “support an outright suffrage platform.” Writing in the Toronto Empire, journalist and Council member Faith Fenton described the “average Canadian woman” as “very conservative.” “It is” she said, “a hard thing for her to loosen the old time conventionalities, the old time proprieties and proproyness in which men have so carefully swaddled her.” But “Lady Aberdeen’s presence among us will help every woman to the courage of her own convictions.”

Woman suffrage and the ‘woman question’ were ‘hot buttons’ guaranteed to stir up competing discourses regarding the proper role of women. As Boxer and Quartaert explain, “Responses…varied greatly from the cult of true womanhood … which emphasized the weakness of women and the perpetuation of domesticity… to feminists calling for full and equal participation in public and private life.” An ideology of equal rights feminism that argued for full suffrage sought to eliminate sexual hierarchy, while maternal feminism supported a separate but equal ideology based upon an evangelical concept of womanhood that defined ‘natural’ roles according to gender. Wayne Roberts argues that maternal feminism triumphed over demands of equal rights feminists simply as a result of “the lack of participation of working women and the weakness of the labour and socialist movements combined with the growth of the ‘helping’ professions to ensure the triumph of maternal feminism.”

wives were likely to give votes for women a second priority.” Pat Jalland, Women, Marriage and Politics, 1860-1914 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 210-211.

14 Veronica Strong-Boag, “Setting the Stage”

15 Toronto, Empire, 4 November 1893. NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 14.


17 As Beverley Boutilier has argued “Most NCWC members viewed the question of women’s equality and citizenship quite differently. They continued to hold that ‘woman’s sphere’ both in private and public life was equal but different.” Beverley Boutilier, “Gender, Organized Women and the Politics of Institution Building: Founding the Victorian Order of Nurse, 1893-1900” (PhD diss., Ottawa: Carleton University, 1993), 3.

perceived threat to conventional discourse about the ‘natural’ position of men and women by arguing that women were simply fulfilling their domestic role in a larger social context. Thus, by avoiding the contentious issue of gender equality “in some senses, maternal feminism de-emphasizes or subordinates personal autonomy in favour of a [relatively] wider social role.” Maternal feminism endorsed a separate but equal ideology that would prove to be an effective tool in overcoming opposition and winning support for the NCWC.

In a recent unpublished paper, “Big Tent’ Feminism: The Suffrage Politics of Ishbel Marjoribanks Gordon, Lady Aberdeen” (presented at the Berkshire Conference in 2011) Strong-Boag stresses Aberdeen’s commitment to a moderate brand of maternal feminism that sought male acceptance of women’s public role in social reform and even male participation. In doing so, she espoused a “maternalist creed that credited women with special duties but that always prized alliances with progressive men.” To those men who were critical of the NCWC as “full of evil possibilities for the women of Canada” Lady Aberdeen invited them to “come and watch our meetings, read what literature we issue …If you do this, she said, “we are not afraid of your verdict.” Her method of working towards improving social conditions while paying lip service to traditionalist gender ideology reassured the more conservative elements of Canadian society that the NCWC presented no threat to the existing gendered order.

Strong Boag suggests that ultimately Lady Aberdeen’s remarkable “intelligence, experience and negotiating skills” within the Council movement in both Canada and elsewhere built key bridges that facilitated feminist awareness. Conversely, Beverley Boutilier focuses her attention on Lady Aberdeen’s plan to create the Victorian Order of Home Helpers and determines that despite “rank, the force of her personality and her

19 Kealey, A Not Unreasonable Claim, 7-8.

20 Strong-Boag, “Creating Big Tent Feminism”, 3.

21 Strong-Boag, “Creating Big Tent Feminism”, 45.

22 ibid.
seemingly bottomless well of energy, the process of founding the VON demonstrated that the power of women to effect change was limited when their interests conflicted with the perceived prerogatives of male dominated political institutions like the organized medical profession.” 23 This work contributes to the considerable historiography on Lady Aberdeen’s philanthropic achievement by examining the methods that she employed to build a consensus among a diverse group of elite women while at the same time she won support from influential males and carefully neutralized controversial issues such as woman suffrage. It explores the role that friendship played in establishing and developing the NCWC and the VON and concludes that despite the fact that the original intent to create the Victorian Order of Home Helpers was “suppressed or changed” by interference from the male medical establishment, nevertheless with a small circle of close friends, many of whom were “experienced institution builders,” Lady Aberdeen was ultimately triumphant in achieving her plan of providing home medical care and expanding the scope of female authority in Canada. 24

Lady Aberdeen’s methods of creating, promoting and gaining formal support for these two organizations - NCWC and the VON - would prove to be effective vehicles for empowering women to influence public policy against the “almost impenetrable barriers” of a cultural construction of womanly virtue that eschewed a public role and political voice for women. 25 Rather than openly opposing more traditionalist views of gender roles, she worked to advance women’s social and cultural influence by utilizing a non-sectarian heterodox religious discourse and domestic ideology that supported feminine moral authority. 26

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26 Strong-Boag, “Creating Big Tent Feminism”; Boutilier, who has shown “The NCWC was predicated on an alternative construction of female authority, one grounded on a non-hierarchical understanding of gender relations that represented women’s institutions and social responsibility as merely different from not subordinate to, those of men.” Boutilier, “Gender, Organized Women.” 4.
Her intention was to revolutionize society through consensus, gentle persuasion and “patient tutoring rather than revolutionary action.” Lady Aberdeen possessed a commanding presence, apparently limitless energy and the social influence of her vice-regal position to establish and promote the National Council of Women of Canada and later, the Victorian Order of Nurses. She was, as her daughter described her, “a leader among women”; nevertheless, her leadership ability was only one component of her success. Her biographer Doris French contends that she dominated, energized and antagonized in order to create, build and sustain these organizations. But the main component of Lady Aberdeen’s success lay in her ability to build a network of synergistic friendships among women, whom she described as “really nice and influential.” Thus she was able to make a positive and enduring impact on social reform and public policy in Canada.

This analysis builds upon Strong-Boag’s work, as well as Griffiths’ comprehensive study of the history of the National Council of Women of Canada and French’s popular biography of Lady Aberdeen. Additionally, Saywell’s assessment of her character in the introduction to Lady Aberdeen’s Canadian Journal, and Gwyn’s informative study of political culture in late nineteenth century Ottawa, one that includes a discussion of the “remarkable Ishbel,” provide an image of an energetic and dynamic woman. Together and separately, their work emphasizes Lady Aberdeen’s leadership role in the creation of the National Council of Women and the Victorian Order of Nurses. Nevertheless, in her examination of the Victorian Order of Nurses, Beverley Boutilier downplays Lady Aberdeen’s accomplishments, arguing that

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27 French, Ishbel, 147; Veronica Strong Boag, “Creating ‘Big Tent’ Feminism.”


29 Journal, 14 April 1894.

the NCWC might have authority to influence [however] its members ultimately found that they had no real power to effect social reforms that challenged institutionalized male prerogative or authority. This was most forcefully underscored by the NCWC’s attempts in the mid-1890s to found the Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada.\footnote{Boutilier, “Gender, Organized Women,” 5.}

To add to the existing discussion, this work provides a detailed examination of how Lady Aberdeen, through her friendships, was able to shepherd these fledgling entities into formal sustainable organizations that almost immediately had a notable impact on public policy.

Infused with the spirit of social reform, Lady Aberdeen was well known to Canadians for her impressive charitable works. Even before her arrival in Canada to take up her vice-regal duties in September of 1893, her reputation preceded her as “the most charitable woman in the world.”\footnote{Strong-Boag, “Setting the Stage”: 87-103. As James Noonan has observed, Lady Aberdeen’s “chief interests lay in the organization of services for the benefit of the needy, both material and spiritual.” James Noonan, Canada’s Governors General At Play: Culture and Rideau Hall from Monck to Grey, with an Afterword on Their Successors, Connaught and leBlanc (Ottawa: Borealis, 2002), 200. See Joseph Schull, Laurier: The First Canadian, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965), 294. An article in the publication Once a Week described Lady Aberdeen as, “The Most Charitable Woman in The World: When Lady Aberdeen begins her charitable work in Canada, she will have the proud distinction of conducting charities in more countries than any other woman in the world...Lady Aberdeen has two orphan schools in England, several educational schools in Scotland, more than twenty industrial schools in Ireland and is a patroness of a working girls society in this country, and an earnest worker in the Society of Improved Dress, which aims to help working women. The first Canadian work which Lady Aberdeen will undertake will be the establishment of a society of young girls for the making of Limerick Lace.” Once a Week, 17 June 1893, NAC, Aberdeen Papers, Volume 13. See also: French, Ishbel, 53; Lisa Chilton, Agents of Empire: British Female Migration to Canada and Australia, 1860s-1930 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 127.}

Not surprisingly, Lady Aberdeen brought that same spirit of social activism to Canada. She was no stranger to the Dominion, having previously traveled across the continent twice. The austere reality of the settlers’ life that she observed first hand on the prairies inspired her to establish the Aberdeen Association, a free circulating library that she intended as a program to “educate and enlarge the spiritual and mental outlook” of the isolated settlers.\footnote{The Gentlewoman, 8 April 1899, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 5.} She returned to Canada for the third time in her official capacity as the wife of the Governor General. In that role she
would draw on her vice-regal position to mobilize an army of women in the attempt to achieve significant social reform in Canada.34

Lady Aberdeen’s commitment to service for the good of the community was centered upon a social gospel of religious and maternal feminist principles in which the “goal of Christianity was the reform of society.”35 As Barbara Rees reminds us, the primary aim of the Victorian lady was to live a good and useful life.36 During this period, Queen Victoria served as the role model for women’s work, which was to be “oriented toward the good of human lives.”37 Following this line of thinking, Lady Aberdeen advanced the notion that domestic virtue, philanthropy and public service were entwined. She described, “women’s mission as mothering” the public domain and absolutely essential to the well being of society.38 There was nothing new about women undertaking charitable work. Traditionally, philanthropy was the responsibility of wealthy leisureed women, especially the wives and daughters of the landed families, often described as “Lady Bountiful” who acted as “dispensers of charity” to their tenants.39 Their role was to ameliorate suffering, not to eliminate its causes. However, as Linda Kealey observes, by

34 Lady Aberdeen explained years later how this army of women would effect change without suffrage but through domestic channels. “The women who belong to these Councils will go home and tell their men folk that this thing is a reform which has to come and will explain why the women want it.” Aberdeen, We Twa: Reminiscences of Lord and Lady Aberdeen Two Volumes (London: W. Collins, 1925): Volume 2, 100.


38 Lady Aberdeen’s inaugural address to the National Council of Women, 11 April 1894, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 4.

39 For further discussion of Lady Bountiful see Barbara Rees, The Victorian Lady, 77; Pamela Horn, Ladies of the Manor, 7 & 120; As F.K. Prochaska, has argued “Charitable work offered escape and adventure for women restricted to enforced idleness.” F.K. Prochaska, Women and Philanthropy in Eighteenth Century England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 12. Additionally, N.E.S. Griffiths has argued, “charitable work has always been undertaken by women, as individuals, or members of a group.” Griffiths, The splendid vision, 2. See also Joan Perkin who has observed “For centuries prior to the Victorian era, upper-class women were engaged in charitable activities in behalf of the poor and sick. Philanthropy….was long considered the proper work of privileged women.” Joan Perkin, Victorian Women (London: J. Murray, 1993), Chapter 11 “Ladies Bountiful”
the last quarter of the nineteenth century, women in Canada were organizing to eliminate the causes of social inequities that were increasingly visible by focusing upon the need for a “fundamental change of social conditions.”  

More than just an act of kindness, elite women were recognizing that “philanthropy is an act of power.” Just how much power organized women were able to access is a continuing discussion among historians. Elizabeth Kirkland’s examination of philanthropy among elite women of Montreal is in part a response to the awareness that “historiography has been frugal in its assessment of the real power and influence wielded by these women.” The elite women in Kirkland’s study “out of their identities as mothers created an important and influential role for themselves first in charity and philanthropy and eventually in overt politics.” However, Beverley Boutilier contends that the “NCWC had no real power to effect social reforms that challenged institutional male prerogative or authority.” Indeed, she suggests that, “women’s actual power to influence was circumscribed by the dominant culture’s hierarchical construction of gender relations.” Conversely, Kathleen McCarthy suggests that philanthropic work enabled women to gain access to power through “non-governmental organizations to effect political reform.” This work is intended to contribute to the discussion by proposing that maternal feminists accepted an essentialist view of gendered identities and never intended to challenge gender relations or male authority but to work within an adaptation of sexual hierarchy by proposing a separate but equal discourse on power. However, maternal feminism with its separate but equal philosophy of gender relations failed to win universal support among those Canadians who subscribed to a rigid discourse of separate spheres. Nevertheless, their efforts to

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40 Kealey, A Not Unreasonable Claim, 5.


43 Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 33.


45 “Parallel Power Structures: Women and the Voluntary Sphere” in McCarthy, editor, Lady Bountiful Revisited: 1-34.
create a “parallel power” structure are notable in achieving many of their objectives in social reform.

Alison Prentice, among many other historians, attributes religious faith as the catalyst for women’s social activism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Canada. While men continued to hold the leadership positions in the church, this upsurge in women’s social activism was rationalized, validated and encouraged by a religious ideology that stressed the moral superiority of women over men. It effectively mitigated an apparently strict divide within an ideological frame-work that posited a domestic sphere for women and a public sphere for men. Ruth Compton Brouwer emphasizes the important role that “religion played in determining women’s and society’s evolving perception of their proper sphere” and a shift to more liberal views of womanhood arguing that women successfully used religious ideology to “enlarge their own lives.”

46 “For most women, religious faith was the underpinning of their activism, just as it was for their charitable work.” Alison Prentice et al, editors, Canadian Women (Toronto: Nelson/Thomson, 2004)), 189. See Ruth Compton Brouwer who has identified the “paradoxical pattern of restraint and opportunity” within religious discourse that empowered women to become socially active. Ruth Compton Brouwer, New Women for God: Canadian Presbyterian Women and India Missions: 1876-1914. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 9. As Gail Cuthbert Brandt has argued, missionary work was providing women with “the opportunity to organize, to administer quite substantial amounts of money and to make decisions on their own.” Gail Cuthbert Brandt, “Organizations on Canada: The English Protestant Tradition” in Paula Bourne, editor, Women’s Paid and Unpaid Work: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1985): 79-95. See also Marguerite van Die who has explored the ways by which feminine access to the public world was legitimated through voluntary religious societies in Canada. Marguerite van Die, “A Woman’s Awakening: Evangelical Belief and Female Spirituality in Mid-Nineteenth Century Canada” in Wendy Mitchinson, et al, editors, Canadian Women: A Reader. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996): 49-67.

47 As Marks has shown, the lay leaders of the churches “were predominantly -though not exclusively male. Although those holding executive positions were men, there were some limited opportunities for women to participate in the administration of the churches.” Lynne Marks, Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion. Leisure and Identity in Late Nineteenth Century Small Town Ontario. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 53.


Mary P. Ryan’s study, “The Power of Women’s Networks,” indicates how in the first half of the nineteenth century, women agitating from within the domestic sphere were able to influence the public sphere through voluntary organizations.\(^50\) Similarly, Nancy Cott has determined that participation in “organized church groups” provided the “contexts in which women could connect purposefully to the community.”\(^51\) Additionally, Marguerite van Die has explored the ways by which women’s access to the public sphere was legitimated through voluntary religious societies in Canada.\(^52\) Here we can see how change developed from continuity and how gender roles and relations can be produced, reproduced and transformed in different situations over time.\(^53\) By the close of the nineteenth century, gender identity was evolving into a discourse that validated the existence of women’s voluntary organizations. As Griffiths explains, “the obvious link of such activities with religious institutions deflected some of the criticism directed against women meddling in matters better left to men.”\(^54\) Francis Elizabeth Murray contended in 1900 that every church spire was an indication of women’s active influence for the betterment of Canadian and foreign societies.\(^55\) Myra Rutherford’s study of Anglican women missionaries in northern Canada reveals that simply by “projecting an idealized


\(^{52}\) van Die, “A Woman’s Awakening”.


\(^{54}\) Griffiths, *The Splendid Vision*, 5.

image of superior womanhood, missionary women could gain power and influence” while at the same time, “many [women missionaries] took the opportunity to break free of gender defined categories.”

Regardless of the image of the “elevated gentlewoman” that they were expected to epitomize, missionary women “were always expected to be efficient and self-reliant. They often …lived in native villages for weeks and sometimes months at a time…canoed, chopped and piled wood and at time gathered food.”

Religion provided the rationalization for women taking on an increasingly central role as missionaries, philanthropists and social activists and inadvertently validated a more active and, often, a more autonomous role in public life.

A new gender paradigm was developing amidst the tumultuous transformation of Canada from an agrarian and rural society to an industrial and urban society, a shift accompanied by social changes that appeared to justify women’s moral intervention. The last quarter of the nineteenth century was a watershed of unprecedented industrialization in Canada that spawned sprawling factories and a new and expanding working class. Stacie Burke’s


58 Gail Cuthbert Brandt’s research has demonstrated that by the late nineteenth century women provided the main impetus for missionary expansion. Gail Cuthbert Brandt, “Organizations in Canada: The English Protestant Tradition” in Paula Bourne, editor, Women’s Paid and Unpaid Work: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1985): 79-95. Further to Cuthbert Brandt’s work, Lynne Marks’ examination of religion in late 19th century small town Ontario reveals a distinct “feminization of the Church”, in which “Protestant discourse was imbued with feminine imagery.” Moreover, “ladies aid and women’s missionary societies provided 19th century women with their first opportunity to…work together with other women in organized groups.” Marks, Revivals and Roller Rinks, 14 & 56. For further discussion of late nineteenth century missionary and philanthropic Canadian women, see Compton Brouwer, New Women for God; Griffiths, The Splendid Vision; Sharon Cook, “Through sunshine and shadow”: The Women’s Christian Temperance Union, evangelicalism and reform in Ontario, 1874-1930 (Montreal: McGill/Queen’s University Press, 1995); and, Suzanne Rickard, “Victorian Women with Causes: Writing, Religion and Action” Sue Morgan, editor, Women, Religion and Feminism in Britain, 1750-1900 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002)

research shows that by 1901 Canada was still largely rural, with the main urban centers being Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. Although Canada in general and Ontario in particular remained for the most part an agrarian society at the close of the nineteenth century, nevertheless Gregory Kealey’s study indicates that “by 1871, Toronto had already attained a significant level of industrialization” and by the early 1890s “capital was poised to enter its monopoly phase.” Brian McKillop describes the rapid change in Toronto during the 1890s. “The good times had begun. New factories opened daily. Real estate boomed. …Electric streetcars introduced in 1894 carried workers to the stores and offices.”

However, the ‘good times’ did not extend to everyone. Increasing demand for industrial labour created a mushrooming working-class population. In a period of two years, 1889 - 1891, the population of Toronto grew by more than 10,000 people, who were flooding into the city in search of employment. The result was an extraordinary housing shortage and appalling living conditions. Consequently, in turn of the century Toronto “some families lived in hastily constructed shacks, in tents in backyards and even on the street.” Kenneth Sylvester has shown that the problem for Toronto industrialists lay in attracting more workers from the countryside: “with tight housing markets and industrial employment still marked by seasonal slow downs, urban employers had to compete with

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61 Kealey, Toronto Workers Respond, introduction.


63 City of Toronto Archives, Population Information File: Population in 1889 = 160,141; in 1891= 174,349. In the years between 1881 and 1891 the population of Toronto grew by almost 100,000 people, 1881 = 86,415.

64 R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones and Donald B. Smith, Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation, (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2012), 163.
traditional understandings of economic security in the countryside.” Consequently, in Ontario a wholesale displacement of working families from the countryside did not occur until the early twentieth century; nevertheless, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a significant number of individuals were at the forefront of what would prove to be a continuing trend towards increased urbanization. Thus, by the turn of the century both young men and young women, who were “native born, gravitated to the new urban economy. They came in search of employment and more independent, less supervised lives.” As Strong-Boag concludes, by the end of the nineteenth century women in Canada “constituted an important but docile element in the labour force.”

Notwithstanding the increasing demand for both male and female urban workers, paid employment opportunities in both rural and urban locales were much weaker for women than for men, particularly in Ontario where industrialized farming was displacing female labour. Marvin McInnes’ analysis of census records shows that during the years 1851-1891, the nature of farming was changing and “what had previously been women’s work passed into the hands of men.” While on the one hand there were new opportunities for paid employment for women as urban workers, on the other hand the 1891 census indicates that in Ontario alone a sizable number of unmarried women (“50,000 over

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66 Sylvester, “Rural to Urban Migration” 147-149. As Carolyn Strange has observed, “as early as 1871, for instance, Henderson’s Straw Works employed almost 175 female employees and only 26 men and boys. This female dominated form was the city’s largest employer at the time. The garment industry however soon employed the greatest proportion of female workers after domestic service…almost 2,000 women out of a total female labour force of 6,000 in 1881.” Carolyn Strange, Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 24. Joy Parr has examined the gendered nature of the “social and economic change that accompanied industrialization” as Ontario transitioned from a predominately agrarian society. Joy Parr, The Gender of Breadwinners: women, men and change in two industrial towns, 1880 – 1950 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990)

67 Strong-Boag, “Setting the Stage”, 84.

68 McInnes has shown that “as the factory cheese industry developed, dairy farming that had been done by women on farms came to be increasingly done by men in factories.” Moreover, “as Ontario farming became largely involved with animal husbandry…beef, pork and dairy production …farming in Ontario offered a relative sense a diminishing opportunity for remunerative work for women.” R. Marvin McInnis, “Women, Work and Childbearing: Ontario in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century” Histoire Sociale/Social History Volume XXIV no 48 (Novembre/November, 1991): 237-262.
twenty-five years of age”) were living in their parents’ home with no remunerated occupation. Two factors seem to have been in play here. First, there were more single women than there were employment opportunities, and second, the nature of employment available to women generally was unsuitable for those who identified themselves as middle class.

McInnes reports that by 1891 domestic service remained the chief employment opportunity for women, with 38% of workingwomen employed as servants. In Toronto in 1894, Lady Aberdeen toured an industrial factory that employed 200 women. She asked “whether the girls came from abroad” and was told that “they were mostly Canadians, who won’t go into service if they can help it.” As McInnes research reveals, “Dressmakers, seamstresses and milliners were the second most numerous occupations for women (20%).” The third leading occupation for women, which was new upon the scene, was employment as school and music teachers. From his research it is clear that, “Few women were yet working as shop clerks or in business offices.” In 1891, according to the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, “almost 12% of the total female

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69 “Between 1851 –1891 female employment in Ontario increased considerably and a somewhat wider selection of occupations opened to women. Nevertheless, the overall picture remains of a limited movement of women into the labour market.” McInnis, “Women, Work and Childbearing”.

70 Lady Aberdeen described the employment of domestic servants in Canada. “Comparatively few people keep more than one servant. One cannot help wondering whether some of these girls could not be trained for service if they were taken young enough.” Journal, 20 February 1894.

71 See Canada census 1891:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>All female workers</td>
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<td>Servants</td>
<td>33,781</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dressmakers, seamstress, milliner</td>
<td>18,521</td>
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<tr>
<td>School teacher, music teacher</td>
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<td>5,245</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>1,943</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laundresses</td>
<td>1,550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses and midwives</td>
<td>964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookkeeper</td>
<td>959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boardinghouse keepers</td>
<td>719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stenographers</td>
<td>611</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knitting Mill operatives</td>
<td>521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other occupations</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

population was gainfully employed.” However, it is probable that the number of women employed for wages was actually much higher than 12%. As Jane Lewis explains, the Census returns for the period underestimated the number of women, especially married women in the labour force simply because they ignored casual, part time work and piece work as home industry, which were exclusively done by women and underscores the marginality of women’s work. Angus McLaren and Arlene Tiger McLaren contend that, “by 1891, women made up 20% of the work force.” As well, McInnes estimates that between 1851 and 1891 there was a six fold increase in women’s waged labour and argues that census data almost certainly undercounted the number of working women.

Bettina Bradbury’s study of working-class families probes the effects of competitive capitalism coupled with an overabundance of unskilled, seasonal and cyclical labourers in Canada’s first and largest industrializing city, Montreal. Bradbury exposes the gendered nature of work amid the precarious realities of wage labour, especially for women. Her investigation indicates that girls’ wages were considerably lower than what boys were paid. As a result, girls were more likely to contribute to the family economy as unpaid domestic labour and temporary wage earners. Additionally, Eric Sager’s research reveals that, “when families whose first breadwinner was in a low wage occupation sent

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75 Carolyn Strange among others has examined the gendered nature of employment in nineteenth century Canada where “even the poorest paid male labourer earned more than female workers.” Strange, Toronto’s Girl Problem, 25. Additionally, as Barbara Taylor has argued ‘throughout the whole of the 19th century, most male workers continued to require the supplementary income earned by their wives often in casual home based employment.” Barbara Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem (London: Virago, 1983), 273. Further to the discussion, Bradbury makes the case that “Men, women and children were drawn into the growing proletariat that made up the workforce of expanding industry.” Bettina Bradbury, “Women’s Workplaces: The Impact of Technological Change on Working-Class Women in the Home and in the Workplace in Nineteenth Century Montreal” in Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, editors, Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women’s History 3rd edition (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997): 154-169.
another wage earner into the labour force that wage earner was often a woman.”

Overall female wages were generally less than half those of male workers. To further emphasize the point, Mackenzie King’s inquiry into labour practices in 1898 exposed the degree of economic exploitation under which women worked in the garment industry. This, the second most numerous of occupations for women, was an industry that depended mainly upon piecework done in the home, although in some companies women worked in factories commonly referred to as ‘sweatshops.’ Mackenzie King’s inquiry revealed that, “a woman slaving away for 60 hours a week, earns two to three dollars per week, while a carpenter earns three dollars per day.”

Lady Aberdeen described the situation that she witnessed of those women who were considered by the DBS to be gainfully employed as this: “It is disturbing to think that sweating and all its attendant evils should have already so firm a hold here… girls by the score earn only 2 dollars a week and are afraid to give up their work because there are hundreds of others ready to step in their places – fines, unsanitary conditions and no women inspectors.”

Late nineteenth century suffragist and labour activist Alice Chown described the potential for exploitation and abuse of working women:

Often the factory girl’s job, or if she did piece work, the kind and amount of work given to her, depended on courting the favour of the factory foreman. There were numerous accounts of the advantage that the foremen had taken of girls under them.

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78 As one employer explained to the Inquiry into Labour Practices, “all our work was done by families, mothers and daughters working together and we paid them so much per piece.” Clio Collective, *Quebec Women: a history* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1987), 151.

79 *Journal*, 20 February 1894.

While many believed that urban life posed a moral danger to single young women, social investigators, reformers and evangelists viewed the ‘working girl’ as a social problem. Accordingly, young working women were “portrayed as victims of potential economic and sexual exploitation and urban immorality.” Increasing social concerns about exploitation and immorality triggered a growing awareness among Canadians of the lack of congruity between orthodox Protestant theology, domestic ideology and developing modernity, as more women worked outside the home and were subject to economic and sexual exploitation. The advance of technology, consumerism and the nature of capitalism, the impact of Darwinism, urbanization and industrialization, individually and together, constituted a challenge to traditional beliefs about religion, and the gendered nature of work and leisure. As Strong Boag concludes, “in the face of steadily advancing secularism and materialism, the church’s authority began to seem insufficient and unreliable.” The escalating incongruity between orthodox Protestantism and society at large also can be viewed through the lens of popular culture. Keith Walden’s wide-ranging study of the history of the Toronto Industrial Exhibition indicates that, “the biggest controversies over entertainment concerned their morality and prominence.”

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81 As Angus McLaren and Arlene Tiger McLaren have argued, “it was commonly held that city life was inherently anonymous and immoral, the virtue of young women was felt to be particularly at risk.” McLaren and Tiger McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State*, 16. Pedersen’s work illustrates that the efforts of the YWCA “were intended to provide ‘protection’ that their leaders believed was in the best interests of working women” against “uncontrolled and irresponsible male sexuality…that threatened women’s physical and moral well being.” Diana Pedersen, “Keeping Our Good Girls Good” *Canadian Women’s Studies* 4 (Winter, 1986): 20-24.


Social reformers regarded commercial entertainment such as amusement parks, dance halls, nickelodeons and vaudeville houses as sites of urban decay because they provided a venue for men and women to meet without the imposition of parental supervision and thus were viewed as a source of danger to single women.  

An increasing moral discourse on the perils of the new popular pleasures and the perceived accompanying necessity for moral regulation highlighted the need for the church to adapt its role to the problems of a modernizing society. Paradoxically, while women were utilizing religion as a means to greater public achievement, a frenzied proliferation and ostentation of church building was underway; the building of new churches during this period surpassed the growth of church membership. Lynne Marks argues that the increase in the building of churches during this period was never intended to house a greater number of religious adherents but rather designed as “symbols of secular ambition” which effectively reinforced social and economic distinctions instead of religious commitment. Nevertheless, church attendance remained the prevailing measure of individual respectability. Kirkland draws much the same conclusion as Nancy Christie and Michael Gavreau have argued in their examination of the social history of religion in Canada, “regular attendance at church may have been a measure of one’s faith, but it might like wise have represented one’s sense of public identity and sense of civic involvement, a simple desire for sociability.”

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86 As Strange has contended, “because these leisure activities threw men and women together indiscriminately, many observers assumed that intimate heterosexual contact was the very object of commercial establishments.” Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem*, 118-119; As Walden has argued, “New possibilities for socializing were pleasurable but unsettling. Unsupervised gender mixing and consequent sexual dangers at parks, rinks, theaters, soda shops and the like were disturbing, as were resilient links between many forms of entertainment and male vice. Marking boundaries between respectable and disreputable distractions were not always easy.”; Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, 248. For further discussion regarding religion and Sunday commercial leisure and entertainment see: McClean, *A Woman of Influence*, 24; Cook, *The Regenerator*.


88 Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks*, 60-64.

In her novel, *The Imperialist*, set in small town Ontario at the close of the nineteenth century, Sara Jeannette Duncan describes the “habit of church attendance” as “not only the basis of respectability but practically the only one.”\(^9\) The internationally renowned author of the *Anne of Green Gables* series, L.M. Montgomery described in her diary the importance of the social element to regular church attendance and the real motivation for her customary presence: it was the respectable thing to do. Indeed, even in the years prior to her marriage to a Presbyterian minister, she feared being “branded a black sheep” if she did not attend church regularly.\(^1\) Nancy Christie and Michael Gaveau make the case that while respectability continued to be associated with regular church attendance in late nineteenth century Canada, in fact, “the idea of church adherence was recast to place less emphasis on church rites and greater participation in a wide range of associational forms of church organization.”\(^2\) In this way, religion, respectability and domesticity were interwoven into Protestant culture in late nineteenth century English Canada and incorporated into a maternal feminist rationalization for women’s increasingly public role.

However, there was a growing sense among Canadians that in order to remain meaningful, orthodox Protestantism must evolve into a new heterodoxy of social philosophy. Lynne Marks’ study of late nineteenth century small town Ontario reveals that in the final decades of the nineteenth century, “members of the elite had begun to sound the alarm in response to emerging secularizing forces.”\(^3\) As a result, a new


\(^3\) As Marks has argued “Churches were reluctant to direct more than a small amount of funds to the poor…poor relief was not a major part of church work.” Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks*, 52. However, Richard Allen has taken a more nuanced interpretation and maintained that it was “the continuing creative force of religion…in the form of a social gospel that at once inspired and guided the impressive progressive reform movements of those years.” Richard Allen, *The View from Murney Tower: Salem Bland, the Late Victorian Controversies, and the Search for a New Christianity, Book One Salem Bland: A Canadian Odyssey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), xxviii.
theological modernism was emerging that supported a social gospel in which the goal of Christianity was the reform of society with women at the forefront, actively engaged in organized reform movements.⁹⁴ Lord and Lady Aberdeen expressed this new heterodoxy in their conviction that political reform was entwined with religion: liberalism, they argued, was the religion of politics.⁹⁵

In fact, religion was the centerpiece of Lady Aberdeen’s public persona. Almost immediately upon their arrival in Ottawa, the Aberdeens had a small chapel erected on the grounds of Rideau Hall.⁹⁶ By making her religious commitment a public spectacle, Lady Aberdeen exploited contemporary hegemonic religious discourse that supported female charitable and social reform, and in turn, helped to secure popular acceptance for her public performance that stepped beyond the conventional boundaries of acceptable behaviour of the vice-regal consort. Arguing “the essence of the teaching of Our Master and Saviour” is Service, she identified female philanthropy as “the only true solution to life.”⁹⁷ Lady Aberdeen practiced what can be described as a kind of neo-Anglicanism in which the correctness of female public leadership was evidence of a healthy Christian sentiment. Few could censure the correctness of her actions when so divinely inspired.⁹⁸ Under the banner of ecumenical Christendom, Lady Aberdeen with her “pleasant, earnest, motherly words” worked to loosen the old time conventionalities and proprieties

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⁹⁶ As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her *Journal*, “we are already making arrangements for building a little Chapel on our own account where an old conservatory now stands at the end of the house.” *Journal*, 26 September 1893. See also John Cowan’s description of the building of the Chapel on the grounds of Rideau Hall. “At his own expense, Lord Aberdeen had a chapel built at Rideau Hall with an organ installed in it. Sunday evening services were conducted by His Excellency with the entire household staff and guests in attendance” John Cowan, *Canada’s Governors General; Lord Monck to General Vanier* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1965), 69.


surrounding respectable feminine behaviour. In the process, she was able to tap into a new religious heterodox that simultaneously supported the increasing secularization of Canadian society and imbued women with a spirit of religious authority to influence public policy. Referring to the popularly perceived social problems, it is “very evident,” she said, “that women will be called on to take part in the solution.” Lady Aberdeen would lead the way.

National Council of Women and the VON: The Political Wife as Cultural Agent: Building an Ecumenical, Bi-partisan, Synergistic Network of Women

From the middle of the nineteenth century, women were beginning to organize into local groups across the country, which emphasized women-centered reform, so that by the 1890s a variety of women’s organizations were formed for charitable and cultural purposes. Most notably, the new reform societies of the late nineteenth century were significantly different from the traditional role of the genteel Lady Bountiful, dispenser of charity. Now rather than simply dispensing charity, women were seeking ways to eliminate the suffering by eradicating the causes. The most prominent example, the


100 Historians continue to debate whether there was a decline in religious influence in Canada in the late nineteenth century. Nancy Christie and Michael Gaveau have argued “against the secularization thesis which has contended that modernization was a linear process in which belief in the supernatural got weaker …and the social authority of religion as a whole was diminished” Christie and Gaveau, *Christian Churches*, 4. Richard Allen has “deliberately challenged the secularist bias of the historiography of early and mid twentieth century Canada” instead he has argued that “a new social evangelicalism and a new social liberalism…coalesced around positive uses of the state and collective ventures to protect working people oppressed by a rampant industrial order and to promote a more egalitarian society.” Allen, *The View from Murney Tower*, xx. For further debates around the decline of religious influence in Canada at the close of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century see Cook, who has argued that “By the 1890s theological liberalism had made a noticeable impact on Protestant thinking in English Canada…[that] emphasized the ethical over the theological.” Cook, *The Regenerators*, 184; See also John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, William Westfall, *Two Worlds: Protestant Culture of Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Kingston/Montreal: McGill/Queen’s University Press, 1989); Richard L. Helmstadter, *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on continuity and change in Nineteenth Century religious belief* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990)


102 As Strong Boag has pointed out “From early in the history of the Dominion, women have been actively involved in philanthropic concerns, although “the major partnerships date from the 1870s.” Strong-Boag, “Setting the Stage” 87-103
Women’s Christian Temperance Union, (WCTU) was the largest national non-denominational women’s organization. Formed in 1883, the WCTU worked to combat the social problems associated with alcohol consumption through a campaign of social activism and legislative strategy by wearing white ribbons to advertise their undertaking, as well as issuing petitions, circulating literature and giving speeches. Keith Walden describes the activities of the WCTU to promote their social agenda by “undertaking fair work” at the annual Toronto Industrial Exhibition. “Their sales of coffee, tea, sandwiches, cake and ice-cream” was simply another “door through which to push forward their work for God and Home and Native Land.” Herein lies the evidence that the women of the WCTU were social and political activists. As Mariana Valverde explains, “the location of philanthropy in the domain of the social does not imply that it was independent of politics.” Increasingly women were realizing that eradicating the cause of social problems was about politics. However, by and large, they “formed strictly local societies for local causes.”

As a more effective means of political lobbying for changes in public policy, the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC) drew together under one umbrella the varied assortment of women’s benevolent and social reform organizations in operation across the country. Griffiths emphasizes the point that the National Council was an association of associations whose very existence depended upon the previous establishment of other societies and organizations. Similarly, Carol Lee Bacchi describes the NCWC as a “clearing house for the social and moral issues of the day.” Toronto for example, formed the first local NCWC, which consisted of a variety of philanthropic organizations (The Infants’ Home and Infirmary, The Convalescent Home and the Orphan Girls’ Home) as well as literary societies (Women’s Art Association and the Women’s Literary

103 Walden, Becoming Modern in Toronto, 45.


Society) and religious organizations (YWCA, WCTU, Methodist Women’s Missionary Society.) The challenge of uniting disparate groups made the work “slow and laborious”; nevertheless Lady Aberdeen recognized that the power for social reform was greater when the various reform organizations worked together. “In union there is strength,” she said, “and the resources at the command of a society like this when exerted in favour of the widow, orphan, the poor, the sick and the helpless is most efficient and effective.”

The chief benefit of creating a national organization, she argued, was to “bring us into contact with all sorts and conditions of women who work for the good of the community & through them we get our hand on the pulse of the country in a way which we could never hope to do in the usual course of traveling about.”

The reform efforts of the NCWC underscores Kathleen McCarthy’s assertion that philanthropic women’s organizations tended to “focus their efforts on the needs of children and other women.” Council members acquired knowledge of the most pressing social concerns through lectures, debates and conferences and lobbied nationally, petitioning the government on issues such as better maternity care, mothers’ allowance and the rights of married women to paid work.

The immediate results were impressive. Within the first five years of the Council’s existence, eighteen local chapters were organized in “all of the major urban centers” across the country. As a direct result of the Council’s lobbying efforts, public policy in

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109 *Journal*, Saturday, 14 April 1894.

110 McCarthy, Lady Bountiful Revisited, 22.


112 Griffiths, The Splendid Vision, 47; See also Appendix E: 435-438.
Canada underwent a considerable transformation. Ottawa society columnist Amaryllis described the changing political landscape. “Women,” she wrote, “are particularly clever at agitating and so as each new subject was brought to their attention, the aged poor, sweating practices and so on, the National Council agitated and new by-laws were passed.” Among the many reforms resulting from the Council’s efforts was the appointment of women inspectors in factories and workshops where women were employed in Quebec and Ontario; the employment of Matrons to oversee women prisoners; and the establishment of hospitals in smaller centers. In addition, the Council played a significant role in promoting a minimum wage to protect workingwomen from exploitation. Margaret Jane Hillyard Little’s exhaustive study of moral regulation and single mothers in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ontario emphasizes the Council’s commitment to assist helpless and friendless women and reveals that as early as 1899 the NCWC “spearheaded and dominated the provincial lobby” for mothers’ allowance. When their petition failed, the Toronto chapter of the Council “created its own mothers’ allowance program.” Here then is evidence of a clear effort to create a “parallel power” for social reform without challenging male prerogative and authority.

Historians agree that Lady Aberdeen was the driving force behind the establishment of the National Council of Women in Canada. Since she was President of the International Council of Women (1893-1936) and vice-regal representative in Canada (1893-1898) she was the obvious choice to head the Council in Canada. At the founding convention of the International Council of Women, held in Washington D.C. in 1888, Canadian delegates agreed to establish a National Council of Women of Canada; however nothing happened until five years later when Lady Aberdeen was asked to accept the leadership in the creation of the organization. Journalist Faith Fenton’s account of the first Council

113 Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” Saturday Night, 1902. See also Gwyn, The Private Capital, 475.

114 Strange, Toronto’s Girl Problem, 199.

115 Margaret Jane Hillyard Little, ‘No Car, No Radio, No Liquor Permit’: The Moral Regulation of Single Mothers In Ontario (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12.

116 McCarthy, “Parallel Power Structures”: 1-34.
meeting in Toronto highlights Lady Aberdeen’s elite status and commanding public presence. “The Countess of Aberdeen” she writes, “sat in the Mayor’s chair and surely never a more stately form graced its dingy upholstery”.117 As the founding President of the Women’s Liberal Federation in both England and Scotland, she was experienced in building women’s political and philanthropic organizations.118 As well, she possessed a political savoir-faire, and the social capital necessary to mobilize the most influential women in the country. After all, “one could hardly refuse” Her Excellency’s invitation to participate.119

Lady Aberdeen’s challenge in establishing the National Council of Women of Canada in 1893 was to modify traditionalist thinking regarding women’s social and cultural responsibility in public life.120 An article in the Toronto Monetary Times, emphasizing the apparently conservative nature of Canadian society, declared that in her efforts to establish the National Council of Women, Lady Aberdeen was exciting controversy since, “there are still some survivors among the antique generation, people in whom the bare suggestion of a National Council of Women will be in danger of producing apoplexy.”121 As the wife of the Governor General, she was expected to avoid any suggestion of controversy and not to be associated with “any new venture that might be

117 Toronto Empire, 28 October 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 4.

118 As French has observed, Lady Aberdeen “had been actively engaged in building a Women’s Liberal Federation in England and a second one in Scotland: she became President of both.” French, Ishbel, 85.


120 As Toronto Empire Columnist Faith Fenton reported “Up to the present time it has not been the ‘correct thing’ from a Canadian society standpoint for a woman to speak upon a platform, no matter how good a word she may have had to say.” Toronto Empire, 4 November 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 14.

121 Fenton described the “average Canadian woman” as “very conservative.” NAC Aberdeen Papers Volume 5, Toronto Empire 4 November 1893. See also a report in the Toronto Monetary Times that stated “The Countess of Aberdeen went perilously close to the debatable land…this was the National Council of Women. Let us say in all candor that simply because this is debatable land, the wife of the Governor General would do well to keep clear of it. The Question is not whether a national council of women is an organization demanded by the spirit of the time…but whether the vice regal consort is the proper person to promote and patronize it by a mild species of platform agitation.” Toronto Monetary Times, 10 November 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 4.
criticized.” Nevertheless, she forged ahead into controversial territory, using many official vice-regal appearances across the country to organize local councils in places such as Toronto, St John, Charlottetown and North Sydney. As a result of her efforts, she was labeled “the most aggressive busybody who ever resided over Rideau Hall” by the distinguished historian, journalist, anti-woman suffrage writer, Goldwin Smith. Smith was expressing the suspicion among traditionalists that “the Council meant only two things: women’s suffrage and prohibition.” When the NCWC held its first meeting in Toronto in October 1893, Fenton reporting for the Toronto Empire declared that “Canadian men who scent suffrage or prohibition at every woman’s meeting” described the meeting of “pleasant faced women” who were representative of “motherly womanliness” as a suffrage meeting Five years later, while the NCWC was making inroads into public social welfare policy, Ottawa Free Press columnist ‘the Marchioness’ described the slow progress in gender relations. “It is the man,” she wrote, “you know him, who says, ‘I don’t let my wife do this, I don’t let my wife do that’ who is loud in his condemnation of the National Council. Beware of him!” Lady Aberdeen’s challenge was to garner support and minimize opposition to her vision of building in Canada, “a society without poverty, where the sick had proper care, where the lot of factory workers and the shop girl was bearable.”

122 In her memoir, Lady Minto shared Queen Victoria’s advice to her as she prepared to replace Lady Aberdeen as vicereine to Canada in 1898. Margot Oxford, Countess of Oxford and Asquith, Myself When Young by Famous Women of Today (London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1938): 215-258.

123 French, Ishbel, 152; Journal, 7 September 1897 (Toronto); Journal, 22 October 1897 (St John); Journal, 22 October 1897 (Charlottetown); and Journal, 11 October 1897 (North Sydney) As the Rossland Miner reported, “She asked her audience if they did not think that a branch of the women’s council would thrive in this community and said that in a community like this, it would be of the greatest possible benefit.” Rossland Miner 21 July 1898, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 14.

124 von Baeyer, The May Court Club, 15.


126 Toronto Empire, 4 November 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 13; Griffiths, The Splendid Vision, 22.


128 Lady Aberdeen believed that through the NCWC, “Canadian women could meet new needs, especially among working girls who lacked decent lodgings and cheap midday meals and in fostering an organization
**Overcoming Opposition: Domestic Ideology & the Politics of Maternal Feminism**

To build support for the establishment and promotion of the NCWC, Lady Aberdeen utilized traditionally venerated ideas about women’s role as a discursive bridge between the domestic and public spheres. By embracing a maternal feminist ideology that celebrated accepted notions of domesticated womanhood she rationalized the expansion of that role into the public arena. “In these days,” she said, “we cannot fulfill the duty of our own homes unless we are in touch with all that is good in the world and with all that is evil—unless we realize what is making the good and what is making the evil.”

Lady Aberdeen was articulating an ideology that identified women’s true dignity and special mission as mothering, thereby exploiting contemporary notions of sexual difference by associating domesticity with the public realm. “When misfortune overtakes the home, it is the woman’s place to cheer up the man,” she said, “Now let us take the same part in public life.” As Strong-Boag points out, Lady Aberdeen’s message was one of “female altruism expressed in maternal care.” Paradoxically, Lady Aberdeen was breaking down barriers to women’s public activity while supporting a gendered structure that put the barriers in place. Unlike more radical women reformers, “who expunged the home from their vocabulary,” she celebrated the home and women’s place within it as a justification for women moving into a public role. “We want our homes full of rest and peace and beauty and refinement,” she explained, “full of power therefore to send out men and women inspired with the spirit and devotion to all that is true and beautiful to serve their generation and day.”

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130 *Pentland,* *A Bonnie Fechter,* 94.

131 Strong-Boag, “Creating ‘Big Tent’ Feminism.”

132 *Metropolitan,* 4 May 1895, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.

133 *Ottawa Free Press,* 11 September 1898, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 22.
Was she a suffragist? Opinion was divided. An article in the New York Sun identifies her as a suffragist, while a commentary in the Utica Globe assures readers that “she is not one of those fighting suffragettes and carefully avoids the blustery methods of the woman reformer.”

In fact, she assiduously avoided associating the Council with woman’s suffrage because she believed that “the subject though not touching party politics was of a controversial nature.” Not surprisingly, she was critical of the methods of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union for being too self-asserting. “It is a pity that the Temperance women should adopt this rabid tone,” she wrote, “they train their younger women to be so self asserting.”

In contrast to the methods and attitudes of the WCTU, Lady Aberdeen advised that, “an anti-male attitude is never tolerated in the Council.”

Instead of advancing a suffragist agenda, Lady Aberdeen continued to rely on a maternal feminist discourse that embraced an image of women as morally superior and reasoned that by virtue of their maternal and domestic roles “women should also aspire to a public role.” To support her contention that woman’s role was both domestic and public, Lady Aberdeen quoted the highly regarded Victorian writer, artist and critic, John Ruskin (1819-1900) who decreed, “what the woman is to be within her gates, as the center of order, the balm of distress and the mirror of beauty, that she is to be without her gates, where order is more difficult, distress more imminent, loveliness more rare.”

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134 *Utica Globe*, 1 June 1895, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19. Additionally, a report in the *New York Sun* stated “The British aristocracy will yet make woman suffrage fashionable in this country. The influence of Lady Aberdeen has already been felt.” *New York Sun*, 3 October 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 4.

135 Griffiths, *The Splendid Vision* 23; As Strong Boag has pointed out, “It was not until 1909 that, “she publicly endorsed suffrage, a goal prepared for by years of patient education.” Strong Boag, Creating ‘Big Tent Feminism’.”

136 *Journal*, 2 August 1895. See also “Letitia Youngmans founded the first Canadian local of the WCTU in Picton, Ontario in 1874. Youngmans is rightly regarded as the pioneer organizer of Canadian women’s temperance activities.” Alison Prentice et al, editors, *Canadian Women* (Toronto: Nelson/Thomson, 2004), 172.


An article in the Utica Globe highlights Lady Aberdeen’s method of working a social revolution under the banner of womanliness. The article praises her as one who “works steadily, quietly and patiently along progressive lines but does not antagonize conservative opinion by revolutionary methods or ideas.”

The Toronto Empire reported that Lady Aberdeen was successfully breaking down the barriers of “old time conventionalities and proprieties” surrounding respectable feminine behaviour. Still, progress was slow. Many women continued to believe that “the pursuit of a mere outward equality with men is for women not only vain but demoralizing. It leads to a total misconception of a woman’s true dignity and special mission.” Not only that but “equal rights advocates faced social ostracism for their unladylike behaviour, public ridicule for attempting to invade masculine terrain and censure from other women activists who were working along different ideological lines.”

Although more women were acquiring a university education, and having smaller families and an increasing number, particularly those with a university degree, were choosing not to marry at all, nevertheless even educated women such as the female editors of the Queen’s University Journal challenged the call for equal rights as far too radical and urged readers “not to forget how generously we have been treated by the AMS” (Alma Mater Society of Queen’s University.)

As Strong Boag explains it was not until the 1890s that feminists

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139 Utica Globe, 1 June 1895, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.

140 As an article in the Toronto Empire stated, “The average Canadian woman is very conservative. It is a hard thing for her to loosen the old time conventionalities, the old time proprieties and properness in which men have so carefully swaddled her.” Toronto Empire, 4 November 1893, NAC, Aberdeen Papers, Volume 14.


142 McCarthy, Lady Bountiful Revisited, 14.

143 As Ehrenreich and English have determined, “A 1895 study found that 28% of female college graduates married compared to 80% of women in general. The birth rate was falling among white middle-class people in general and most precipitously among the college educated.” Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, For Her Own Good: One Hundred Years of Expert’s Advice to Women (New York: Anchor Press, 1979): 128. Additionally as Joan Perkin has argued “there is clear evidence that many middle-class families were limiting their families from mid-century onward…The vaginal cap became popular with the vulcanization of rubber in 1843. At the end of the century, the condom was popular, but most middle-class women preferred the sponge, the douche or the vaginal cap.” Joan Perkin, Women and Marriage in nineteenth-century England (London: Routledge, 1988), 68-9. Additionally, as Peterson has observed, “After 1870, middle-class family size declined...presumably with the use of contraception.” M. Jeanne Peterson,
began to “find general support from liberally minded men and non-feminist women who rallied to them not so much because of any enthusiasm for women’s rights but more out of a general interest in community betterment.”

Lynne Marks and Chad Gaffield’s informative study of the experiences of women students at Queen’s University indicates that their presence in late nineteenth century universities in Canada represented a revision but not a rejection of domestic ideology. New attitudes about woman and education were fuelling debates around women’s proper roles. Principal George Grant of Queen’s University commended the aspirations of women to achieve higher education, stating “we see nothing but good resulting from this.” Still, the issue of woman’s ‘natural’ role remained at the forefront of public discourse. Education was a double-edged sword for women during this period: on one side, it increased educational opportunities, although “opposition was acute to women entering the medical or law schools,” while on the other side discourses around education intensified pressure for women to embrace the occupation of motherhood. Domestic ideology was taking on a new meaning that was inherent in the growing opinion that

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*Family, Love and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 64. See also: Prentice et al, who have shown that “Dominion statistician George Johnson announced that the decline in the birth rate was due to the spread of education, which enables females to become better wage earners, and therefore less interested in marriage.” Prentice et al, editors, *Canadian Women*, 173. More recently Lynne Marks and Chad Gaffield have observed that, “Only 58% of female graduates married after leaving Queen’s…this marriage rate…is much lower than the Canadian proportion of 88% for all women in the same age group.” Lynne Marks and Chad Gaffield, “Women at Queen’s University, 1895-1905: A ‘Little Sphere’ All Their Own?” *Ontario History* Volume LXXVIII, Number 4 (December, 1986): 331-350. See also McInnes who has contended that, “it was the control of fertility in marriage that was at the heart of the fertility transition.” McInnis, “Women, Work and Childbearing”; Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics*, 175.


145 Marks and Gaffield, “Women at Queen’s University, 1895-1905”.

146 “In 1888 McGill University granted Bachelor Degrees to women for the first time.” Clio Collective, *Quebec Women*, 143.


148 “What women experienced during this period was on the one hand greater opportunity to educate themselves for wider roles but on the other hand increasing pressures to espouse domestic life and particularly an intensification of the role of motherhood.” Prentice et al, editors, *Canadian Women*, 181.
higher education for women would create “brighter and more intelligent” mothers.\textsuperscript{149} Many clergy and members of the upper classes agreed that higher education for women could assist in reestablishing a strict moral order.\textsuperscript{150}

Thus, despite increased access to higher education, educated motherhood rather than greater professional opportunities became the clarion call to women.\textsuperscript{151} When Lady Aberdeen spoke in favour of university training for women, rather than celebrating new professional prospects for educated women, she argued that through the influence of higher education a woman is better able to “organize the household, to care for its health and welfare and to train her children even better than a girl brought up in the old haphazard fashion.”\textsuperscript{152} Paradoxically, the glorification of educated motherhood was the antithesis of women’s liberation from domestic ideology while simultaneously the route to enhanced female influence in the public sphere under the banner of maternal feminism. This notion of the value of educated motherhood reinforces what Mary S. Hartman, among others, has identified as an “enduring perception that motherhood is the core of woman’s identity.”\textsuperscript{153} Accordingly, instead of giving support to the expanding professional roles for university educated women, the National Council of Women of

\textsuperscript{149} NCWC Education for Domesticity: 149-154: ‘The Labour Question and Women’s Work and its Relation to Home Life’ in Women Workers of Canada compiled by the National Council of Women of Canada (Ottawa, 1898); Cook and Mitchinson, editors. The Proper sphere, 254-262.

\textsuperscript{150} As Carol Bacchi has argued, “Many clergy and well to do citizens promoted a higher education for women…moved by the impulse to reestablish a strict moral order, they became convinced that the mothers of the next generation needed greater mental discipline in order to handle capably the moral instruction of the young.” Bacchi, Liberation Deferred, 19.

\textsuperscript{151} As Sheila M. Rothman has summarized, “Women had to be trained to the task of motherhood. One progressive educator insisted, ‘She needs what many do not possess, the refinement which association brings, a broad outlook, a logical mind, …qualities in which the average mother has little or no training. She must not rely too much on her natural instincts; the well deserving but much vaunted mother sense.” Sheila M. Rothman, Woman’s Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 99.

\textsuperscript{152} Toronto Globe, 2 April 1897. NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 24.

Canada adhered to the notion that a woman’s greatest charm was not a desire for self-advancement, which a university education offered, but rather a sense of duty and a “loving and unselfish consideration of others.”

Thus, despite increased access to university, popular discourse continued to rate marriage and motherhood as the “noblest career for women.”

The impact of maternal feminism remains controversial. Comparing suffragists’ demand for gender equality to maternal feminism, Linda Kealey argues that “in some senses maternal feminism de-emphasizes or subordinates personal autonomy in favour of a (relatively) wider social role.” Kathleen McCarthy concludes that late nineteenth century maternal feminist ideology “provided the means for leveraging political and even constitutional change” as a parallel power structure. NCWC women were for the most part maternal feminists who envisioned “equal but different spheres” for men and women as parallel powers. However, Beverley Boutilier’s examination of the Victorian Order of Nurses produces a different assessment of the effectiveness of maternal feminism as a means to social or political influence. Rather than a parallel structure of influence, Boutilier argues that maternal feminism actually reinforced male stewardship of the public arena.
Quite the opposite of maternal feminists, equal rights suffragists argued for “absolute equality of opportunity in all areas of public life.” In Canada, the Dominion Women’s Enfranchisement Association’s membership represented equal rights feminist ideology and the conviction that woman suffrage was the means to political and economic equality. In the same way, mid-Victorian British feminist Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon argued in order to achieve equality “women must have work.” “Work, not drudgery is as necessary for women as it is for men,” she said. Maintaining that marriage alone might “not fully challenge the abilities of every woman” or considering the surplus of middle-class women who would never marry, work, she argued, was a necessity to uplift the spirit and to enable women to be economically autonomous. “Women should not make love their profession” she said, “if we work, love may meet us in life; if not, we have something still beyond all price.” An examination of Bodichon’s life reveals the dichotomy in her feminist ideology. While, “absolute equality of opportunity for men and women in all areas of public and domestic life was her eventual goal” nevertheless, her brand of gender equality advocated a maternal feminist view of “women’s special moral responsibility for civilizing society.” As the “first writer to recognize the value of women’s work within the home and to attribute economic value to the task of wife and mother” Bodichon straddled the ideological divide between equal rights feminism and maternal feminism.

Thus by the end of the nineteenth century the formerly idealized imagery of womanhood as the domestic angel of the hearth was being replaced by an ideology of educated

motherhood, one which conflicted with a developing discourse of the ‘new woman.’ Educated motherhood and its sister ideology maternal feminism were advocated as part of the natural order in which women were popularly conceived to possess nurturing qualities identifiable to their sex alone. As Kealey points out, these identified nurturing qualities were associated with “all women, married or not.” In her comprehensive analysis of the creation of the Victorian Order of Nurses, Boutilier calls attention to the composition of the NCWC membership in which, “the ideological balance was in favour of women whose politics were predicated on the assertion of sexual difference” and who “firmly held the belief that men and women had equal but different spheres of God-given social responsibility.” Maternal feminism thus provided a counter ideology that situated female influence in the guise of ‘woman’s work’ as a social and political force. Mariana Valverde points out that maternal feminism empowered even those women who were neither mothers nor wives but were able to justify “their claims to political and social rights by reference to their quasi-maternal public and private roles.” As Strong-Boag argues, the “NCWC’s emphasis on sexual difference and its domination by maternalism compromised its authority to lobby unquestionably for equal participation in every aspect of community life.”

Competing ideologies about the nature of women’s place in society and their relationship to men continued to ignite public discourse. Maternal feminism, predicated upon the assertion of sexual difference as a validation for women’s influence in the public sphere, was counterpoised to equal rights feminism based upon sexual equality and the

166 Barbara Welter determined that the “cardinal virtues associated with women were domesticity, piety, purity and submissiveness.” Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood” American Quarterly (1966): 151-174. See also Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place”

167 Kealey, A Not Unreasonable Claim, 7-8.


169 “When the Mother of the Race is Free: Race Reproduction and Sexuality in First Wave Feminism” in Iacovetta and Valverde, editors., Gender Conflicts: 3-26.

promotion of women’s individual rights, a concept that sought to “realign gender relations.” David Rubinstein cites as evidence of the ongoing debate regarding gender roles, the almost universal attention and coverage given to the ‘woman question’ in newspapers and literary journals of the period. An article in the Toronto Mail (1893) described the “woman question” as an issue that “perturbed and excited the minds of all classes.” Certainly “by the 1890s, alarm at the new posturing of women was common in conservative circles…the sex question was hardly ever out of the newspapers and journals.” Sara Jeannette Duncan’s novel The Imperialist (1903) captures succinctly the image of the “new woman” in the character of Advena Murchison, who “justified her existence …teaching English …in the Collegiate Institute, which placed her arbitrarily outside the sphere of domestic criticism.” In some circles, the concept of the new woman was attacked, “as a third sex, an intermediate sex, a mannish lesbian.” The image of the new woman offered an alternative lifestyle when, according to Sheila Jeffreys, in “the late Victorian period almost one in three of all adult women were single and one in four would never marry.”

The new popularity of ‘scientific’ and industrial exhibitions provided women with a platform to strengthen their claim to participate in the public sphere. One woman in particular provides an outstanding example of modern womanhood that effectively linked

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173 Toronto Mail, 28 October 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 14.


175 Duncan, The Imperialist, 32.


women’s emancipation with the advancement of civilization. Organizers of the Chicago World’s Fair (1893) presented the celebrated African explorer May French Sheldon in public lectures on her life as the “White Queen in Darkest Africa.” She described to her audiences how her womanly sensitivity, tolerant attitudes and impeccable manners as a civilized white woman made it possible to gain nearly unique access to the private social relations and ‘inner life of the primitive.’” Notably, May French Sheldon did not claim a maternal feminist or a new woman identity, instead she claimed to be empowered by what Peggy Pascoe has identified as “a cultural consensus that women of [her] class and race possessed a ‘female moral authority.’” Fair organizers expressed the evolving gender discourse by repeatedly using the phrase ‘true woman’ in speeches and writings to impress upon fair visitors “a continuity between modern woman’s talent for public service and capacity for individual achievement and her maternal or domestic virtue, while attempting to accommodate the sensibilities of conservatives as well as those of women reformers and their supporters.” The fact that fair promoters were attempting to accommodate the sensibilities of both conservative and reform elements of late Victorian society underscores the increasing acceptance of the concept of the new woman. Henry Morgan made public his own shifting gender paradigm in the introduction to his book *Types of Canadian Women* (1903). He described “the ‘woman question’ as one of the most vital movements of the age.” While admitting that he too had been “blind to the claims of women” and although he continued to remain unsympathetic to “what is revolutionary in that movement,” nevertheless he concluded that “the man must be obstinate in his prejudices who disdains to acknowledge the need and the good of reforms in female education.”

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180 Boisseau, “White Queens”.

181 Henry Morgan, *Types of Canadian Women* Volume 1, (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1903), introduction.
Lady Aberdeen possessed a sophisticated understanding of the evolving gender dynamics of the period and the place of the ‘new woman’ and maternal feminism in the mix. Carol Bacchi has dismissed maternal feminism as a “self-serving middle-class ideology.”\footnote{Bacchi, \textit{Liberation Deferred}, 148: Beverley Boutilier has argued that “Bacchi’s analysis clearly overestimated the extent to which middle-class women would or could share in the spoils of elite power, whether they had the vote or not.” Boutilier, “Gender, Organized Women”, 17.}

Nevertheless Lady Aberdeen was able to effectively garner support from a cross section of political and religious ideologies and take the position of advocating a larger public role for women in the public domain by embracing traditional femininity and describing, “women’s mission as mothering.”\footnote{Lady Aberdeen’s inaugural address to the National Council of Women, 11 April 1894, NAC Aberdeen Papers Volume 16.} The success and sustainability of the NCWC was a direct result of Lady Aberdeen’s ability to diminish oppositional forces by championing women’s education and at the same time emphasize women’s traditional, nurturing role. In this way, rather than challenging entrenched channels of political power, Lady Aberdeen built a parallel power structure of synergistic friendships with women of heterogeneous political and religious affiliations that would reflect the purpose of the Council to act as a unifying association, rising above political animosities, and religious and national prejudices to effect social reform.\footnote{For further discussion of parallel power structures, see: McCarthy, “Parallel Power Structures: Women and the Voluntary Sphere”: 1-34; A report in the \textit{Utica Globe} stated that “Lady Aberdeen has done much to bring the women of Canada into closer sympathy, to remove religious and national prejudices, to soften political animosities, to smooth over social rivalries and to develop healthy Christian sentiment in the country.” \textit{Utica Globe}, 2 January 1897, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.}

“We want to make it absolutely clear,” she wrote, “that women holding the most opposite views and ideas on any subject can join the organization however much their views may conflict, they can join our Councils; we desire to represent in our Councils every possible phase of work and activity and thought existing among women.”\footnote{Griffiths, \textit{The Splendid Vision}, 52.}

To this end, she was careful to include prominent social leaders from French and English Canada, as well as Roman Catholic, Protestant and Jewish women, in order to emphasize...
that the Council was above political partisanship and religious sectionalism.\footnote{Is this a council of political organization? No. Women of all parties belong to its ranks. All denominations.” NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 5.} It was a Herculean task to bring together socially and politically active women who could operate above partisan interests and beyond religious affiliation to achieve a consensus. “I am not so sure that I would have taken the Presidency,” she admitted, “had I known all that it would entail.”\footnote{Journal, 7 April 1894.} Nevertheless she successfully arranged a roster of socially and politically prominent women who were active in philanthropy in both French and English Canada.\footnote{Journal, 7 April 1894.} In her examination of elite women in Montreal, Kirkland questions the motivation that drove these women to participate in philanthropic organizations such as the NCWC and determines that “their motivations were complex and overlapping.”\footnote{Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 103.} “Self interest [and] social obligation were often paired with genuine religious and moral conviction.” However other motivations were also in play since “charity also issued social capital for those on the giving end.”\footnote{Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 105.} The synergistic, mutually beneficial friendships that Lady Aberdeen built with prominent women is characteristic of a client/patron relationship in which “the core interaction is thus a type of reciprocity … between individuals who are of unequal status, …[where the] patron is typically in a position to bestow upon a client some tangible benefit”: in this case, social connection with the most socially prominent woman in the Dominion.\footnote{S. J. R. Noel, Patrons Clients, Brokers: Ontario Society and Politics, 1791-1896 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 13.} Moreover, as Kirkland emphasizes, philanthropy provided a “very public means” for these women to assert “power and status” especially when associated with the vice-reine.\footnote{Kirkland, “Mothering Citizens”, 100.} Through the creation of a synergistic friendship among elite women, Lady Aberdeen supplanted any major ideological differences and effectively cemented what she intended to be an
ecumenical bipartisan composition of the National Council of Women. It is here that her political savoir-faire is most evident.

She invited Lady Thompson, a Roman Catholic and wife of the Conservative Prime Minister, and Mme. Laurier, a French Canadian, Roman Catholic married to the Liberal leader of the opposition, to join the Council as Vice Presidents at large. As she explained, “their being Roman Catholics is useful as it will bring them in not on a religious ground but on the political and yet it will introduce Roman Catholics among the officers, who otherwise were v [sic] much one way.”193 Lady Aberdeen considered asking Lady Thompson to become President of the Ottawa Local Council as well. However, since Lady Thompson was “much tied with her sick child, besides being unaccustomed to taking the Chair” she instead approached Lady Ritchie, the widow of the late Chief Justice, William Buell Ritchie who accepted the posting.194 Boutilier describes Lady Ritchie’s formidable “social authority” and her “moral authority as the philanthropic doyen of Ottawa society.”195 Additionally, Lady Aberdeen asked Mrs. R. W. Scott to take an executive role in the Ottawa Council, “for the double reason that her husband is leader of the (Liberal) Opposition in the Senate and they are both ardent Catholics.”196 Moreover, the Irish Catholic Scotts were one of the founding families and acknowledged leaders of Ottawa society, R.W. Scott having been the former Mayor of Bytown (Ottawa), who lobbied for the lumber town as the best choice for the new Capital. Thus, Mrs. Scott possessed much influence to attract further collaboration of Ottawa society women into the Council.197

193 Journal, 7 April 1894.

194 Ibid.


196 Journal, 11 January 1894.

197 As Gwyn has suggested, “The Scotts by the 1890s were one of the most consequential families in the city...as Mayor of Bytown, he had written a memorandum describing Ottawa ...as the best possible site for the Capital...as Member of Parliament...he mounted a ferocious lobbying campaign...and persuaded a sufficient majority of members...” Gwyn, The Private Capital, 476-478.
Lady Aberdeen’s political savvy was apparent again when she describes her efforts to overcome “the formidable difficulties” in creating the Council of Women in Quebec. Her method was to have a “good many pourparlers” in order to bring together “Roman Catholics being so strong and strict” and “Protestants being so narrow.”\(^{198}\) She used her social and political capital as the vice-regal representative to enlist the cooperation of all the wives of the Lieutenant Governors across the country. Nowhere was this more useful than in Quebec.\(^{199}\) As Lady Aberdeen explains:

> Lieut. Governor and Mme Chapleau … he is RC & and she is Protestant & both are very cordial and anxious to cooperate with us. In this she would simply be Hon. Vice President, as she is too shy and nervous to be anything more, but still her approval and support would be much.\(^{200}\)

Having enlisted the support of the Protestant wife of the Roman Catholic Lieutenant Governor of Quebec, she then approached “Mme. Routhier, wife of Judge Routhier, an ardent Roman Catholic and one very zealous in all good works,” and asked her “if she would be willing to be President if elected…She at once responded heartily.” Lady Aberdeen’s plan as she describes it was to work together with Mme. Routhier to garner further support for the Council in Quebec: “she amongst the Roman Catholics and I amongst the Protestants,” she said.\(^{201}\) Moreover, the support of Montreal society leaders Mme. Thibaudeau (wife of Senator J.R. Thibaudeau) and Mrs. Grace Julia Drummond (wife of Senator G.A. Drummond) helped further to encourage women to join the Council. Mrs. Drummond gave full support to the usefulness of the Council while expressing the maternal feminism that Lady Aberdeen endorsed as women’s domestic role in the public sphere. “Home,” she said, “will ever be our chosen kingdom, but we shall order our homes with greater wisdom by taking a woman’s part in helping the great

\(^{198}\) *Journal*, 4 February 1894.


\(^{200}\) *Journal*, 4 February 1894.

\(^{201}\) *Journal*, 4 February 1894.
world.”

It was a sentiment upon which both Protestant and Roman Catholic Council women could agree.

The success and sustainability of the NCWC and later the Victorian Order of Nurses was a direct result of Lady Aberdeen’s ability to diminish oppositional forces by emphasizing women’s traditional, nurturing role but in a publicly proactive way and to build synergistic friendships with women of heterogeneous political and religious affiliations, ones that would reflect the Council’s intention to act as a unifying association, above political animosities, and religious and national prejudices. Lady Aberdeen was steadfast in her vision to “combine all sections of thought and work, secular, philanthropic and religious” of the existing women’s organizations across the country under the umbrella organization of the NCWC. This meant bringing in leading women from both the WCTU and the Dominion Women’s Enfranchisement Association, despite her criticism of the “too self asserting” behaviour of many of the women in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and her desire to avoid any discussion of woman suffrage as being too controversial. In order to accommodate all religious affiliations of the members and thus maintain the Council’s ecumenical design, Lady Aberdeen, with the full support of ecclesiastic authorities, determined that a silent prayer should be instituted to open each meeting. Although, as she reported in her Journal, some of the “ladies object strongly” to the idea,” nevertheless, the majority of members approved of the silent prayer. Still, there were those who were “evidently likely to upset the coach.” As she reports, “some would not be satisfied and a very aggressive little person, Mrs. Thornby, President of that very American WCTU asked the question publicly if we were to include

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203 Journal, 27 October 1893.

204 Journal, 7 April 1894. See also: Lady Aberdeen’s comments regarding the Women’s Enfranchisement Association, “I could take no part in their movement in Canada as the subject though not touching party politics was of a controversial character and the others (WCTU) while at one with them in desiring to promote temperance that I could not say I was in sympathy with their methods.” Journal, 27 October 1893.

205 Lady Aberdeen described one purpose of the NCWC was to “smooth away ancient feuds and rancors…to have peace, harmony and union amongst all heterogeneous elements” Aberdeen, We Twá, Volume 1, 107. See also Journal, 7 April 1894 and 14 April 1894.
societies not acknowledging God and Christ.” Boutilier argues that while the WCTU and the YWCA “refused to affiliate with the NCWC” and the Toronto, London and Kingston chapters of the NCWC struggled with the implementation of a silent prayer, the real significance of the silent prayer debate was one of “self definition.” It “was not about whether the NCWC should pursue a religious or secular institution course” she says, “nor did the prayer represent a simple polarization of evangelical and no-evangelical women [instead] the prayer debate demonstrated the readiness of most Council women to subscribe to Lady Aberdeen’s non-sectarian but still implicitly evangelical ideal of female unity.” Such an ideal buttressed their moral claim to social reformation as divinely authorized moral authority. Lady Aberdeen’s position was unequivocal and pointed out that the basis of the Council was to “include all societies and institutions.” Regardless of her pledge to bring together women of all points of views and religious affiliations, Lady Aberdeen hoped Mrs. Thornby would “be left out” since “she will doubtless give trouble and would not mind excluding R.C.s, [sic] Jews, Unitarians and Quakers.” The WCTU did not affiliate with the NCWC until 1919 because of the silent prayer and the unwillingness of the NCWC to support prohibition.

In the end, she was pleased with the final roster of members. “The peculiar struggle,” she said, “to get the really nice and influential women …to unite for common purposes has been difficult to inoculate [sic]. However it has been done and we have got capital women together and we are thankful to see from whose hands the movement has been delivered.” As a result, the synergistic partnership that she built with prominent women

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206 *Journal*, 14 February 1894.

207 Boutilier has noted that the WCTU and the YWCA maintained their boycott of the Council, “some affiliates withdrew as a result of the vote, with the Toronto local council suffering the greatest turnover in membership. But, on the whole there was no wholesale exodus of religious associations or evangelical leaders from the NCWC.” Boutilier, “Gender, Organized Women”, 65-66.

208 *Journal*, 14 February 1894.

209 Ibid.

210 Cook, *Through Sunshine and Shadow*, 68.

211 *Journal*, 14 April 1894.
supplanted any major ideological differences and effectively cemented what she intended to be an ecumenical bipartisan composition of the National Council of Women. Lady Aberdeen’s success in building the NCWC was a result of her ability to bring people together, to win over her adversaries, and to find common ground among disparate groups of women in order to work effectively to bring about enduring social reform.

Beverley Boutilier suggests that organized middle-class women’s “actual power to influence was circumscribed” since “they were able to exercise a kind of power when the interests of their political sphere complemented those of the dominant male culture.”

Thus, it was a practical move by Lady Aberdeen to seek the support of leading religious and political leaders to further legitimize the work of the NCWC and emphasize its bipartisan and ecumenical public presence. To this end, not only did she bring together a heterogeneous group of influential women, Lady Aberdeen was able to garner clerical and political support for the Council. The Protestant Bishop gave his support for the scheme and “suggested that where societies might hesitate about joining, individual members might like to do so and thus the societies might be indirectly represented.”

She recorded in her journal the degree to which the Roman Catholic Archbishop assisted in the creation of the Council by sending women to discuss its purpose with her.

Moreover the enthusiastic support that she received from Prime Minister John Thompson was unmistakable and served to further enhance the legitimacy of the NCWC. In his address to the Council, the Prime Minister “said that the public men could especially appreciate the aims of the movement, for anything which tends to bring together people

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213 Journal, 4 February 1894.

214 As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her Journal, “The Roman Catholic Archbishop...is as keen about Women’s Council as ever... the Archbishop also wrote strongly to Archbishop Fabre advising him to allow his societies to join... and...seeking opportunities for Roman Catholic and Protestant women to meet, sent women to Lady Aberdeen to discuss the purpose of the Council.” Journal, 16 February 1894; Journal, 20 February 1894.

215 Thompson to Lady Aberdeen re National Council: “My Dear Lady Aberdeen, I shall be entirely at your service for the meeting – to move, second or support anything – barring of course the emergencies of business in the House.” 2 April 1894, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 4.
of different provinces, politics, opinions and beliefs will be patriotic in its work.”

Rather than challenging the dominant male culture, choosing instead to enlist the support of male political and religious leadership, Lady Aberdeen could further justify female influence in the public domain as essential.

Kirkland’s examination of the Montreal branch of the NCWC shows how “charity work provided women with influence in society and the opportunity to engage in social regulation, [but] when push came to shove, elite ‘ladies’ bent to male authority.” Boutilier offers a reasonable explanation that reflects the “gendered assumptions about female fiscal and legal incompetence on the one hand and on the other, the convention of male trusteeship of female property and financial resources” that implied female incompetence. While Peter Baskerville’s work reflects a new late nineteenth century fiscal reality in which there were an “increasingly significant number of women involved in matters of capital,” nevertheless he does “not suggest that women became the equals of men in these sectors.” By utilizing a maternal feminist approach to social problems, Lady Aberdeen and the elite women of the Council claimed a complementary gendered discourse that supported an ideology of male fiscal and legal stewardship that successfully attracted powerful male support for the creation of the National Council of Women of Canada.

In the case of the Victorian Order of Nurses, she enjoyed the backing of Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier, who gave his “hearty approval” of the scheme and indicated that he was in favour of a parliamentary grant that would guarantee the creation of the VON as an

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official memorial to celebrate Queen Victoria’s diamond jubilee. Lord Aberdeen took on the role of Patron with Lady Aberdeen taking the position of President of a board to establish what was initially to be called the Victorian Order of Home Helpers. She chose to commemorate Queen Victoria’s Jubilee in 1897 by founding the Victorian Order of Home Helpers (VOHH), as a response to the disturbing narratives of mothers and children in isolated western communities who often died while fathers and husbands traveled long distances for medical care. The VOHH was intended to be a system of traveling home helpers who would care for the sick in their homes and cottage hospitals in areas where no medical assistance was available as well as to those who could not afford medical care. The strategy was to train women to assist in childbirth and to provide nursing care to mother and child and housekeeping in the post-partum period. However, the establishment of this organization would prove to be a more onerous task in the face of organized opposition from the medical establishment. Saywell concludes that what was to become the Victorian Order of Nurses “almost certainly would not have” come to fruition without Lady Aberdeen’s persistent efforts in the face of concerted opposition to the plan.

From its inception, hostility to the establishment of the Victorian Order of Home Helpers was “very general, all over the continent.” In Toronto, the local Council “entirely rejected the scheme.” Nursing professionals opposed the idea of home helpers, fearing that it would lower the standards of nurses and “deflate the wages of all nurses.” They

220 Journal, 7 September 1897.

221 As J.T. Saywell has summarized in the introduction to The Canadian Journal of Lady Aberdeen, “Laurier had approved of the Order as a national undertaking, and the Governor General became patron.” Journal, xxx. See also Journal, 31 January 1897.

222 As Boutilier has argued, “The principal objective of the VOHH was to provide prairie mothers with a worker who would not only give them the kind of maternity care that Council women equated with safe childbirth, but also take charge of their homes and families during the lying-in period that followed.” Boutilier, “Gender, Organized Women”, 155.

223 Journal, xxx.

224 Journal, 7 November 1897.

insisted that Lady Aberdeen “recruit only hospital trained nurses.” The change of name from the Victorian Order of Home Helpers to the Victorian Order of Nurses reflects Lady Aberdeen’s efforts to mollify opposition from nursing professionals. However, opposition continued to stall the plan. Overall resistance to the scheme was based largely upon doctors’ concerns that they would find themselves in competition with the nurses for patients, some of whom, they feared, would prefer to send for a VON than a doctor.

On the whole, physicians were generally antagonistic to the plan, fearing that the nurses would interfere with their livelihood by taking patients away from them, especially by practicing midwifery. Moreover, Sir Charles Tupper, President of the Canadian Medical Association, led the opposition to the plan. Still outraged at Lord Aberdeen for his actions in refusing to endorse Tupper’s chosen appointments to the Senate when the Conservative Party was defeated in 1896, he “automatically criticized anything with which the Aberdeens were connected.” Not surprisingly, the Ontario Medical Association passed a resolution denouncing the scheme as “fraught with danger to the country.”

Boutilier has interpreted this “virulent opposition” to the creation of the VOHH as an event that “forced Lady Aberdeen to reconsider the viability of her pioneer nursing scheme, and on a more profound level, the extent of her authority as a ‘politician.’” Lady Aberdeen was enough of a politician not to be deterred by organized opposition; instead, she recognized that in order to gain acceptance for the scheme she would have to eliminate the issues that were the most contentious and seek ways to win over her...
opponents. Thus, she determined not to include midwifery among the VON responsibilities, even though she believed that eventually “there will be a modification of this rule in the North West and in many country districts but it must work itself out.”

What followed was an organized campaign by Lady Aberdeen to overcome resistance from the medical establishment that questioned whether there was “really any district in Canada that needed nurses,” while others asserted that there were already too many nurses. “The supply is already much greater than the demand” and as a result trained nurses were unable to obtain enough work to “support themselves.” In order to accommodate the concerns of the nursing and medical profession Lady Aberdeen renamed the proposed plan the Victorian Order of Nurses. The new moniker emphasized nursing as a profession as well as their adjunct position under the physician’s authority. Lady Aberdeen’s strategy was two pronged: to garner support from powerful sources and to get the message out to correct the “misunderstanding of the medical men and their absolute ignorance to the system of district nursing.” To this end, she addressed meetings of physicians and nurses across the country, explaining how the scheme would operate. With each meeting she made a few more converts. Winning support from the medical profession was paramount to the success of the plan since “doctors alone had the professional and institutional authority to evaluate and legitimate the training” of the VON nurses.

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231 *Journal*, 7 November 1897.

232 Boutilier cites the editors of *The Canadian Practitioner* who argued “there were already too many trained nurses…graduates of our best hospitals…are unable to obtain enough to do to support themselves: the supply is already much greater than the demand.” “The Victorian Order of Nurses in Canada,” *The Canadian Practitioner* 22, no. 4 (April, 1897), 280-281. Boutilier, “Gender, Organized Women”, 206.

233 *Journal*, 8 December 1897.

234 As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her *Journal* “The Lady Superintendent of Toronto Nurses also professed herself converted when she found it was a district nursing scheme. I had a number of interviews and most of them successful.” *Journal*, Stanley House, 7 September 1897. Remarking on her trip to St. John, Lady Aberdeen stated that “the outcome was extremely good and two or three of the leading men expressed themselves as satisfied at the conclusion of the meeting.” *Journal*, St. John New Brunswick, 22 October 1897.

Laurier also arranged for Lady Aberdeen to meet with Senators and Members of Parliament in one of the Committee Rooms in the House of Commons to explain the intended work of the VON.\textsuperscript{236} “It was splendid,” she said, “to have all the powers that be supporting us: General, Admiral, Roman Catholic Archbishop, (the Episcopalian Bishop is away but he is also a supporter), the Lieutenant Governor, and the Mayor and the Premier not to speak of the Governor General in the Chair.”\textsuperscript{237} Lady Aberdeen’s political expertise is evident by her actions in creating a medical advisory council of ”leading medical men” who “occupied an “elevated status” as the most “socially prominent” men of their profession.\textsuperscript{238} Since, as Boutilier points out, female moral authority was limited by the prerogative of male authority, Lady Aberdeen was prepared to seek out the support of powerful male backers. As she wrote,

“The prominence of six [of 10] of its members within the Canadian Medical Association, including five past presidents, also distinguished them as a group.”\textsuperscript{239} As a result of the support of these prominent men, coupled with her address to meetings of physicians and nurses across the country, the Ontario Medical Association reversed its decision with a resolution to support the scheme.\textsuperscript{240} Lady Aberdeen was politically savvy enough to methodically acquire support for the VON from the ‘leading medical men’, able to overcome opposition from the medical community and successfully established the VON across the Dominion.

Lady Aberdeen possessed a political talent for creating enduring national women’s organizations that would make a sustainable impact on public policy despite the stark reality of late nineteenth century sexual hierarchy, and the “systematic inequality of

\textsuperscript{236} Aberdeen and Temair, \textit{We Twa}, Volume 1, 116.

\textsuperscript{237} “Dr. Worchester’s address at that public meeting was splendid and moved many to tears & [sic] there was no doubt after that Toronto would be all right. It was a transformation scene and it was wonderful.” \textit{Journal}, 20 June 1897.

\textsuperscript{238} Boutilier, “Gender, Organized Women”, 181.

\textsuperscript{239} Boutilier, “Gender, Organized Women”, 182.

\textsuperscript{240} \textit{Journal}, 7 November 1897.
women and men” in Canadian political culture.241 From the evidence presented in this chapter the wider implication of Lady Aberdeen’s work was showing women how to be politically effective, achieve national influence and cross gender barriers while working within, rather than openly challenging accepted gender roles. By utilizing an essentialist or maternal feminist discourse, she encouraged women to participate in an “organized movement of women [that] will best conserve the highest good of the family and the State” by banding together “to further the application of the Golden Rule to society, custom and law.”242 The synergistic friendships that she built with prominent women supplanted any major ideological differences and effectively cemented what she intended to be an ecumenical bipartisan composition of the National Council of Women of Canada. Lady Aberdeen’s ability to win over her adversaries, build synergistic friendships and find common ground among disparate interests underscore her political expertise and set the example in showing women how to navigate gender discourse in order to effectively influence public policy to bring about enduring social reform. This alone was a considerable achievement of political finesse and influence on the part of Lady Aberdeen especially within a “dominant male political culture” that effectively limited “female moral authority”243 The NCWC and the VON were evidence of the significant role that women played in influencing public policy while working within both patriarchal notions of women’s role and emerging perceptions that the closing decade of the nineteenth century was the dawn of a woman’s age.


242 Aberdeen, We Twa Volume 2, 99.

Chapter Four

Woman’s Age: A New Gender Paradigm?

There are many indications that this is a woman’s age and if we do not do our duty, keep our literature pure, our homes lovely and our men content, we will have lost the greatest opportunity that has ever been given to women in the world before.

Mary Agnes Fitzgibbon

Patriarchy, Change and Continuity

Was it true, as often claimed, that the 1890s was a woman’s decade? Increased rights and opportunities for women in English Canada led many to conclude that the 1890s in Canada was the ‘women’s decade.’

Certainly some aspects of women’s lives were changing for the better. They were able to control wealth and participate in the world of capital as a result of a series of acts that enabled them to acquire control over their property and earnings as well as to enter into contracts without the legal requirement of

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1 Mary Agnes Fitzgibbon’s address to the National Council of Women of Canada in 1900, in Jeffrey Keshen and Suzanne Morton, Material Memory: Documents in Post Confederation History (Don Mills: Addison Wesley, 1998), 107.

2 See Lady Aberdeen’s speech at the University of Chicago in which she said: “The present age has with much reason been called the woman’s age and truly …a revolution in the position, responsibilities and opportunities of women and the whole face of social life and philanthropy has been changed thereby.” Toronto Globe, 7 April 1897, NAC Aberdeen Papers Volume 25; Sandra Gwyn has described the last decade in 19th century, “Ottawa as an environment favourable to women.” Sandra Gwyn, Private Capital: Ambition and Love in the Age of Macdonald and Laurier (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), 483. See also Constance Backhouse who cites Senator J.J.C. Abbott’s reference to “changing principles” that “we are gradually increasing our respect for her position and more generally acknowledging her equality in every sense with man.” Constance Backhouse, “Pure Patriarchy: Nineteenth Century Canadian Marriage” McGill Law Journal 31 (1986): 265-312. “By the 1890s, the last full decade of the Victorian era, there was talk as the century drew to a close that this had been the ‘woman’s century’ and the 1890s the ‘woman’s decade.’” Peter Groenewegen, editor, Feminism and Political Economy in Victorian England (Brookfield: E. Elgar, 1994), introduction. Additionally, as Michael S. Kimmel has argued “This was an era of the “new woman, rise of women’s colleges, increased literacy, delayed age of marriage and an ideology of upward mobility and capitalist developments.” Michael S. Kimmel, “The Contemporary ‘Crisis’ of Masculinity in Historical Perspective” in Harry Brod, editor, The Making of Masculinities: The New Men’s Studies (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 142.
their husband’s consent. As Constance Backhouse explains, “from a position of virtual
downpowerless in 1800, married women gradually amassed significant control over their
real and personal property, wages and business profits by 1900.” However, the situation
was reversed for women in Quebec, who had previously enjoyed greater protection of
their dower rights under the Coutume de Paris and later the Civil Code of 1866 than
women throughout the rest of Canada, whose rights were determined under common law.
Women in Quebec “were gradually deprived of their dower rights” which had “entitled a
woman and her children, after the death of a husband, to the use of some of his property,
even if the property had been sold or mortgaged.” Thus by the close of the century, in
English Canada women were increasingly involved in business both as entrepreneurs and
business leaders whereas in Quebec “a woman needed her husband’s consent to conduct
affairs as she saw fit.” Further to the point, in his examination of “Gender, Wealth and
Investment” in Victoria, British Columbia and Hamilton, Ontario, Peter Baskerville
reports a “very significant” involvement by women, married and otherwise, in matters of
capital toward the end of the nineteenth century. In all of the capital sectors that he
examined women were “very active and visible” and in some cases managed their wealth
“even more aggressively than men.” These findings suggest that some women at least
were enjoying a greater measure of economic autonomy and an increased sense of agency
in the public sphere. Moreover, late nineteenth century women were enjoying greater

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3 As Backhouse has shown, “In 1892 the Supreme Court of Canada …thenceforth married women were
completely emancipated from their husband’s control both as regards the enjoyment and the disposition of
their real estate.” Constance Backhouse, “Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century Canada” in
Bettina Bradbury, editor, Canadian Family History: Selected Readings (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman,
1992): 320-359. See also Joan Pekin who has argued, “The New Woman began to emerge. By the 1890s
she was independent, pursued a career, sometimes bore a child out of wedlock (but has it anyway) and


6 Baskerville has reported “a significant transfer of wealth from men to women and a heightened if bounded
sense of agency and possibilities on the part of middle-class women and some working-class women, all of
which occurred in a relatively few short years encompassing the end of the nineteenth century and the
beginning of the twentieth century.” Peter Baskerville, Silent Revolution: Gender and Wealth in English

7 Ibid.
choice in how to live their lives. The work of Lynne Marks and Chad Gaffield, among others, has shown that women’s increasing access to universities was concomitant with an increasing number of spinsters and provides further indication of the changing status of women. For those who did choose to marry, a declining birthrate among middle-class married women suggests evidence of women’s growing control of their sexual relations. Additionally, according to Gordon Darroch’s examination of census records, by the turn of the century “large numbers of never married women were heads of their own households especially in rural areas.” From this evidence one might conclude that the last decade of the nineteenth century was indeed ‘a woman’s age’ in which women were beginning to achieve the hegemonic “liberal quest for money, liberty, justice and equality”, but there were some signs that these transformations were illusory.

There were notable changes in the position of women; nevertheless overall women remained yoked by an ideology of female dependence. As Diana Gittens asserts, “while the laws on women’s property, and women and children as property were altered in the late nineteenth century, the notion of women as dependents of men and of men responsible for ‘their’ women has remained an essential cornerstone of women’s position

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8 Lynne Marks and Chad Gaffield, “Women at Queen’s University, 1895-1905: A ‘Little Sphere’ All Their Own?” Ontario History Volume LXXVIII, Number 4 (December, 1986): 331-350. An earlier study by Ehrenreich and English reported that “An 1895 study found that 28% of female college graduates married compared to 80% of women in general. The birth rate was falling among white middle-class people in general and most precipitously among the college educated.” Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts Advice to Women, (New York: Anchor Press, 1979), 128.

9 As Angus McLaren and Arlene Tiger McLaren have observed “The shrinking size of the Anglo-Saxon family” was attributed to the ‘selfishness’ of women.” They argue that, “Despite relatively stable marriage rates and improving fecundity, the birth rate of English speaking families fell; hence some form of birth control must have been used.” Angus McLaren and Arlene Tiger McLaren, The Bedroom and the State: The Changing Practices of Contraception and Abortion in Canada, 1880-1980 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 15-18.


in society generally. These assumptions are imbued in the concept of patriarchy.”¹² Moreover, Lori Chambers’ study of _Married Women and Property Law in Victorian Ontario_ together with Chris Clarkson’s work, _Domestic Reforms, Political Visions and Family Regulation in British Columbia, 1862-1940_ indicate that women’s emancipation was never the motivating factor behind property reforms and “male self interest was inherent throughout the legislation.”¹³ Rather than a determination to provide women with greater economic autonomy, the central concern for legislators when enacting reforms was to foster a policy of social engineering. As Ian McKay argues, it was “an attempt to plant and nurture …the philosophical assumptions and the related political and economic practices of a liberal order.”¹⁴ However “liberalism’s new order” did not extend to women.¹⁵

Instead, the various Married Women’s Property Acts that were legislated across the country were patriarchal in intent to ‘better protect’ women from abusive, economically irresponsible or deserting husbands in order to preserve the family unit as the cornerstone of a pro-natal policy that was the basis of nation building.¹⁶ While some described the


¹³ Chris Clarkson, _Domestic Reforms, Political Visions and Family Regulation in British Columbia, 1862-1940_ (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), 207; As Joy Parr has argued “the changing regulations of married women’s property” was “more to secrete husbands’ assets from the reach of creditors than to secure women’s rights within marriage.” Joy Parr, “Gender History and Historical Practice” _Canadian Historical Review_ 76:3 (September, 1995): 354-376.

¹⁴ As Clarkson has argued women’s property rights were expanded “based on state priorities” of a pro-natal “nation building agenda.” Clarkson, _Domestic Reforms_ 61 & 83. See also Ian McKay, “The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History” _The Canadian Historical Review_ 81, 4 (2000): 620-1 as cited in Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism”: 423-450.

¹⁵ As Pateman has maintained “women were not marginalized in spite of liberalism but because of it.” Carol Pateman, _The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory_ (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1989), 43: As cited by Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism”: 423-450.

¹⁶ Lori Chambers points to the “broad public, legal and judicial agreement that women required more protection” from abusive and deserting husbands, who were at the “complete mercy of their husbands” under common law. Lori Chambers, _Married Women’s Property Law in Victorian Ontario_ (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 68-70; Mary Poovey, _Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England_ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 70.
period as a ‘woman’s age,’ married women’s dependence in late nineteenth century Canada was reinforced in law by a liberal political economic ideology that normalized the quest for masculine economic independence, masculine political identity and masculine individual autonomy.\textsuperscript{17} Legislative intent and judicial interpretation “continued to be based upon the assumption that the role of the husband was to provide for his wife and family and the duty of the wife to obey and cohabit in all but the most extreme of cases.”\textsuperscript{18} Thus, the guiding principle behind legislation was to better facilitate provincial and national expansion through pro-natal policies to safeguard three constant objectives: economic development, expanding the liberal capitalist economy and the formation of white heterosexual nuclear families.”\textsuperscript{19} Women’s autonomy was never a consideration of legislators’ anachronistic policies aimed at reform and regulation.

Economic development and the expanding liberal capitalist economy was predicated upon a hegemonic liberal ideal of man’s role as provider of capital accumulation - often achieved through some measure of financial risk taking- to be able to endow his family with a middle-class economic standard of living. The reasoning driving the legislation was that in order for men to achieve material independence, they “should not be penalized for taking risks necessary to achieve that status. Legislators argued that it was creditors who were destroying families and undermining nation building priorities.”\textsuperscript{20} Reform minded legislators viewed financial risk-taking as a form of nation building.

\textsuperscript{17} Sandwell has discussed Ian McKay’s argument that there was “a historically specific project of rule” that encapsulated “the implantation and expansion” of a “certain politico-economic logic” based upon the “philosophical assumptions and the related political and economic practices of a liberal order.” Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism”.

\textsuperscript{18} As Lori Chambers has argued “The basic stated purpose –[was] ‘the better protection of married women.’” Chambers, Married Women’s Property, 182.

\textsuperscript{19} As Clarkson has argued, “Each extension of women’s property rights was intended to safeguard and facilitate reproduction..” Clarkson, Domestic Reforms, 208; As Lori Chambers has maintained chivalry was the main objective of legislators. “This protective theme emerges clearly in the legislation itself and the ways that the judge interpreted the married women’s property statutes when wives could prove their husbands were abusive or economically irresponsible, but limited the scope of legislation when women used their property to challenge masculine authority.” Chambers, Married Women’s Property, 180.

\textsuperscript{20} Clarkson, Domestic Reforms, 204-6.
because it supported Liberal reproductive and economic priorities. By allowing women to own property, a husband could transfer assets to his wife for protection from potential seizure by creditors in order to better facilitate the expansion of wealth. Accordingly, the Married Women’s Property Act “provided men with a means to protect their families from destitution” and safeguard a “national vision of dedicated motherhood.”

Two competing historical theories have developed to assess the waves of legislation that provided women with greater control over their property and earnings. On the one hand, a liberalization interpretation identifies a movement from patriarchy to individual autonomy; reform legislation was designed solely for political and economic purposes. According to this liberalization interpretation, by expanding women’s rights patriarchal control over the family was weakened. On the other hand, others observe a movement not to individual autonomy but rather to the establishment of state patriarchy in which “much of the legislation called upon men – judges or husbands- to assess wives and children’s needs” and for the state to assume “supervisory roles” where the husband had abandoned his role. Patriarchal power was thus not weakened but transformed and appropriated by a state more interested in preserving the heterosexual family as a nation-building instrument than in maintaining individual patriarchal rights. However, both of these interpretations presuppose the ability on the part of women in general either to achieve or to be blocked from achieving normalized liberal goals of economic independence, political identity and individual autonomy. Then again, as R.W. Sandwell argues “the question is seldom asked…whether women were, indeed, even trying to reach the personal and political goals of liberal individualism.”

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21 ibid.


23 Clarkson, *Domestic Reforms*, 7.

24 Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism”.
Ian McKay identifies the autonomous individual as “liberalism’s central tenet.”

Women, however, were not generally exhibiting an urge to autonomous identity but rather sought to maintain and improve a network of relationships. We need only to examine Lady Aberdeen’s construction of the National Council of Women of Canada and the Victorian Order of Nurses as an endorsement of women’s sense of mutuality. Her appeal to women was centered upon an ideology of mutuality - family and community, service and relationships - not the advancement of female autonomy. “Women must learn,” she said that “if the poor around her doors are not cared for, the orphans not housed, the erring not reclaimed, because she was too much engrossed in her own house to lend a helping hand, the results of her self-absorption may be in the future to provide pitfalls for her own children whom she desires to cherish.”

Faced with a very limited range of choices, beyond a narrative of relationships “women of the past centuries” Nancy F. Cott has argued, “rarely perceived as many modern feminists do, an antithesis between women’s obligation in the domestic realm and their general progress.” More recently Marilyn Freedman has pointed out that, “many feminist philosophers have recently suggested that women find autonomy to be a notion, inhospitable to women, one that represents a masculine style pre-occupation with self sufficiency and self realization

25 ibid

26 As Sandwell has argued, “Women did not generally participate in the project of maximizing self interest, … but seemed to have understood their role within a broader context than that defined by liberal economic theory.” Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism”: 423-450.

27 As Ruth Smith and Deborah Valenze have argued, when women, “defined and pursued moral activity” they were doing so within an aliberal attitude of “mutuality” that was reflected in a sense of interdependence.” Ruth Smith and Deborah Valenze, “Mutuality and Marginality: Liberal Moral Theory and Working-Class Women in Nineteenth Century England” Signs 8, 2 (1988): 278, as cited by Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism”: 423-450.

28 Lady Aberdeen argued that women’s domestic role extended beyond the household. “If she is to be truly her husband’s companion, her children’s friend and guide, the maker of a home that will shed light and blessing, …she must needs understand the changes that are taking place in social conditions, the progress of thoughts in all directions.” Lady Aberdeen’s address to the NCWC 1898, Women Workers of Canada, (Ottawa, 1898), 10-11. As Strange has pointed out, “The Toronto Local Council of Women had cast their sights toward the much broader terrain of urban morality.” Carolyn Strange, Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 104-5.

at the expense of human connection.” In contrast to Kimmel’s assessment of the ‘new woman’ as an “avowed feminist,” the celebrated nineteenth century Canadian journalist Kit Coleman provides a cogent example of this disavowal of personal autonomy or what early twentieth century, Italian philosopher, historian and Marxist politician Antonio Gramsci has identified as the “divided consciousness” of the oppressed. Coleman, the quintessential ‘new woman,’ covered the Spanish American War for the Toronto Mail and Empire as “the first woman in the world actually to be accredited as a war correspondent.” All the same, she was adamant that, “women should strive for equality in the professions but they should not do so in their private lives.” “Marriage was,” she claimed, “the greatest career a woman could aspire to.” “A woman can travel widely and adventure freely” she said, “but her real happiness almost always hinges on marriage and motherhood.” Coleman’s contemporary, another ‘new woman,’ political journalist, Faith Fenton agreed. “No matter how successful in her chosen profession,” she maintained that a woman “would instantly lay it down at love’s behest” and “would deem happy matronhood a career far above the most successful career of solitary independence.” In other words, women experience greater satisfaction in the subordinate role of domestic relationships than through personal autonomy. As Sandwell points out, “it is precisely those aliberal characteristics – an ambivalence

30 Marilyn Friedman, Autonomy, Gender, Politics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 98.

31 As Kimmel has argued, “The New Woman was an avowed feminist who campaigned for suffrage and asserted her autonomy in the world of men.” Kimmel, “The Contemporary ‘Crisis’ of Masculinity in Historical Perspective” in Brod, editor. The Making of Masculinities: 122-152. See also T. J. Jackson Lears who has cited Antonio Gramsci’s argument that, “the oppressed internalize cultural hegemonic ideology and thus become ‘unwitting accomplices in the maintenance of existing inequalities.’” T. J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities” American Historic Review Volume 90, Issue #3 (Summer, 1985): 567-593.

32 Gwyn, The Private Capital, 472.


34 Barbara M. Freeman, Kit’s Kingdom: The Journalism of Kathleen Blake Coleman. (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1989), 168.


36 As Friedman has argued “Women themselves simply do not value personal autonomy as much as men do.” Friedman, Autonomy, 135.
towards waged labour, or reticence about rational self interest that have been used to exclude women from the kinds of freedom, wealth and equality offered by the modern state.”37 Legislators and women alike agreed that in fatherless families, a woman faced difficult choices. As Clarkson argues, “She could put the children up for adoption, she could find work to support herself and send the children to an institution, or she could keep them at home and fight starvation.”38 Any one of these choices presented dire consequences for the prospects of the individual family and “the future citizenship”39 Thus by emphasizing the needs of the family over female individualism, late nineteenth century women’s narratives of relationships juxtaposed with politico-economic goals of male self-interests and individual autonomy worked together to underpin patriarchy.

This study adds to and deepens our understanding of whether women had the intention of achieving “the personal and political goals of liberal individualism” through the biographies and real lived experiences of four political wives.40 In the process, it provides insight into the formal and informal legal and social structures that buttressed patriarchy, were manifested continually and served to subordinate women to men even in apparently progressive social systems in which women were idealized for their maternal role as the instruments of moral authority such as in late nineteenth century Canada.

Theoretically, marriage was undergoing an ideological shift away from a patriarchal model, in which the husband presumably held the authority, toward a new companionate model that promised greater closeness and sharing in the marital union.41 Increasingly,

37 Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism”.

38 Clarkson, Domestic Reforms, 156-7.


40 As Sandwell has pointed out, “This question is seldom asked, let alone answered.” Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism”.

41 As Constance Backhouse has determined, “a companionate model attempted to assert greater equality in the marital union.” Constance Backhouse, “‘Pure Patriarchy’”. Moreover, as John Tosh has argued, “Cutting across the traditional masculine investment in private patriarchy was the desire for companionship…intimacy not authority.” John Tosh, “New Men? The Bourgeois Cult of the Home” Gender and History Volume 46 Issue 12 (December, 1996): 9-15.
both men and women idealized a successful union as one in which husbands and wives were friends and companions. The notion that a husband should be a companion and friend as well as a support to his wife was increasingly assumed to be a prerequisite for a successful union. Within the companionate model of conjugal life, the wife was elevated to a new position as her husband’s “chief associate, his most confidential friend, and often his most trusted advisor.”

Ostensibly, this new progressive model of marriage promised women greater equality in the marital union. In her investigation of the lives of Victorian gentlewomen, M. J. Peterson concludes that although “there seems widespread agreement that paternalism and male authority were characteristics of Victorian marriage” this was not always the case. According to her research, in most upper middle-class households “sharing partnership and mutuality” were more often the practice. In the same manner, Joan Perkin’s study of Women and Marriage in Nineteenth Century England reveals that a kind of intellectual companionship existed where “men engaged in public life, literary men and artists, often found their wives to be companions and confidantes in thought and feeling.” However, others make the case that while in some marriages mutuality and sharing was the reality, in general patriarchy continued to be a key element in late nineteenth century conjugality.

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42 As Backhouse has argued further, in the companionate model of marriage, “men and women, although operating in distinctly separate spheres, would seek to achieve a genuine partnership with a working acceptance of joint authority.” Constance Backhouse, “Pure Patriarchy: Marriage”; Peter Ward cites Sir Sanford Fleming in a letter to his sister advising her on her decision to marry to choose a man with “tastes and feelings that are similar to your own, then you might find in the husband, a lover, a friend, an equal companion.” 2 November 1856 in Peter Ward, Courtship, Love and Marriage in Nineteenth Century Canada (Montreal/Kingston: McGill/Queen’s University Press, 1990), 151.

43 John Tosh, A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle Class Home in Victorian England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 53; John Tosh, “‘New Men?’”.


46 As Backhouse has argued, “far from serving as the uniquely moral relationship that nineteenth century Canadian rhetoric espoused, marriage served as a bulwark for institutionalized and ideological male supremacy.” Backhouse, “Pure Patriarchy”. See Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History” Journal of American History 75:1 (June, 1988): 9-37; Michael Mason, The Making of Victorian Sexuality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 116. As Griswold has made the case, “It was generally agreed that the foundation of the Victorian marriage was more in affection and less in convenience...some commentators judged that marriages remained companionable and affectionate but there was also a consensus that wives were much subordinated...Jurists
argues that although the companionate ideal of marriage “constituted a chipping away at the edges of patriarchy, making it more difficult for men to indulge freely in gross abuse of their power over others, much of the power remained firmly in their hands.” In other words, while the diversity of women’s experiences leads to multiple conclusions about the power balance in marriage, in late nineteenth century Canada patriarchy continued to hold women in a subordinate position.

Thus, even the more progressive model of a companionate marriage that supported an intense friendship between the husband and wife was almost always based upon the wife becoming an attentive companion to her husband. It was not a mutual exchange between equal partners. In practice, the discourse on companionate marriage was most often a closeness based upon her support of his needs and exigencies, which fit well within a Victorian sex paradigm of feminine support and masculine leadership. As Peter Ward concludes, “Victorian English Canadians entered marriage with deep rooted patriarchal assumptions about their future roles as husbands and wives.” What is more, John Tosh argues that regardless of notions of egalitarian sharing, “Victorians “felt no doubt that the husband should be master.” François Noel reaches a similar conclusion: while wives expected to participate in the decision-making, they “accepted their husbands’ right to make decisions for the family.” Regardless of the notion that wives were companions


47 James Hammerton, Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth Century Married Life (New York: Routledge, 1992), 166.

48 Ward, Courtship, Love and Marriage, 156.

49 Tosh, A Man’s Place, 28.

50 François Noel, Family Life and Sociability in Upper and Lower Canada, 1780-1870 A View from Diaries and Family Correspondence (Montreal/Kingston: McGill/Queen’s University Press, 2003), 130.
and confidantes, womanly subordination continued to be a fundamental aspect of romantic love and married life in late nineteenth century Canada.\textsuperscript{51}

The aim of this and the following chapters is to examine the extent to which Matilda Ridout Edgar, Zoë Lafontaine Laurier, Annie Affleck Thompson and Ishbel Marjoribanks Gordon, Lady Aberdeen were companions and confidantes to their husbands and whether their position was limited to a supportive and submissive role in their marriage. In the process, this work examines how patriarchy gave meaning to their lives and whether the concept of a ‘woman’s age’ had an impact on their personal lives.

**The Edgar marriage**

When Matilda Ridout married James Edgar, she brought to the marriage a colonial aristocratic status that provided her new husband entré into Toronto’s elite establishment.\textsuperscript{52} The Ridout family belonged to the socially and politically powerful Family Compact that dominated Upper Canadian politics for the first half of the nineteenth century and afterward continued to possess considerable political and social influence.\textsuperscript{53} James Edgar the ambitious but impecunious son of Scottish immigrants stood

\textsuperscript{51} As Tosh has emphasized “advice books recommended that the husband should be master and assumed that sharply distinguished roles could be deeply satisfying to both husband and wife. He received emotional support from his wife while his education and experience made available to her a wider window on the world.” Tosh, *A Man’s Place*, 28. Additionally, as Grazely has noted in her examination of early Upper Canada, “The extent to which companionate marriage was practiced, however, as well as when and by whom, has also been debated.” Robin Grazley, *Nothing ‘Improper’ Happened: Sex, Marriage and Colonial Identity in Upper Canada, 1783-1850* (PhD diss., Kingston, Queen’s University, 2010), 20.


\textsuperscript{53} As Fraser has argued members of the Family Compact, “referred to themselves or their social peers as ‘gentry.’ Obviously borrowed from English social structure, it describes men of lesser stature than aristocracy but set apart by gentle birth, education and good breeding, in other words, gentlemen.” R.L. Fraser, *Like Eden in Her Summer Dress: Gentry, Economy and Society in Upper Canada* (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1979), 5. Additionally McLean and Vance have argued that “Mrs. Jamieson, the authoress…either failed to estimate the scions of the old Family Compact or had some quarrel with them” she describes the Family Compact as “an aristocracy founded upon nothing!” Scott A McLean and Michael
to benefit considerably through his marriage to a member of the founding elite. The year before meeting his future wife, he informed his paternal grandmother that it was his intention to be in Parliament.\textsuperscript{54} The following year Edgar wrote to his Aunt Caroline expressing his social and political aspirations that marriage to Matilda Ridout would help him to achieve. “You must know” he wrote, “that there is a provincial aristocracy in Toronto – formerly called the Family Compact – as they have all intermarried from their exclusiveness. After I am married to Miss Ridout, I will be a cousin to them all. A close connection with these families will do me no harm.” With evident delight, Edgar reported to his family that their engagement was “the most interesting topic in fashionable circles.”\textsuperscript{55} It appears that Edgar was at least as enamored with Miss Ridout’s social cachet as he was with Miss Ridout. Through his marriage to Matilda Ridout, James Edgar stood to benefit politically and socially.

The Ridout/Edgar marriage was a mutually beneficial arrangement, politically, socially and economically. Matilda Ridout brought no dowry to the marriage other than her good name and advantageous social connections. Her father the late Thomas Ridout was a respected and influential man.\textsuperscript{56} As a result of his political and social connections, he held a comfortable position as cashier (general manager) of the Bank of Upper Canada for forty years. For the first sixteen years of her life, Matilda Ridout flourished in the agreeable life of a daughter of the small Upper Canada elite, describing her father as “the kindest of fathers” and her childhood as “indulged almost too much.”\textsuperscript{57} However, prior to

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\textsuperscript{54} Edgar to Grandmother Edgar, 4 December 1864, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{55} 5 February 1865, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{56} According to McLean and Stamp, “Thomas Ridout was Provincial Grand Master of the Masonic Lodge, President of the St. Andrew’s Society, the first President of the Toronto Mechanics Institute, Treasurer of Trinity College and co-founder of the Toronto, Hamilton, Niagara, St. Catherine’s Electro-Magnetic Telegraph Company.” Maud J. McLean and Robert M. Stamp, \textit{My Dearest Wife: the private and public lives of James David Edgar and Matilda Ridout Edgar} (Toronto: Natural Heritage/Natural History, 1998), 62-78.

\textsuperscript{57} Matilda Edgar to Aunt Cary, 7 January 1861, PAO Edgar Family Papers.
her father’s death in 1861, he suffered financial reversals that left his widow and children in straightened circumstances. As a result, the widowed Mrs. Ridout was compelled to move to a more modest home and receive paying guests. The situation left her daughter with limited marital prospects since she had “no prospect of property and few liquid assets for any dowry.”\footnote{McLean and Stamp, \textit{My Dearest Wife}, 61.} Considering Matilda’s reduced circumstances, marriage to Edgar, an ambitious young lawyer, may have been the best option available to her.

In contrast to Matilda Ridout’s privileged early life, James Edgar’s formative years were tumultuous. Born in the Eastern Townships of Lower Canada within a year after his parents emigrated from Scotland, Edgar’s early life was difficult. His father, who was an elementary school teacher, died when James was nine years old. His mother was left nearly destitute and remarried a few months later to a Church of England clergyman with an abusive temperament. The recurring violence in the home reached its zenith when James as a young articling law student assaulted his brutal stepfather, threatening to kill him in retaliation for the violent attacks on his mother and sister. As a result of his family’s domestic problems, he arranged for his sister Eliza to board with Mrs. Ridout, whom he described as “the passé leader of the bon ton.”\footnote{As Edgar informed his grandmother, “I have arranged that she [Eliza] shall board with a lady who is the passé leader bon ton here. Her husband was a wealthy banker but his sudden death some years ago left his affairs in a complicated state.” Edgar to his grandmother, 9 October 1865, PAO Edgar Family Papers.} It was a fortuitous move for Edgar since it was there that he met his future bride whom he described as “the best girl in town.”\footnote{Edgar described Matilda Ridout as “the best girl in town…If anyone here were asked, who is the most amiable, the cleverest and one of the prettiest girls in Toronto, the answer without a doubt would be Tillie Ridout.” Edgar to his grandmother, 9 October 1865, PAO Edgar Family Papers.}

Although her family’s material circumstances had been severely reduced, Matilda Ridout was indeed a prize for the young man who lacked social and financial connections. It was a marriage that would benefit them both. On the one hand, marriage to Matilda Ridout cemented Edgar’s social status and political connections. On the other hand, Edgar was a
young, ambitious lawyer with a promising future as a family provider. The year before their marriage, Edgar published his first book, which established his reputation in insolvency and bankruptcy law. “Advantageously connected” and comfortable with the necessary obligations of political entertaining, Matilda was an asset to Edgar’s political and social ambition. Perhaps in this case, as Pat Jalland has determined occurred in other matches, “love was by no means the only consideration, social and economic interests were often influential in marital selection as in earlier times.” This is not to suggest that the Ridout /Edgar courtship was a loveless match; rather it brought mutual benefits to both beyond romantic attachment.

Romantic attachment was certainly an aspect of their relationship. Matilda frequently expressed her affection for her husband when she wrote to Edgar’s Aunt Caroline and at one point apologized for being “spoony” when describing him. After twenty years of marriage, James continued to express his unfeigned affection for his wife and arranged to spend “a few honeymoon days alone together” in Ottawa. By his own admission, he thought of her constantly. Maude J. McLean and Robert M. Stamp in their informative biography of the Edgars assert that theirs was a “companionate marriage with husband

61 As Matilda Edgar wrote to her husband’s aunt, “I have great faith in Jim’s future, he is so industrious as well as ambitious that he cannot fail to be a leading man. You will be proud of your nephew someday – am I not a fond and foolish wife to talk this way?” Matilda Edgar to Aunt Carry, 22 November 1869 PAO Edgar Family Papers.

62 James Edgar’s first book was titled, The Insolvent Act of 1864 with Tariff, Notes, Forms and a Full Index. (Toronto: Rollo and Adam, 1864); McLean and Stamp, My Dearest Wife, 57.


65 Matilda Edgar described her husband as: “Such a darling husband he is. It falls very seldom to the lot of women to be as perfectly happy as I am, he is happy too I know in his home – so what we have is better than riches.” Matilda Edgar to Aunt Carry, 7 January 1866. PAO Edgar Family Papers.

66 Matilda Edgar wrote to her husband’s aunt, “I am awfully lonely without him…nothing would induce him to leave me for so long again, there’s romance for you.” Matilda Edgar to Aunt Carry, 2 January 1867, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

67 “My dearest wife, I did write a note the other day…to Mrs. Laurier and she said she never received it – so I may have addressed it to you, as you know I am always thinking about you.” Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 1 April 1892, PAO Edgar Family Papers.
and wife being friends, sharing tasks and affection.”\textsuperscript{68} Not surprisingly, given the times, there are distinct patriarchal overtones woven throughout their marriage.

Their letters indicate Edgar’s unchallenged supervisory role in the relationship and make it clear that Matilda Edgar was his confidante, but never his advisor. She kept abreast of political issues by following closely what was reported in the newspapers and quizzed her husband about what she had read.\textsuperscript{69} He shared his political opinions with her. More often, his letters contained gossip about his colleagues or details about himself, regarding how he was feeling and how he performed. Typically, Edgar wrote to Matilda reporting the intrigue that followed the death of Sir John A. Macdonald. “I am having great fun watching Cabinet making,” he wrote. “Thompson was undoubtedly consulted and trying his hand but is having an awful time I never saw such flushed and conceited men as were at the Rideau Club just now.”\textsuperscript{70} As the Conservative administration was crumbling under the leadership of Mackenzie Bowell, Edgar described the political circumstances to his wife from his unique perspective. “You will no doubt see the full political situation in the papers. We have had our consultation and the situation looks promising” he told her, “I hear a great deal and think that neither Bowell nor Tupper can succeed. Chances are at present that after an adjournment, Laurier will be called in.”\textsuperscript{71} A year later, Bowell’s Conservative government was still clinging to office when Edgar wrote to his wife, apparently in response to political opinions that she had expressed about the situation: “Laurier can tell no more than you can whether he will be called in before the next elections. I smugly think that the odds are about even and seem to be improving.”\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{68} McLean and Stamp, \textit{My Dearest Wife}, 81.

\textsuperscript{69} Edgar wrote: “My dearest wife, I write in answer to queries in which you say you have read the \textit{Mail} editorial on duration of Parliament and you think that Mowat has furnished a precedent. You have evidently not had my speech on the subject in Tuesday’s \textit{Globe}.” Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 19 March no year indicated, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{70} Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 12 June 1891, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{71} Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 6 January 1895, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{72} Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 10 January 1896, PAO Edgar Family Papers.
Generally, Edgar wrote about his own performance and how he was feeling.\textsuperscript{73} When he rose in the House to speak, he reported to his wife that he was “not at all nervous and the House was all attention.”\textsuperscript{74} Although he appeared confident in the House, he confided to Matilda his anxiety: “I have just sat down after a half hour speech. I feel three times as well as I did an hour ago when I had my speech on my stomach.”\textsuperscript{75}

Habitually homesick, Edgar confessed in his letters to his wife that after more than twenty years of marriage, he was “nearly breaking down” when he left for Ottawa, and another Parliamentary Session.\textsuperscript{76} While he was away from home, James and Matilda Edgar wrote to each other daily. More often, he wrote two or three letters to his wife in a day, often expressing to her his inner most anxieties, revealing the “vulnerability that lay behind the public mask of strength and imperturbability.”\textsuperscript{77} He regularly wrote from the House of Commons during a debate or immediately after he had given his speech to the House. When in Parliament during the Pacific Scandal, which ultimately led to the demise of the Conservative Government amid charges of corruption, he wrote that he longed to be home: “I wish that this was over and I was home quietly again.”\textsuperscript{78} During the resultant fierce election campaign of 1883, in which the Liberal Party under Alexander Mackenzie was victorious but Edgar was defeated, he expressed his frustration and loneliness to his wife, writing, “What a nuisance this election is. Am I never to have peace and rest and loaves with my family?”\textsuperscript{79} Edgar depended on Matilda’s letters to assuage his longing to be home and to keep him informed of everyday events in the

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\textsuperscript{73} As Edgar reported to his wife, “This has been the best day we ever had in Parliament and I was glad that I had the responsibility for the business” Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 7 March 1896, PAO Edgar Family Papers.
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\textsuperscript{74} Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 2 May 1887, PAO Edgar Family Papers.
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\textsuperscript{75} Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 20 February 1890, PAO Edgar Family Papers.
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\textsuperscript{76} As Edgar told his wife, “I was nearly breaking down when I said goodbye to you.” 22 May 1886; “I feel very homesick, but must work it off.” Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 7 June 1886, PAO Edgar Family Papers.
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\textsuperscript{77} Tosh, \textit{A Mans Place}, 54.
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\textsuperscript{78} Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 10 June 1875, PAO Edgar Family Papers.
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\textsuperscript{79} McLean and Stamp, \textit{My Dearest Wife}, 133.
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family. He frequently complained when he did not receive a letter from home daily. “What has happened to you? Two mails have been delivered to the office today. I hope nothing is wrong. I am anxious to hear.”\textsuperscript{80} Other letters continued this complaint: “No letter at all from you today. How do you explain such conduct?” And, “I have had no letters from you at all today. How do you explain that?”\textsuperscript{81} “No letter from you tonight.” he wrote petulantly, “I ought to write only one letter per day for that is all I get.”\textsuperscript{82}

In the main, his letters were authoritarian and dictatorial, indicating that their marriage was not an egalitarian relationship. He repeatedly instructed her in what he considered to be the correct manner of letter writing, insisting that she “not forget to put date, day or hour” at the heading of each note to him.\textsuperscript{83} Throughout the years, Edgar continued to reprimand Matilda that when writing to him to “be as careful about dates and hours as I am.”\textsuperscript{84} When he was not instructing his wife on the proper method of letter writing, he gave her directions on the care and feeding of their children. “I am relieved of a great anxiety about Jamie,” he wrote, “but be careful not to let him exert himself, or read, or get excited. Feed him up, he may have a relapse.”\textsuperscript{85} Here it is evident how Edgar’s behaviour supports Tosh’s contention that “men felt their identity to be vested in the exercise of domestic authority.”\textsuperscript{86}

Edgar exhibited his domestic authority further when he instructed Matilda about what she should do with gifts that he sent to the children. When he sent a botany book, \textit{Wildflowers, Shrubs and Trees}, he provided precise directions for its use: “Let the

\textsuperscript{80} Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 18 August 1884, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{81} Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 2 June 1885 and 24 June 1885.

\textsuperscript{82} Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 19 March 1892, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{83} Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 17 July 1884, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{84} Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 7 March 1896, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{85} Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 3 February 1885, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

children try to find flowers and name them out of the book...after you get the plant names you should print them in a book we will get, and print the proper names to them. This will fill the summer with a new interest for us all, and keep up your painting. Don’t let the children take the book out of the house. On another occasion when sending home a gift of maple sugar to his children, he advised his wife to “break it up into pieces like marbles and feed it out gradually to the children as Papa’s sugar.” He was also inclined to provide his wife with detailed instruction regarding work to be done around the house or cottage. For example, when he sent some rose plants to Toronto, he included explicit instructions regarding the method of planting and placement in the garden. In fact, James Edgar appears to have been the chief authority in all aspects of his family life. While, Canadian turn-of-the-century social commentator, Henry Morgan described Matilda Edgar in his work *Types of Canadian Women* (1905) as a woman of “clear intellect,” nevertheless, regardless of the clarity of her intellect, her husband found it necessary to provide detailed instruction to his wife in the simplest of tasks.

James Edgar’s role exemplifies the late Victorian patriarchal principles of a husband’s manly responsibility in the supervision of his wife and family. Typically, he was the one to proffer advice and she was the one to receive it. While his letters are abundant with instructions, there is no indication that Matilda Edgar offered advice or instruction to her husband on any matter, political or domestic, or that he requested her opinion or her advice. When, for example, Edgar considered accepting the Presidency of the Cricket Club, rather than giving her opinion outright instead Matilda asked “How much is it..." McLean and Stamp, *My Dearest Wife*, 177.

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87 Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 10 July 1885, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

88 Edgar to Matilda Edgar, no date, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

89 Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 1 June 1885, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

90 Edgar instructed his wife, “As soon as the roses arrive, cut them down ruthlessly to four inches from the roots and plant them in the beds nearest the summer house and further away from the lower garden –cut off old and new wood clean…” McLean and Stamp, *My Dearest Wife*, 177.


92 As Tosh has argued, “Authority guidance and discipline continued to be viewed as a father’s central role.” Tosh, *A Man’s Place*, 89.
likely to cost?” McLean and Stamp, *My Dearest Wife*, 147.

ibid.

As Tosh has argued, “Masculine identity was associated with being master in his own house…upholding patriarchal power.” Tosh, “What Should Historians Do About Masculinity?” See also Hammerton who has argued that, “the issue of men’s domestic presence remained one of symbolic importance for the health of the companionate marriage.” Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship*, 80.

As Edgar wrote to his wife, “I have sent you a couple of volumes of correspondence of historian (I forget his name) as you might get a hint from it for yours. I may be able to get you a copy of some letters written by Toronto boys about Dr. Strachan at Cornwall, I will see Dr. Bergeron about it.” Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 4 May 1890, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

As Langland has observed one paradigm of social mobility was “the relatively early acceptance of self made men as companions or marriage partners by persons of genteel birth and elite status.” Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody’s Angels: Middle-class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 29.
emerging classes and immigrants.” Matilda Edgar’s book, *Ten Years in Upper Canada in Peace and War* verified her colonial aristocratic status. In turn, it created for James Edgar a relationship to colonial aristocracy, through marriage and by doing so further validated his political role in the stewardship of the nation. Typically, his assistance was more in the nature of supervision than support. While he worked to promote her book to newspaper journalists and passed along encouraging reviews from his Ottawa colleagues, he also instructed her to be more forceful with her British publishers to increase sales. While there is no evidence in their letters that Matilda Edgar requested her husband’s supervision of her writing, nevertheless he instructed her to show him what she had prepared because, as he explained, he possessed more experience in writing for the press.

As in most aspects of their life, he continued to provide leadership and held the authority in the relationship. When for example in 1891 Matilda Edgar was invited to join the York Pioneer and Historical Society (YPHS) following the publication of her book, Edgar advised her to “most politely decline to add these responsibilities to your present


99 As Boutilier and Prentice have argued “by advancing this imperialistic nation building narrative, they claimed not only pride of place for their forefathers in Canadian history but attempted to legitimate an enhanced leadership role for themselves in the present as the rightful stewards of the new Canadian nation.” Beverley Boutilier and Alison Prentice, editors, *Creating Historical Memory: English Canadian Women and the Work of History* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1997), 65. Moreover as Knowles has contended, “its middle class members sought to bestow upon themselves …an enduring mark of honour…to protect and legitimize their status values and beliefs during a period of profound social and economic change.” Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists*, 140; Cross, *A Biography of Robert Baldwin*, 91.

100 Edgar wrote to his wife to inform her of his efforts to promote her work. “I spoke to Willison about your paper and he will be very glad to have it for the Saturday *Globe*. I spoke not of pay but can give him a hint about that later.” Edgar to Matilda, 3 June 1891. See also: “Senator Alan [said]… he only read the book the other day and could not put it down till he had finished it. Senator McInnis said that he had been one of the first to discuss its merits. A day or two ago Senator Gervan told me that he could not put it down. Your style appeals directly to the Senators at any rate.” Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 18 June 1891, 10:00am PAO Edgar Family Papers.

101 As Edgar suggested to his wife, “I think it might be well for you to show me what you prepare – as I have written more for the press than you have and may suggest more ways of putting facts.” Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 12 March 1893, PAO Edgar Family Papers.
The motivation for his advice on this point is problematic since it seemed appropriate for Matilda Edgar to join the Society, given that her writing is focused upon a history of the early days of the province. Moreover, membership in the YPHS was unlikely to require much of her time away from her domestic duties as the mother of eight children or her socio-professional responsibilities as a political wife. Self-interest may have been Edgar’s real motivation as further responsibilities such as meetings, committees and correspondence to do with the YPHS may have left his wife with less time to answer his needs. Alternatively, Edgar’s motivation may well have been to discourage his wife from a close association with women’s rights advocate Sarah Curzon. As Cecilia Morgan points out, women writing history was often a gendered response to “national identity and national development.”

Quite the reverse to the historical writing of Matilda Edgar that celebrated male achievement, women historians were beginning to write an alternative view to patriarchal history. Sarah Curzon, who was an honorary member of the as yet, all male York Pioneer and Historical Society, presented a heroic image of Laura Secord that served to move the “cause of women’s rights to the center of Canadian political discourse by asserting an historic relationship between the sacrifices of Canadian women in wartime and the preservation of Canada as a British nation.” Was Edgar concerned that his wife not be associated with the work of a woman that he perceived constituted an attack on a liberal hegemony of male privilege by promoting women’s rights through historical writings, especially when he was an opponent of woman suffrage?

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102 Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 29 May 1891, PAO Edgar Family Papers.


105 As Boutilier has explained, Curzon experienced “a degree of public notoriety for her women’s rights politics.” Boutilier, “Women’s Rights and Duties”, 52. See also McLean and Stamp who have claimed that, Edgar “had spoken against votes for women in the Franchise Bill of 1885.” McLean and Stamp, *My Dearest Wife*, 252.
Government either for this”¹⁰⁶ Edgar may well have felt the same as many well to do and influential men of the period, for whom support of women’s history was “equivocal.”¹⁰⁷ Davidoff and Hall have shown that class identity was contingent upon gendered patterns of behaviour.¹⁰⁸ Thus, Edgar’s drive to elevate his status to what he identified as the exclusive “bon ton” of the Canadian establishment may have led him to discourage Matilda Edgar from any sort of public association with Sarah Curzon, who was known to challenge the gendered order that underpinned the elite culture to which he sought to belong.¹⁰⁹

Despite Edgar’s efforts to maintain authoritarian control in his marriage, there is one letter that stands alone among the Edgar papers that indicates Matilda Edgar may have attempted to avoid the authoritarian interference that her husband presented in the guise of assistance. In March 1896 Edgar learned of his wife’s impending address to the Canadian Women’s Historical Society, of which Sarah Curzon was a founding member. Evidently, he had no forewarning and knew nothing about it. Here is a suggestion that she deliberately avoided telling him. On balance, it is reasonable to surmise that she would have required some time to prepare her text for the address. Since they exchanged letters daily, and were “friends, sharing tasks and affection,” it is logical to expect that she would have kept him abreast of her activities. Instead he wrote, “I see by the papers that you are going to be the big gun and read a paper on Friday before the Historical Society.”¹¹⁰ Surely, this was to be an important event, especially because it was reported in the paper. Yet it is clear that she had told him nothing about it, since he asked, “What is it about?” With his usual authoritarian manner, Edgar proceeded to encourage and

¹⁰⁶ Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 29 May 1891, 8:45 pm, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

¹⁰⁷ Boutilier, “Women’s Rights and Duties”.

¹⁰⁸ As Davidoff and Hall pointed out “the middle class adopted distinctly different class identities and the language of class formation was gendered.” Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family Fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 30.

¹⁰⁹ Boutilier, “Women’s Rights and Duties”.

¹¹⁰ Edgar to Matilda 7 March 1896, PAO Edgar Family Papers. See also “An open meeting of the Canadian Women’s Historical Society will be held in the Canadian Institute next Friday. Papers will be read by Mrs. J.D. Edgar.” Toronto Globe Saturday, 7 March 1896.
advise his wife, and clearly missed the subtle insinuation that his directions were unnecessary. Nevertheless, forever the guiding patriarch, he wrote, “I am sure that the matter and style will be good – but be sure that you practice the elocution well before Maud, loud, slow and each word clear.” Apart from this one instance, whether Matilda Edgar found her husband’s controlling patriarchal manner an irritation to be endured or experienced their relationship within “a culture of compensation within patriarchy” is difficult to assess. As Wendy Mitchinson points out, “tact, adaptability and intuition were traits necessary for individuals who did not have power but had to live with those who did.” When reading Edgar’s letters to his wife, one can only assume that Matilda Edgar failed to inform her husband beforehand of her address to the Women’s Canadian Historical Society in order to tactfully avoid his efforts to direct her.

Two conclusions may be drawn from the Edgar papers. First, James Edgar was a paterfamilias extraordinaire, taking charge and guiding his wife and family in generally all aspects of their lives. Second, theirs was a loving and affectionate marriage that contained elements of a companionate relationship within a patriarchal structure that they both appear to have accepted as the natural order between the sexes. What follows is an examination of the ideological and cultural constructs that led an accomplished woman such as Matilda Ridout Edgar to accept a subordinate position in her marriage.

**Fetishization of Male Power**

Apart from a single letter that suggests an effort by Matilda Edgar to avoid her husband’s constant supervision, the larger power relations and structural constraints inherent in late-nineteenth century principles of male superiority appear not to have been a source of discord in the Edgar marriage. Matilda Edgar’s fundamental acceptance of male dominance and female submission is apparent in her letters to Edgar’s Aunt Caroline.

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111 Edgar to Matilda Edgar, 7 March 1896, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

112 Sandwell, “Limits of Liberalism”.

“Now as a steady old married man” she writes, "he is quite the Master of the house."\textsuperscript{114} In other letters, she repeatedly refers to her husband as “my Lord and Master” and describes Edgar as “the Master of the house, my dear husband and father at the head of his little table, looking so handsome and contented.”\textsuperscript{115} Her choice of language may be interpreted as an expression of affection, possibly tinged with a measure of irony or sarcasm. More to the point, Matilda Edgar’s terms of endearment are expressive not of inherent masculine and feminine traits but rather what Kimmel has described as “role enactments.”\textsuperscript{116} When we examine masculinity and femininity as relational constructs, it becomes clear that by emphasizing her husband’s masculine role, Matilda Edgar is asserting her own bourgeois feminine sense of self.\textsuperscript{117} Mary Poovey points out that sexual binary opposition was fundamental to Victorian gender identity and the consolidation of bourgeois power.\textsuperscript{118} As Mary S. Hartman emphasizes, most societies have, “stressed the importance of differences between the sexes and have endorsed to a greater or lesser degree a sexual hierarchy favouring men.”\textsuperscript{119} In sixteenth century England, for example, women were counseled to serve, love and obey.”\textsuperscript{120} Three centuries later, in his first published work (\textit{Man and Woman}, 1894), renowned American sexologist, Havelock Ellis rationalized the “ideal woman” as the “glorification of motherhood” in contrast to an

\textsuperscript{114} Matilda Edgar to Aunt Caroline, 7 January 1866, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{115} Matilda Edgar to Aunt Carry, 2 January 1867 and 23 May 1869, PAO, Edgar Family Papers.


\textsuperscript{117} As Davidoff and Hall, have argued, “it was only when placed beside man that she could make sense and her husband achieve his full manhood.” Davidoff and Hall, \textit{Family Fortunes}, 452.

\textsuperscript{118} As Poovey has argued gender binary opposition emphasized “the natural difference between the manly man and the womanly woman.” Poovey, \textit{Uneven Developments}, 6. See also Davidoff and Hall who have argued that, “Middle-class gentlemen and middle-class ladies each had their appointed place in the newly mapped social world.” Davidoff and Hall, \textit{Family Fortunes}, 30.


\textsuperscript{120} In Shakespeare’s “Taming of the Shrew” Katherina [the now tamed ‘shrew’] counsels women not to “seek for rule supremacy and sway when they are bound to serve, love and obey.” William Shakespeare, \textit{The Taming of the Shrew} Act 5 Scene 2, (1584)
increasingly popular discourse of the ‘new woman’ of the period.\textsuperscript{121} Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English in their examination of nineteenth century prescriptive literature have described a ‘new masculinism’ that was developing throughout the century that sanctioned and reinforced male power within marriage. They explain further that “science mocked the old patriarchal ideology” while simultaneously supporting a “masculinist view of human nature” that rationalized the continuance of male supremacy and female dependency.\textsuperscript{122} Physicians claiming scientific knowledge declared that female biology made women dependent upon men, and, by so doing bolstered the patriarchal role as protector and benefactor.\textsuperscript{123}

The patriarchal nature of the Edgar marriage suggests a fetishization of masculinity in which a psychological, social, legal and scientific component perpetuated a sexual hierarchy based upon an ideology of male superiority as the natural order of gender relations. As Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argue in their seminal examination of the rise of the English middle class, “Women’s independent action was denounced as ‘unwomanly’, ‘unsexed’ or ‘strongminded’ [sic], epithets designed to undermine core feminine identity…Marriage became both a symbol and an institution of women’s containment.” What this work is attempting to explain is how the late Victorian cultural concept of femininity was a prominent factor in women’s sense of self and why women held onto roles that took power away from them through an examination of the lived experience of Matilda Ridout Edgar. Deborah Gorham’s investigation of the role psychology plays in the internalization of gender identity arrives at a determination that it is the concept of femininity, dating from the eighteenth century that rationalized and

\textsuperscript{121} Sheila Jeffreys, \textit{The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930} (London: Pandora Press, 1985), 129.

\textsuperscript{122} Ehrenreich and English, \textit{For Her Own Good}, 17-28.

\textsuperscript{123} As Mitchinson has argued, “many physicians believed that women were intellectually inferior to men and some linked this imbalance to the menarch…Puberty not only accounted for women being intellectually inferior to men and having a limited role in society but it also made them physically weaker than men. Women therefor, were to be removed from active participation in the outside world and sheltered.” Wendy Mitchinson, \textit{The Nature of Their Bodies; Women and Their Doctors in Victorian Canada} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 81.
entrenched Victorian female subordination. The idea of femininity,” she tells us, “reinforced the Victorian conception of masculinity.” In the relational construct, femininity was about subordination. If a woman ceases to be subordinate, as one man explained, “there would be no object for a man to marry.” “If you compete with us,” he said, “we shan’t marry you.” This entrenched belief in the natural function of women and men determined that women’s true dignity lay in her subordinate role to her masculine protector. To further stress the point, Queen Victoria cautioned that, “women would be the most hateful, heartless and disgusting of human beings, were she allowed to unsex herself and where would be the protection which man was intended to give the weaker sex?” The message was clear: female autonomy was a source of danger for women.

The marriage of Matilda and James Edgar provides a concrete example of the profound impact of the interrelated concepts of femininity and dependency. When Matilda Edgar tells his aunt that, “he works so hard, always – I wonder sometimes if he does not get almost in despair at having such a number to provide for” she is revealing a “consciousness of dependence” on her husband as provider. For his part, Edgar was fulfilling what Michael Roper and John Tosh have described as the “desired masculine traits of the middle class that stressed a punishing work ethic” and “dedication to family pursuits.” Matilda Edgar’s restricted ability to achieve financial autonomy symbolized

124 As Gorham has determined, “Femininity is a modern idea and represents a major ideological shift in the justification for the secondary position of females...since the end of the eighteenth century the concept of femininity...has been the major ideological agent in enforcing the subordination of women.” Deborah Gorham, The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 5: See also Davidoff and Hall, who have argued, “a woman’s femininity was expressed in her dependence” Davidoff and Hall, Family Fortunes, 114.


129 Michael Roper and John Tosh, editors, Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800
her bourgeois identity. Thus her marriage to the ambitious Edgar was essential to the maintenance of her genteel position and that of her children. Although recognized as an accomplished author, her literary achievements “never brought in more than a trickle of royalties.” The question is whether Matilda Edgar had any real desire to participate in the formal economy, as a professional author. Theresa Healey “summarizes the relationship of most Canadian women to the formal economy in the 1930s as intermittent and not always imbued with a seriousness of purpose.” More recently, Peter Baskerville presents a challenge to this argument with evidence that some women at least were very involved in late nineteenth century financial and economic activity, observing, “Many women, including married women ran businesses situated with and outside their homes. Many of these women too were demonstrably middle class, the group believed to be the most constrained by separate spheres ideology.” This work is not intended to frame Matilda Edgar’s experience within a system of oppression that prevented her from achieving the “hegemonic structures of liberalism that celebrated and normalized the quest for money, liberty, justice and equality.” Instead, it examines how Matilda Edgar understood her role in a different way, as part of two disparate but unified modes, one being her responsibility, the other her husband’s as a cooperative way of building and supporting a bourgeois family. Moreover, she would have been mindful and aware of Sarah Curzon’s struggle to make a living as a professional historian and a woman.


130 As Davidoff and Hall have argued, “The active generation of lasting wealth was virtually impossible for women.” Davidoff and Hall, Family Fortunes, 451. Additionally, as Gorham has summarized, for a woman “earning money meant loss of caste.” Gorham, The Victorian Girl, 8. See also Ehrenreich and English, who have observed that, “A successful man could have no better social ornament than an idle wife.” Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good, 106.

131 McLean and Stamp, My Dearest Wife, 238.


133 Baskerville, Silent Revolution, 14.

134 Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism”.

135 See Boutilier’s discussion of Sarah Curzon’s economic reality. Boutilier, “Women’s Rights and Duties”.
Matilda Edgar’s behavior exemplifies general attitudes regarding gender roles in late Victorian Canada, revealing how change is comprised out of continuity that moves at a glacial pace.\textsuperscript{136} Regardless of their identification as ‘new women,’ Kit Coleman and Faith Fenton subscribed to the same prevailing sexual paradigm that sanctioned traditional male power within the marriage and a wife’s “loving unobtrusive adaptation of herself to her husband’s tastes and wishes” as natural and desirable to women.\textsuperscript{137} Lady Marjorie Pentland’s biography of her mother, Lady Aberdeen, paid homage to the notion of male superiority as the true measure of her mother’s intellect. “The quality of her mind” she writes, “might be judged by the number of men who throughout her life had been glad to discuss and assist her ideas.”\textsuperscript{138} This suggests that Pentland subscribed to the dominant ideology of male superiority and serves to underscore the enduring nature of sexual hierarchy.

How Patriarchy Gave Meaning to her life

Lady Matilda Ridout Edgar appears to have internalized the doctrine of male superiority. Born in 1845, her life intersects with the early Victorian period, the post-Confederation era and the emergence of the ‘new woman’ of the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{139} During her lifetime, the position of women progressed from complete economic dependence to significant control over their property and earnings. However, as this chapter has shown, formal and informal structures continued to buttress patriarchy. Prescriptive literature and popular discourse of the period endorsed notions of male superiority and female

\textsuperscript{136} Downie. \textit{A passionate pen}, 188.


\textsuperscript{138} Marjorie Pentland, \textit{A Bonnie Fechter} (London: Batsford, 1952), 221.

\textsuperscript{139} As Errington has pointed out, “Between 1790 and 1840, Upper Canada was a pre-industrial society…colonial development, colonial economy.” Elizabeth Jane Errington, \textit{Wives and Mothers, School Mistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada, 1790-1840} (Montreal/Kingston: McGill/ Queen’s University Press, 1995), 240.
dependency that were reinforced by law.\textsuperscript{140} As Robin Grazley’s examination of sexual and domestic relationships in early Upper Canada (1783-1850) reveals, popular discourse supported a belief that women were responsible for, “happiness in marriage” and “were urged to “forebear and forgive their husbands in love and Christian duty.”\textsuperscript{141} Moreover, while Baskerville argues that by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, some middle-class women “were far more autonomous in matters of finance” than previously believed, nevertheless the “accepted rubric about woman’s relationship to paid labour” and social class continued to be particularly limiting to bourgeois women like Matilda Ridout Edgar.\textsuperscript{142} Her formative years coincide with a period when the cult of true womanhood was at its zenith.\textsuperscript{143} Thus, despite the grim reality that her mother was left in “near desperate straits” after the financial reversals and subsequent death of her father, Matilda Ridout’s education, typical of her class and gender, was one of learned dependence in which she was trained to be an amusing and intelligent companion to her husband.\textsuperscript{144} She

\textsuperscript{140} An article in the Metropolitan stated that “The strength and grace of woman have their best expression in the home…The ornament of a quiet spirit…the soft touch the delicate courtesies, the patience, the wisdom give woman her best empire…before these, men will gladly bow.” Metropolitan 4 May 1895, NAC, Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19; “She knows that it is part of her natural mission to please and be charming, and she knows that dress sets her off, and that men feel more enthusiastically toward her when she’s looking fresh and pretty than when she is dowdy and a fright. And, being womanly, she likes the admiration of men and thinks their love a better thing than their indifference.” Eliza Linton, “The Womanly Woman” Hollis, Women in Public, 1.3.5

\textsuperscript{141} Grazley, “Nothing “Improper” Happened,” 44.

\textsuperscript{142} Peter Baskerville, Silent Revolution, 10; Elizabeth Jane Errington, Wives and Mothers, School Mistresses and Scullery Maids, 232; Katherine M.J. McKenna, A Life of Propriety: Anne Murray Powel and Her Family, 1755-1849 (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 190. Additionally, Davidoff and Hall have argued that a non-working wife was “one of the fixed points of middle-class status.” Davidoff and Hall, Family Fortunes, 275.

\textsuperscript{143} As Welter has argued, “It is however, certain, that in whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind, are required from her.” Welter citing Sphere and Duties of Woman (1854), Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” American Quarterly (1966): 151-174.

\textsuperscript{144} As McLean and Stamp have observed, “His widow was left in near desperate straits…with nine children still at home.” McLean and Stamp, My Dearest Wife, 62-71. Additionally, as Errington has shown, “John Strachan Chairman of the General Board of Education for Upper Canada, asserted in 1829 that all children ‘ought likewise to enjoy the pleasure as well as the advantage of intellectual employment’…Strachan took it for granted however that boys and girls required different kinds of education…girls like boys ought to be able to read and write…what was considered an appropriate degree of education depended on her family’s status in society…young ladies of the middle and upper classes had to be able to converse well, act as hostess for their husband and generally be capable of taking their rightful place in society. They also had to be capable of reflecting and promoting virtue and morality to members of their families and to
married James Edgar in 1865, when she was twenty years old. Another fifteen years would pass before women were admitted to universities in Canada.\textsuperscript{145} Matilda Ridout Edgar internalized the feminine role for which she was trained and lived within an ideology of patriarchal bargains whereby she paid with her dependence in exchange for a husband who would protect and provide for her.\textsuperscript{146}

For Matilda Ridout and James Edgar patriarchal bargains proved to be mutually beneficial. She brought elite status and connections to the marriage. In addition, her historical writing led to a personal friendship with Lady Aberdeen that subsequently drew James Edgar into a close relationship with Lord and Lady Aberdeen, which was surely one of the crowning achievements of his life as the boy who had sought to be “somebody.”\textsuperscript{147} In return, it was through James Edgar’s political accomplishments that Matilda Edgar became in 1898 Lady Edgar, which further enhanced her upper-class position. Despite women’s changing legal status throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Matilda Ridout Edgar’s life was lived within the normative construction of liberal political/economic standards in which a woman was dependent upon a man for her survival. As the mother of eight children, her life symbolized the middle-class ideal of dedicated motherhood.

Matilda Edgar’s historical writing trace her genteel identity through the celebration of male achievement, thus serving as further evidence of her acceptance of patriarchal ideology. Her book \textit{Ten years of Upper Canada in Peace and War, 1805-1815} makes no


\textsuperscript{146} As Bennett has argued “patriarchal bargains” [that is the notion that in exchange for surrendering personal autonomy, one receives protection and a measure of influence] “create strategic opportunities for women.” Judith M. Bennett, \textit{History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 59.

\textsuperscript{147} Edgar to his grandmother, no date, PAO Edgar Family Papers.
mention of female ancestors. Instead it is a history of achievement by the male members of her family alone, effectively bolstering a patriarchal view of history while underpinning her genteel identity as a descendent of early Upper Canadian elite society.

She informs her readers that writing this book “has been a labour of love to collect these memorials of an honored father.” It may well have been a labour of love intended to rehabilitate her father’s tarnished reputation and in the process substantiate her own colonial aristocratic identity. In her book, Lady Edgar celebrates Laura Secord’s courageous actions in the War of 1812, describing her as a “heroine.” Yet she recalls no heroic acts on the part of any other women who could be described as deserving of the “grateful admiration for those [men] who saved the land in its hour of need.” In fact, Laura Secord is the only female mentioned and makes but a brief appearance in Matilda Edgar’s first book. Although this was not unusual there were a few exceptions such as Sarah Curzon, who first recognized and celebrated the heroism of Laura Secord or Janet Carnichon, “who was enthusiastic about attempts to memorialize Canadian women…and maintained that women’s work in building the Canadian nation must be recognized by historians” and Florence Deeks, who set out to write a history of the world “as she now saw history, from the beginning of human life women had been a constructive influence.”

Lady Edgar published two more books: General Brock (1904)

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148 Matilda Edgar described early Upper Canadian society: “So small was society in Upper Canada that almost all the names mentioned are, in some way or other, interwoven with its history.” Matilda Ridout Edgar, Ten years of Upper Canada in peace and war, 1805-1815: being the Ridout letters with annotations; also an appendix of the narrative of the captivity among the Shawanese Indians, in 1788, of Thos. Ridout, afterwards surveyor-general of Upper Canada; and a vocabulary, compiled by him, of the Shawanese language. (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1890), Introduction.

149 Ibid.

150 “Sixty-eight year old Thomas Ridout was forced to resign” [his position as cashier of the Bank of Upper Canada.] Under his tenure, “the Bank had lost $1.5 million, or half of its capital, as a result of imprudent railway and land speculation…devastated by his misfortunes, Ridout’s physical and psychological health started to fail. He died…the day before his bank affairs were to be examined.” McLean and Stamp, My Dearest Wife, 71.

151 Matilda Ridout Edgar, Ten years of Upper Canada in peace and war, introduction.

and a work, about her ancestor John Ridout, secretary to Governor Horatio Sharpe: *A Colonial Governor in Maryland: Horatio Sharpe and His Times, 1753-1773* which was published posthumously in 1912. Like her first, both works continued to honor male achievement. At the time of her death, she was researching her husband’s ancestor, James Edgar, secretary to the exiled Prince of Scotland James Stuart. This work would bring to light her husband’s distinguished ancestry and in the process further draw attention to her own status and that of her children. Through her historical research and writing, Matilda Edgar exhibits what Smith and Valenze have described as “mutuality as a form of individuality based on interdependence and the recognition of other agents as a part of one’s own agency.” Not only did she verify her own colonial aristocratic status through the acknowledgement of interdependence with her ancestral achievements but she also highlighted James Edgar’s aristocratic antecedents as well. While on the whole, as a wife she exhibited liberal characteristics, that is, a reticence toward rational self-interest; nevertheless, through her work, Matilda Ridout Edgar was making a declaration of her individual identity and social status through her relationship to her male ancestors.

Her efforts to publicize herself and her work included taking the initiative to send an unsolicited copy of her book, *Ten Years in Upper Canada in Peace and War* to the grand old man of liberalism, W.E. Gladstone and to Queen Victoria. While this was a common strategy for authors to promote their books, in the case of Matilda Edgar, her self-promotion seems to be a politically and socially calculating move to expand her

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153 McLean and Stamp, *My Dearest Wife*, 244.

154 Smith and Valenze, “Mutuality and Marginality”, 278; as cited by Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism”.

155 Matilda Ridout’s work serves to illustrate the family connection to the political and social luminaries of the early period of Upper Canada. Her father, Thomas G Ridout and his brother George attended John Strachan’s school at Cornwall and socialized with the likes of John Beverley Robinson “who became the distinguished Sir John Beverley Robinson, Chief Justice of Upper Canada” and Hon. Peter Russell, “on whom devolved the government of Canada on the recall of General Simcoe in 1796 and who continued as administrator until the arrival of General Hunter in 1799.” Ridout Edgar, *Ten Years of Upper Canada in peace and war*, 17.

156 Lady Edgar wrote in a letter to Lady Aberdeen, “The Queen has been graciously pleased to accept my other book [*Ten Years of Upper Canada in Peace and War*] and to have it placed in the Royal Library.” McLean and Stamp, *My Dearest Wife*, 244. See also PAO Edgar Family Papers.
network of relationships among the upper class, perhaps for the benefit of her husband’s political career as well as to strengthen her own genteel status. Certainly, Lady Edgar could not have foreseen that sending her book to Gladstone would prove in later years to be the catalyst for a close friendship with the wife of the Governor General. In this instance, we can witness a network of relationships at play. Lady Aberdeen’s close personal friendship with Prime Minister Gladstone led her to read the book that Matilda Edgar had sent to him. In turn, her literary work set her apart from other political wives and garnered the respect of Lady Aberdeen that developed into a close friendship between the two women.\textsuperscript{157}

Synergistic Friendship Transforming Identity

The synergistic friendship that developed between Lady Aberdeen and Lady Edgar proved to be transformational. Lady Aberdeen “would open a new chapter in Ridout Edgar’s life by involving her in the work of the National Council of Women.”\textsuperscript{158} As a result of their friendship, Matilda Edgar would become Lady Aberdeen’s chosen successor as President of the NCWC in 1898. Not surprisingly, since Lady Matilda Edgar possessed the social capital of her colonial aristocratic status, the political knowledge and connections as the wife of a leading politician and the maternal womanly image in her traditional role as the mother of a large family, she was the “logical and non-controversial choice” to carry out the work that the vicereine had initiated. As Lady Aberdeen explained, “It was Lady Edgar’s scholarly interests and her knowledge of public affairs, as well as her idyllic family life which marked her out for the presidency of the National

\textsuperscript{157} As Lady recorded in her Journal, “Mrs. Edgar wrote the book \textit{Ten Years in Upper Canada} which Mr. Gladstone gave me and thought so much of.” Journal, 21 August 1896. See also Lady Edgar’s letter to Lady Aberdeen, “What you say too about Mr. Gladstone’s spoken words of praise of my work gives me the pleasant feeling that I must have written something useful in its way. After all to us, the most valued part of your letter is where we find that a friendship which we felt and whose return we coveted so much, is ours. Believe me to be most sincerely yours, M. Edgar” Lady Edgar to Lady Aberdeen, 18 February 1898, PAO Edgar Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{158} McLean and Stamp, \textit{My Dearest Wife}, 166.
Like Lady Aberdeen, Lady Edgar’s practice, viewed through the prism of her domestic life, “was to carefully avoid the blustery methods of the woman reformer.” She had the personal qualifications to maintain the style that Lady Aberdeen had set in motion for the NCWC in what Strong Boag describes as “a successful middle of the road member of Canada’s community of progressive organizations.” Lady Aberdeen could leave the leadership of the NCWC under the guidance of a woman whom she knew could ensure that the Council would avoid the “rabid tone” and “anti-male attitude” of which she so disapproved.

While Lady Edgar as President influenced the style of the NCWC to continue the non-controversial methods that Lady Aberdeen had employed to gain wide acceptance for the Council’s work, in turn, the NCWC influenced Lady Edgar. As President of the NCWC, Matilda Edgar hosted the International Council of Women, which was held at the University of Toronto in 1909. Here we can see further evidence of the firm friendship between the two women: Lady Aberdeen attended the ICW in 1909, and stayed at the home of her friend Lady Edgar. More significantly, although James Edgar had spoken out against woman suffrage in the Franchise Bill debate of 1885, twenty-four years later under Lady Edgar’s presidency the NCWC moved “cautiously” toward woman suffrage. Although Matilda Edgar had never publicly expressed an opinion about woman suffrage, nevertheless, she proved to be the ideal woman to carry through the inclinations of Ishbel Aberdeen and the Council membership in this regard. Even though Lady Aberdeen personally supported woman suffrage, she had avoided the issue at the

159 Aberdeen, *We Twa: Reminiscences of Lord and Lady Aberdeen* Volume 2 (London, 1925), 102; McLean and Stamp, 249.

160 *Utica Globe*, 1 June 1895, NAC Abedeen Papers, Volume 19.


162 *Journal*, 2 August 1895, 28 February 1898.

163 Matilda Edgar addressed the annual general meeting of the National Council of Women of Canada in Ottawa. “Social problems are everywhere the order of the day and questions have to be discussed here that touch the very foundations of society.” National Council of Women of Canada, *Women Workers of Canada*, 1908, Griffiths, *The Splendid Vision*, 105-107.
inception of the NCWC because she considered the subject too controversial. As she wrote, “When we suggest that the time has fully come when the responsibility, the privilege of parliamentary vote should be given to us, the time is always inconvenient.” However, by 1909, under Lady Edgar’s management of the Council, the time seemed right and so the question of woman suffrage was a significant part of the main business of the meeting of the ICW in Toronto. A year later at the annual meeting of the NCWC “the resolution reading ‘the National Council of Women of Canada do hereby place itself on record in favour of the enfranchisement of women’ was passed.”

Accepting that individuality is the “central tenet” of liberalism, Lady Edgar’s presidency can be viewed through a prism of women’s liberal behaviour in valuing mutuality as “a form of individuality based on interdependence and recognition of other agents as part of one’s own agency.” Here we witness a clear interdependence of individual agency in the relationship between Lady Edgar and the NCWC. Whether she embraced woman suffrage personally is unclear. Council members voted in favour of woman suffrage but it was Lady Edgar’s knowledge of political form, her aristocratic grace and delicate courtesies that bespoke of the womanly woman, a maternal image that served to lead the

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164 As the Daily Mercury reported “The Countess of Aberdeen before leaving for Canada accepted the Presidency of the Scottish Committee of Woman’s Enfranchisement Association, which intends to present a memorial to the Prime Minister in favour of women’s enfranchisement.” Daily Mercury, 10 September 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers Volume 4. See also Griffiths, The Splendid Vision, 23. As Strong Boag has pointed out, it was not until 1909 that, “she publicly endorsed suffrage, a goal prepared for by years of patient education.” Strong Boag, “Creating ‘Big Tent’ Feminism: the Suffrage Politics of Ishbel Marjoribanks Gordon, Lady Aberdeen” (Paper presented at Berkshire Conference, 2011).

165 As French has observed, “She would continue to make urgent appeals for the women’s vote through the Liberal Federations and also through the International Council of Women but she never personally advocated or approved violent tactics.” Doris French, Ishbel and the Empire: A Biography of Lady Aberdeen (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1988), 274-5: See also newspaper report that identified Lady Aberdeen with woman suffrage. “The British aristocracy will yet make woman suffrage fashionable in this country. The influence of Lady Aberdeen has already been felt.” New York Sun, 3 October 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 4.

166 Griffiths, The Splendid Vision, 106.

167 Sandwell citing Ruth Smith and Deborah Valenze. “Mutuality an Marginality” 278, Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism”.

organization along quietly progressive lines toward woman suffrage.\textsuperscript{168} As Griffiths observes, women’s “‘innate’ maternal attributes were still, on most occasions offered as the justification for the extension of the suffrage.”\textsuperscript{169} With Matilda Edgar in place as president, it was apparent that the NCWC was not claiming to be seeking the right to vote for women’s own political autonomy but rather for the social benefit of the community at large that thus further exhibited an aliberal form of interdependence of individual agency among women.

\textbf{Woman’s Age: A New Gender Paradigm?}

Despite notable advances in women’s lives that opened up opportunities for economic autonomy and an increased sense of agency in the public and private sphere, Matilda Ridout Edgar’s life reveals how change can be a nuanced process that develops from continuity. The liberal hegemonic ideal of masculine autonomy that situated the ‘manly man’ as protector and provider seems to have remained the dominant discourse in Matilda Edgar’s life as well as a sense of interdependence that continued to make patriarchy acceptable to her as a natural part of gender relations. The writing of early twentieth century Canadian feminist, peace activist and journalist, Alice Chown, reflected an enduring belief in women’s ‘natural’ role. Although Chown was “in many ways a woman very much of her time. She was also a woman ahead of it.”\textsuperscript{170} Her uncompromising stance on marriage as an “impediment to women’s autonomy” for example set her apart from mainstream discourse as a radical feminist, while at the same time, she maintained a hegemonic view that woman’s “natural work” is to mother. Indeed, Chown stressed that if a woman, “is not mothering someone, she has natural

\textsuperscript{168} Lady Edgar’s refined “sweetness of manner, her energy and her talent, no less than her husband’s dignity and judgment, contributed to making the Speakership memorable and subtly different.” PAO Women’s Canadian Historical Society of Toronto: Reports and Transactions, 1896-1914.

\textsuperscript{169} In her article “The Common Cause” in the \textit{Montreal Herald} “Women’s Edition” Carrie Derick reasoned that, “the spirit which animates the suffrage movement is not self seeking. It is rather animated by a maternal spirit aroused by infant mortality, the exploitation of child labour…and the greater value placed upon property than upon the persons of women.” Carrie Derick, \textit{Montreal Herald}, 23 November 1913, as cited in Griffiths, \textit{The Splendid Vision}, 108; Strong-Boag, \textit{The Parliament of Women}, 277.

\textsuperscript{170} Alice Chown, \textit{The Stairway} (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988), introduction by Diana Chown.
instincts and aptitudes going to waste.” Paradoxically, the pronouncement of radical feminist Chown reflects a maternal feminist vision supporting the actions of the NCWC. Rather than advancing a suffragist agenda, the NCWC utilized an aliberal maternal feminist discourse in which social progress was based upon a network of relationships and an essentialist ideology regarding women’s ‘natural’ maternal role. And so, the question reemerges here: were women even trying to reach a goal of personal and political individualism? Apparently, they were not. Of course there were women who actively sought to achieve personal and professional fulfillment outside of marriage and child rearing, but as Crowley and Strong Boag have shown, more often their domestic role took precedence. As Joan Perkin has argued, “emancipation was a central concern for only a small minority of women. The great majority of wives not only accepted but embraced their lot.” Historians can extrapolate from Matilda Ridout Edgar’s biography that by embracing a maternalist ideology women were claiming a dignity and agency that it endorsed, while at the same time, supporting patriarchy.


As Crowley has pointed out, early Canadian historian Isabel Skelton “feared that while [her husband] Oscar’s career was advancing, she was slipping into ‘greasy domesticity’ that might transform her into ‘a pitiful example of a woman who gives up her own work and washes dishes instead.’…Oscar sympathized with the domestic and parental burdens that she bore, but in a puzzling manner that spoke to his conception of male sexuality, he tried to argue that while marrying placed greater restrictions on the man, parenting demanded more of the woman.” Terry Crowley, Marriage of Minds: Isabel and Oscar Skelton Reinventing Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 16 & 32; Elizabeth Smith married Adam Shortt December 1886. As Strong Boag has observed, after achieving her medical degree, “Elizabeth devoted herself to her growing family…housework and children drained even her abundant energies and reduced the scope of her outside interests. Although the medical profession was unusual in that women often continued in it after marriage and childbirth…at no time did she resume her medical career. An explanation is difficult to find …one can only suppose that the social requirements of Adam’s position first at Queen’s [University] and then in the Civil Service and Elizabeth’s growing participation in voluntary work militated against her resumption of the vocation for which she had struggled so hard.” Veronica Strong Boag, editor, A Woman with a Purpose: The Diaries of Elizabeth Smith, 1872 – 1884 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), xxix.

Perkin, Women and Marriage, 3. See also journalist Faith Fenton’s contention: “It is hard for her to loosen the old time conventionalities, the old time proprieties and properness.” Toronto Empire 4 November, 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 13.
Chapter Five

Patriarchal Bargains and Strategic Opportunities for Women

Of all the old prejudices that cling to the hem of the woman's garments and persistently impede her progress, none holds faster than this.
The idea that she owes service to a man instead of to herself, and that it is her highest duty to aid his development rather than her own, will be the last to die.

Susan B. Anthony (1897)

Zoë Lafontaine Laurier proved to be the ideal political wife for Canada’s first French Canadian Prime Minister. James Edgar described her as possessing “a natural graciousness of disposition, and those genial and sympathetic qualities that win hearts.” Her kindness and charm led her friend, journalist and author Madge MacBeth, to speculate, “it was probably impossible to live with Lady Laurier and not become infected with her goodness.” On the occasion of their fiftieth wedding anniversary, Laurier attributed much of his political success to her, saying, “his political battle was half won when he married his wife.” Through her real lived experience, Lady Laurier’s life represents the essence of patriarchal bargains; she received shelter and protection for which her duty was to the development of her husband’s career. Her life underscores an


2 James D. Edgar, Canada and Its Capital with Sketches of Political and Social Life at Ottawa (Toronto, 1898), 103.

3 Madge Macbeth, Over My Shoulder (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1953), 47.

4 Ottawa Evening Journal 19 November 1921, NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 814.

5 As Bennett has argued, “We must examine the patriarchal ideologies and realities that have assured women that there is safety in protected subordination and danger in vulnerable freedom.” Judith M. Bennett, History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 59; Sandwell has discussed the idea that there exists a “Women’s culture of compensation within patriarchy.” R.W. Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism: The Liberal Reconnaissance and the History of the Family in Canada” Canadian Historical Review 84,3 (September 2003): 423-450.
ideology in which a woman’s perceived value continued to be based upon her service to a man and remained the dominant principle governing the social construction of womanhood in late nineteenth century Canada. In his biography, Laurier: The First Canadian, Joseph Schull describes Zoë Laurier’s devoted service to her husband as “always with a vigilant eye for his comfort and well being…she carried his money, watched over his diet and saw to his dress.” In this way, Zoë Laurier’s supportive role represents the larger power relations and structural constraints of late nineteenth century gender ideology. It epitomizes both liberal hegemonic values of masculine economic independence, political identity and individualism, as well as aliberal feminine values of mutuality and interdependence. Her foremost duties were to provide a peaceful home environment, tend to her husband’s reputedly delicate health and to fulfill the social responsibilities of a political wife. Historians have described Zoë Laurier as a woman uncomfortable with her role as a political wife who had no political ambition for her husband. She reportedly said that as the wife of a politician: “I belong to everybody and to no one in particular. I would rather be the wife of a simple avocat in Arthabaska.” Nonetheless, despite her apparent aversion to her public role, Zoë Laurier presented an appealing image as a political wife to men and to women alike. She exemplified what Helen Buss explains are “cultural definitions of a ‘good’ woman as one [who is] always

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7 Sandwell has summarized the gendered difference between Liberalism as “the individual’s progress towards freedom, equality, justice, property and rational citizenship” and aliberal values of “altruism” and mutuality “that made patriarchy acceptable to so many women.” Sandwell, “The Limits of Liberalism”. Additionally as Friedman has argued “What is more important for women, according to this view, are human relationships and their preservation.” Marilyn Friedman, Autonomy, Gender, Politics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 135. Other theorists whose writing suggests this view include Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) and Nel Noddings, Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

8 Gwyn has described Zoë Laurier as a woman who “did not care for politics.” Sandra Gwyn, Private Capital: Ambition and Love in the Age of Macdonald and Laurier (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), 248. Robertson has described Mme. Laurier as a “bonne femme” who was “happy in her domestic world” with no intellectual pretensions.” Heather Robertson, More Than a Rose: prime minister’s wives and other women (Toronto: Seal Books, 1991), 128. Additionally, Schull has depicted Mme.Laurier as a wife who “had no thought of probing or changing, no seed of her own to plant, no wish to thrust on him.” Schull, Laurier, 73.

9 Schull, Laurier, 91; Carol McLeod, Wives of the Canadian Prime Ministers (Hansport: Lancelot, 1985), 75-6: McLeod citing Schull. See also: Gwyn, The Private Capital, 269.
sacrificing the self for the other.”

Zoë Laurier appears to have internalized a discourse that encouraged women to submit themselves to what Joan Perkin describes as “a certain pleasure in martyrdom, in placing the needs of others above one’s own.” As this chapter demonstrates, in due course, with the help of Lady Aberdeen who proved to be an inspiring friend and influential ally, Lady Laurier’s sense of interdependence and service to a man would be the catalyst to her own social and political influence. The evidence indicates that ultimately she would grow to enjoy and utilize her status as a public figure.

The Laurier Marriage

Among historians the marriage of Zoë Lafontaine to Wilfrid Laurier has been the subject of considerable discussion and conflicting interpretations. Numerous analyses are heavily dependent upon the stereotype of a designing female trapping Laurier, an “emotionally immature, sick young man” into a marriage that he did not want. Joseph Schull has portrayed the young Laurier as passively manipulated into marriage to a young woman who declared that she would marry Laurier or no one. According to popular historian Laurier LaPierre, Zoë Lafontaine wanted to marry and Wilfrid Laurier did not. From their letters, LaPierre concludes that “Zoë became more persistent and he more reluctant.” What is clear is that he was less than enthusiastic about marrying. When she informed Laurier that she had agreed to marry someone else, his response was simply “adieu ma bonne Zoë.” Heather Robertson concludes from their letters that Laurier was “more than a little equivocal about their relationship,” since he would not commit himself to an


12 As Fisher has argued, “Marriage to Zoë was no more than the yielding of an emotionally immature, sick young man to pressure.” Charles Fisher, editor, *Dearest Emilie: the love letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier to Madame Emilie Lavergne* (Toronto: NC Press, 1989), 57.

13 Schull has portrayed Laurier as being passively manipulated into marriage. Schull, *Laurier,* 67-70.

14 LaPierre has suggested a similar scenario in which “she was becoming more persistent and he more reluctant.” Laurier LaPierre, *Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the romance of Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1996), 7.

15 NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 814 B.
engagement and yet showed a reluctance to end the affair. However, according to Schull, Laurier had resolved to resist any proposal with a “stiff and dignified refusal.” Alternatively, Quebec historian Raymond Tanghe, and others have depicted the young couple as “very much in love” and argue that only Laurier’s uncertain health presented an obstacle to their marriage.

Laurier’s health has been the topic of speculation by historians and biographers alike. In his letters to Zoë Lafontaine, Laurier repeatedly bemoaned his poor health as a reason not to marry. His mother, father, sister and three half brothers died at a young age from what was probably tuberculosis. Senator L.O. David, journalist, politician, French Canadian historian and long time friend described Laurier in his youth as a man expecting to die soon. “He passed through it like a shadow,” he said, “and seemed to say to us, ‘brother, we must all die.’” As further evidence of his poor health, another of Laurier’s biographers, Oscar D. Skelton, discloses that Laurier “was well past middle age

16 Robertson, More Than a Rose, 123.
17 Schull, Laurier, 67.
18 Raymond Tanghe, Laurier: Architect of Canadian Unity (Montreal: Harvest House, 1967), 7. Skelton also has concluded that Mlle. Lafontaine had “completely captured his heart” but because of Laurier’s poor health he was “convinced that his days were numbered and he could not fairly ask any girl to share them.” Oscar D. Skelton, Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier (New York: Century, 1922), 41-43; As McArthur has maintained, Laurier “made the acquaintance of a beautiful good natured girl, who refused a very advantageous marriage in favour of Laurier. Having heard one day of the degree to which she remained faithful and devoted to him, he made his way to Montreal got married on the following day and returned immediately to Arthabaska and came a few weeks later to get his wife.” Peter McArthur, Sir Wilfrid Laurier (London: Dent, 1919), 13. Barbara Robertson has provided a similar account in which the “attraction was mutual but the prospect of marriage was pretty dim. Her mother lay dying and he had poor health and no money.” Barbara Robertson, Sir Wilfrid Laurier: the Great Conciliator (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1991), 17. See also newspaper account of their courtship. “Many physicians were of the opinion that Mr. Laurier was in consumption, that his lungs were attacked and he would not live long. He himself said that he did not know what to think, and that he would not live perhaps 6 months. Mme. Laurier settled this question by saying, ‘I am ready to run the risk. With the help of Providence, I will restore him to health.’” The Herald, Monday 30 August 1897, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 26.
19 Laurier to Zoë Lafontaine, “Oh Zoë the day that I see you happy, even though I am dying will be the best day of my life. Alas, why have the heavens refused me wealth and health?” NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 814 B, undated.
20 McArthur, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, 5; B. Robertson, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, 15; Fisher, Dearest Emilie, 30.
21 L.O. David, Laurier: Sa Vie, Ses Oeuvres (Beauceville, Quebec, 1919), 226; Robertson, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, 24.
before an insurance company would risk insuring his life.” The fact that Laurier lived into his seventy-ninth year indicates that he was not suffering from tuberculosis. Since he was reluctant to marry, it appears that his marriage to Zoë Lafontaine may have been the result of an intervention by her guardian, Dr. Seraphim Gautier, who declared that the young man was not consumptive and was not dying but rather suffered from chronic bronchitis. Apparently, Gauthier urged Laurier to marry the young woman. However, Heather Robertson suggests that it may have been Zoë Lafontaine and one of the Gauthier daughters who created an imaginary suitor, Pierre Valois, in order to “force Laurier’s hand.” Whatever the catalyst, a special dispensation from the church was necessary in order to rush through the marriage on the same day that Laurier proposed. But why the hurry? Could it be that Dr. Gauthier or Zoë Lafontaine feared that time would provide Laurier with an opportunity to reconsider and renege on his promise to wed? Sandra Gwyn describes the marriage as “flamboyantly romantic,” but then notes that their wedding night may have been “a harbinger of things to come” since Laurier took the train from Montreal back to Arthabaska alone, within two hours after the wedding, rather than spend the night with his bride.

Was Laurier, as Charles Fisher contends, “dragooned into marriage”? Here again there are conflicting views of the Laurier marriage. Senator David, whose friendship with Laurier extended back to their student days at McGill University, describes a happy marriage and tremendous similarity in personality between husband and wife. Additionally, Mme. David was one of Mme. Laurier’s oldest friends, having known each other from their time as students at the Convent of the Good Shepherd in Montreal. As

22 Skelton, Life and letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, 105; Schull, Laurier, 160.
23 Schull, Laurier, 67.
24 Robertson, More than a Rose, 126.
26 Fisher, Dearest Emilie, 21.
27 Schull, Laurier, 41.
a result of their enduring friendship, the Davids provide an insider’s observation of Wilfrid and Zoë Laurier. They witnessed a patriarchal marriage in which the wife was the perfect subordinate and supportive helpmate, who did not attempt to give herself any importance and was always able to “speak and act as circumstances demand with moderation and prudence.”

Mme. David portrayed Zoë Laurier as a “noble hearted woman, benevolent and modest, gentle, strong, vigorous” who was “filled with courage” and “never tired of helping others.”

An apolitical Woman
There is no evidence that theirs was a companionate marriage or that as Laurier’s political star rose, Zoë Laurier became either her husband’s political confidant or his advisor. As a result, many historians have portrayed her as a politically unsophisticated woman, struggling to adapt to political culture in Ottawa. Gwyn suggests that, “Zoë did not grow with him.”

Robertson draws a picture of a “bonne femme” who was “happy in her domestic world” with “no intellectual pretensions,” her attention centered upon “music, cheerful gossip, children, gardening and above all, fussing over (Laurier’s) health.”

Schull describes her as a woman who was out of her depth in the Capital; she was the woman of Arthabaska, of old friends and old surroundings, and he goes further to suggest that there was a breach in the marriage, strained by Laurier’s political success. When Laurier was finally voted from office in 1911, Zoë Laurier is reported to have said, “It was providence that was taking him a little from the country and giving him back to his old wife.” She seems to have had no political ambition for her husband and preferred a quiet life at their home in the small town of Arthabaska in central Quebec, away from politics.

29 *The Herald*, 30 August 1897, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 27.


32 Robertson, *More than a Rose* 128.


34 Robertson, *Sir Wilfrid Laurier*, 125.
The nature of their marriage remains enigmatic. Richard Clippingdale, another of Laurier’s biographers, describes the Laurier marriage as a happy one, arguing that, “marriage to the effervescent Zoë Lafontaine of Montreal made his Arthabaska exile far more endurable.” At the same time, there is no inference of romantic love in their letters either before or after their marriage. Unlike James Edgar’s letters of affectionate pining for ‘honeymoon days’ with his “little wife,” Laurier’s letters provide no indication of a passionate love affair or an intellectual friendship. Instead, he addresses her as his “dear good Zoë,” “his dear kind Zoë” or his “good angel.” Despite Skelton’s contention that Zoë and Wilfrid Laurier enjoyed “fifty years of rare happiness and close communion,” the facts suggest otherwise. In all of his letters, Laurier expresses no sentiment to indicate “a romantic love, the transcendent feeling of oneness, common purpose and mutual support.” Instead, he repeatedly expresses to others his profound unhappiness. Had Laurier married Zoë Lafontaine only to realize his mistake too late? Just three years after his marriage, although he had been elected by over one thousand votes on his first foray into politics, he wrote to his old school chum Oscar Archambault, not triumphantly but instead expressing his unhappiness about his life:

How many times do I find these thoughts in my head, these regrets in my heart? I say to myself, what’s the use in regretting what cannot be helped, what’s the use of complaining of the implacable edicts of destiny? Yet the very first instance afterwards, I find myself dallying with the same thoughts, the same regrets. Assuredly, I ought to be perfectly happy. It would rest only with myself to be happy, and I would be were it not for this regret.

36 Edgar to Matilda Edgar: “Won’t I be glad to see my little wife again.” 4 November 1873, PAO Edgar Family Papers.
37 NAC Laurier Papers, Volumes 814 A-B.
38 Skelton, *Life and letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier*, 44.
Twenty-three years after his marriage he wrote:

I honestly believe that the stern realities of the present life have never weighed on me as they do now. I feel all the time in my soul, a storm of conflicting passions, all arising from the same one cause. Sadness unutterable, inexpressible tinges everything in and around me.\textsuperscript{41}

The following year, Laurier seemed to be writing on the same topic. “How pleasant it would be,” he wrote, “if I could commence as I might have commenced twenty-five years ago.”\textsuperscript{42} As Fisher points out, twenty-five years earlier was one year before he married Zoë Lafontaine. In Schull’s opinion, Laurier was unsatisfied in his marriage, “always a little alone, feeling in the hours of unblemished serenity a hint of the troubling vacancy that lay at its heart,” while Zoë Laurier was contentedly unaware.\textsuperscript{43}

**Sexual Double Standard, Divorce and the larger power relations and structural constraints**

Despite the fact that Laurier wrote about his unhappiness, historians have generally paid little attention to Zoë Laurier’s predicament. For twenty-five years, Madame Laurier had to endure the gossip, speculation and humiliation of her husband’s very public friendship with the wife of his law partner, Joseph Lavergne.\textsuperscript{44} Historians tend to disagree about the nature of Laurier’s relationship with Emilie Lavergne. Was their relationship a love affair or an intellectual meeting of minds? Quebec historian Réal Bélanger asserts that the relationship between Laurier and Mme. Lavergne was a “communion de coeur et d’esprit. Ils s’aiment.”\textsuperscript{45} Barbara Robertson argues that Laurier was captivated by Mme.

\textsuperscript{41} Laurier to Emilie Lavergne, 24 May 1891, Fisher, *Dearest Emilie*, 55-57.

\textsuperscript{42} Laurier to Emilie Lavergne, 15 March 1892, Fisher, *Dearest Emilie* 122.

\textsuperscript{43} Schull has described the marriage as possessing a “troubling vacancy that lay at its heart.” Schull, *Laurier*, 73.

\textsuperscript{44} As Tosh has argued in his examination of extramarital affairs and class identity in Victorian England, “We know that for middle-class spouses, sex was for the most part confined to the marriage bed.” John Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle Class Home in Victorian England* (London: Prentice Hall, 1999), 59.

Lavergne’s intelligence.\textsuperscript{46} In the same manner, Lapierre contends that Laurier and Emilie were kindred spirits, not lovers. “Both were prone to loneliness, misunderstanding and solitary pursuits,” he says.\textsuperscript{47} Gwyn takes a different approach, alleging that their relationship was a quasi-political relationship in which mutual self-interest was at its heart.\textsuperscript{48} Fisher, however, declares that they were indeed lovers.\textsuperscript{49} On the other hand, Schull concludes that Madame Lavergne was not Laurier’s mistress “in the generally accepted sense.”\textsuperscript{50} Quebec historian Marc La Terreur also assesses their relationship as a “literary friendship, a similarity of tastes and sentiments between two intellectuals” and nothing more intimate.\textsuperscript{51} Heather Robertson agrees that their friendship was platonic. “It seems incredible” she says, “that Laurier who prized loyalty highly, would have an affair with his partner’s wife, especially so soon after their marriage, and would risk personal and political disaster on the threshold of fame.”\textsuperscript{52}

It seems incredible, but not impossible. Certainly the people of Arthabaska did not consider it to be impossible. Indeed, Belanger claims that in Arthabaska, the home base of both Laurier and Lavergne, their relationship was the basis for much gossip and speculation. “Tout se sait pourtant dans le petit village,” he tells us, “Et tous se dit.”\textsuperscript{53} Moreover, according to both Gwyn and Schull, “excited chatter that Emilie was Laurier’s mistress had been widespread almost from the first meeting.”\textsuperscript{54} Apparently, the two made no effort to conceal their friendship and they appeared indifferent to the chatter.\textsuperscript{55} In Arthabaska, many seemed to believe that their relationship was a sexually intimate one, since there was much speculation that Mme. Lavergne’s son Armand was actually

\textsuperscript{46} Robertson, \textit{Sir Wilfrid Laurier}, 36.
\textsuperscript{47} Lapierre, \textit{Sir Wilfrid Laurier}, 116.
\textsuperscript{49} Fisher, \textit{Dearest Emilie}, 13.
\textsuperscript{50} Fisher, \textit{Dearest Emilie}, 21.
\textsuperscript{51} Fisher, \textit{Dearest Emilie}, 21-22.
\textsuperscript{52} Robertson, \textit{More than a Rose}, 132.
\textsuperscript{53} Bélanger, \textit{Wilfrid Laurier}, 131.
\textsuperscript{54} Gwyn, “The Lady Who loved Laurier”, 23; Schull, \textit{Laurier}, 162.
\textsuperscript{55} Bélanger, \textit{Wilfrid Laurier} 181.
Laurier’s child. To many observers, the physical resemblance was remarkable.\textsuperscript{56} The question regarding his parentage was to follow Armand Lavergne throughout his life. “Whether I be the son of Laurier or Lavergne,” he is reported to have said, “I have good reason to be proud.”\textsuperscript{57} Meanwhile, Mme. Laurier was powerless to put an end to her husband’s questionable conduct.

We can see in Laurier’s behaviour the legally endorsed patriarchal bargain of a “husband’s acknowledged right to infidelity and the wife’s duty to be silent.”\textsuperscript{58} As James Snell has shown, “the sexual double standard that tolerated male adultery was sustained by the authority of the law.”\textsuperscript{59} Under Canadian law, wives were expected to “bear some indignities” as well as their husband’s “foibles and weaknesses.”\textsuperscript{60} Women, on the other hand, were afforded no leeway for their own ‘foibles and weaknesses.’\textsuperscript{61} It was commonly accepted that the purity of society depended upon the absolute chastity of women only, while, sexual activity enhanced masculine status.\textsuperscript{62} As a result, although the “central concern of social purity was the double standard” nevertheless “the embarrassing issue of marital infidelity was largely overlooked.”\textsuperscript{63} Instead, the prevailing ideology of ‘true womanhood’ was buttressed by a jurisprudence that demanded of women: piety,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{56} Emilie is reported to have said to her husband that “it is not that Armand looks like Laurier but rather that Laurier looks like Armand.” Fisher, \textit{Dearest Emilie}, 23.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Gwyn, \textit{The Private Capital}, 271.
\item \textsuperscript{59} James G. Snell, \textit{In the Shadow of the Law: Divorce in Canada: 1900-1939} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 33.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Constance Backhouse, “Pure Patriarchy: Nineteenth Century Canadian Marriage” \textit{McGill Law Journal} 31 (1986): 265-312.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Snell has cited the example of a Judge in Halifax in 1901 finding a woman guilty of adultery because “she and the correspondent were on a first name basis with one another.” Snell, \textit{Shadow of the Law}, 174.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Mary Poovey, \textit{Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 60. As Tosh has argued, “Sexual activity amounted to a ‘rite de passage’…enhanced masculine status.” Tosh, \textit{A Man’s Place}, 108.
\item \textsuperscript{63} “Feminists demanded that men conform to women’s standard of purity.” Tosh, \textit{A Man’s Place}, 154-156.
\end{itemize}
domesticity, submissiveness and sexual purity. Women were “legally denied any semblance of independence and autonomy” and instead were “admonished to meet temper with meekness and harsh conduct with self abasement.” As the research of Constance Backhouse makes clear, “patriarchal marriage was predicated upon the silence of women” as well as matrimonial law that upheld the sexual double standard. In Canada, divorce was simply not an option for women in Zoë Laurier’s predicament.

Sarah Carter has examined the “role of marriage in nation building in western Canada” and concludes, “‘legal’ Christian marriage was to be the foundation of the new region of the nation.” This efficiently endorsed “the gender order of the obedient and submissive wife, and provider, head of family husband” in the development of a burgeoning hegemonic Canadian identity. Throughout the nineteenth century, under the law, a married woman in Canada disappeared as a legally autonomous person to become a ‘femme covert.’ As Chris Clarkson’s examination of nineteenth century British Columbia reveals, the legal position of married women was consistent across the country. “Upon marriage, women were placed under the protection and guardianship of their husbands.”


66 Backhouse, Petticoats and Prejudice, 177.

67 Among other historians of early 19th century Canada, Katherine M.J. McKenna has pointed out that “a woman of social standing, once married, had no other recourse but to make the best of it.” Katherine M. J. McKenna, A Life of Propriety: Anne Murray Powell and her Family, 1755-1849 (Montreal/Kingston: McGill/Queen’s University Press, 1994), 194. See also E. J. Errington, Wives, Mothers, School Mistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada, 1790-1840 (Montreal: McGill/Queen’s University Press 1995), 41-3; Robin Grazley’s analysis of early Upper Canadian matrimonial law unpacks the official intent of marriage as a bulwark against social disorder and as such, included “no provision for divorce,” effectively denying “women basic protection against ruthless mistreatment” by their husbands. Robin Grazley, “Nothing ‘Improper’ Happened: Sex, Marriage and Colonial Identity in Upper Canada, 1783-1850” (PhD diss., Queen’s University, 2010), 171.

68 Sarah Carter, The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation Building in Western Canada to 1915 (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008), 283.

69 Chris Clarkson, Domestic Reforms, Political Visions and Family Regulation in British Columbia, 1862-1940 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), 1-2. In Quebec, “the courts preferred to
Despite a growing discourse of a ‘woman’s age’ by the close of the nineteenth century the situation remained the same.

Marriage in Canada then, throughout the nineteenth century was a tool to create and enforce a national identity, and one in which the absence of divorce was represented as an indication of a moral nation. Snell’s examination of divorce laws in Canada indicates that divorce was counter-productive to a liberal hegemonic vision of the family unit and an official pro-natal policy that was the basis of nation building. Moreover, popular discourse reinforced the idea that divorce was “ruinous to the morals, well being and the entire social interests of communities” across Canada. According to the research of Jeanne L’Esperance, “there were only about twenty divorces a year in Canada between 1867 and 1913, partly because the process of obtaining a divorce was lengthy and expensive and partly because of social pressure.” Nevertheless, from the early period of Upper Canadian society through to the close of the nineteenth century, some Canadians simply abandoned their marriage, while others acquired a divorce in the United States. However, if they decided to remarry, according to Canadian matrimonial laws, they were not considered legally divorced in Canada and thus were liable to a criminal charge of bigamy or to a civil suit of ‘criminal conversation.’ Additionally, notwithstanding the illegality of divorces contracted outside of Canada, social stigma played a prominent role in the community’s attitude towards divorce.

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70 Clarkson, Domestic Reforms, 11.
73 As Grazely’s examination of marriage laws in early Upper Canada reveals “some unhappy couples simply separated or one party abandoning the marriage, a phenomenon which has been called ‘self divorce’ or ‘frontier divorce.’” Grazley, “Nothing ‘Improper’ Happened”, 172.
75 Snell, Shadow of the Law, 36.
invariably the result of divorce.\textsuperscript{76} The life of Addie Chisholm Foster serves to illustrate the point. Although Mrs. Foster was President of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, one of the most prominent women’s organizations in Canada, and the wife of the Conservative Minister of Finance, George Foster, she was “refused admittance to important social functions in Ottawa because she obtained a divorce in the United States from her former husband after he had abandoned her.”\textsuperscript{77} Thus, considering Mme. Laurier’s Roman Catholic religion as well as the social and legal impediments to divorce in Canada, she would have known that ignominious social disgrace would surely result if she followed the example of other Canadians and obtained a divorce in the United States.\textsuperscript{78} Laurier expressed his views on the matter when he spoke out publicly against divorce, stating:

For my part, I would rather belong to this country Canada where divorces are few, than belong to the neighboring republic where divorces are many. I think that it argues a good moral condition of a country, where you have few divorces, even though they are made difficult – a better moral condition than prevails in a country where divorces are numerous and made easy by law.\textsuperscript{79}

The good moral condition that Laurier advocated was predicated upon the sexual double standard in which female purity was the necessary ingredient.\textsuperscript{80} The Laurier marriage provides a fitting example of what Backhouse identifies as, “the rhetoric of purity [that]
was an indispensable keystone to the maintenance of male supremacy.” Since she was left with no social or legal recourse, Zoë Laurier remained silent.

Instead of complaint and recrimination, Zoë Laurier’s response embodies Mrs. Sigourney’s 1838 advice to women: “to bear the evils and sorrows which may be appointed to us, with a patient mind, should be the continual efforts of our sex.” More to the point, Mme. Laurier’s behaviour was shaped by her religious beliefs as a Roman Catholic woman and wife. She was never known to express disapproval or regret about her husband’s questionable friendship with the wife of his law partner and the gossip that swirled around them. Since Zoë Laurier kept silent, Lapierre concludes that she had “no anxiety in tolerating the relationship” and even goes so far as to assert that Madame Laurier encouraged the relationship, arguing that, “she would nurture his soul and take care of his body; while Emilie could satisfy his mind and intellect.” Instead, as Gwyn surmises, Zoë Laurier’s “most painful burden surely, was that her rival was always so near.” Madame Lavergne was a part of their lives; rather than encourage the relationship, in all probability, Zoë Laurier felt helpless to put an end to it. Divorce and social ostracism were not a choice that she was willing to make. Instead of acceptance or approval, Zoë Laurier’s response to the liaison reflected the image of the ideal Victorian wife as a “giving and docile helpmate, who revered her husband and ministered unto him, to preserve order and economy and behave obligingly to him.” A political wife in the public eye, Mme. Laurier was performing what Jo Margadant has identified as “feminine

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81 Backhouse, “Pure Patriarchy”: 265-312. As Welter has argued, “legality and duty were only disguises for man's indulgence of his baser nature.” Barbara Welter, Dainty Convictions (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976), 59.

82 As reported in the Montreal Witness, “One beautiful thing about Mme. Laurier, she will never criticize. In all my life I have never heard her say an unkind thing about anyone.” Montreal Witness, 12 July 1896, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 27.

83 Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood”.

84 Schull, Laurier, 163; McLeod, Wives of the Canadian prime Ministers, 76.

85 Lapierre, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, 115.

86 Gwyn, “The Woman Who Loved Laurier”.

personae under scrutiny.”  

In this way, Mme. Laurier had agency in her feminine performance that buttressed her dignity and her image as a virtuous ‘bon femme.’

Structures of Power, Contested and Supported

Zoë Laurier could not have been unaware of the widespread insinuations about the nature of the Laurier/Lavergne relationship. Ottawa political society columnist Amaryllis frequently insinuated in her weekly Saturday Night column that there was something improper in the friendship between the Prime Minister and Mme. Lavergne, whom she described as the “brilliant woman called by many the Canadian Lady Chesterfield.” The significance is one that nineteenth century readers would have recognized immediately, since Lady Chesterfield was assumed by many to have been the mistress of former British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. Doubtless Amaryllis’ readers understood the nasty innuendo that emphasized the apparently scandalous nature of Laurier’s relationship with Mme. Lavergne.

Numerous hints of impropriety regarding Laurier’s relationship with Emilie Lavergne regularly filtered through both of Agnes Scott’s columns. For example, there is a veiled suggestion of unseemliness when the Marchioness informed her readers that “last season, Mr. Justice and Madame Lavergne occupied rooms at the Russell House [where Laurier resided during the parliamentary session] but this year it is their intention to rent a house on Theodore Street, quite close to Sir Wilfrid Laurier’s” new residence. There was never a suggestion in her columns that Mme. Lavergne’s friendship was with Mme. Laurier. She filtered more innuendo through her column in the reporting of Madame Lavergne’s gala at the Russell House Hotel to benefit St. Luke’s hospital. The gala


89 Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital”, Saturday Night; Contrary to public perception as Pearson has argued, “fond though he was of Lady Chesterfield, the constant attention that he paid to her was due chiefly to his love for her sister, Lady Bradford.” Hesketh Pearson, Dizzy: The Life and Nature of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield (London: Methuen, 1951), 224; See also Edward Clarke Benjamin Disraeli: The Romance of a Great Career, 1804-1881 (London: J. Murray, 1926)

90 The Marchioness, Ottawa Free Press, 8 October 1898.
featured a ‘Living Pictures’ theatrical review that included Emilie’s daughter, Miss Gabrielle Lavergne, in the final tableau. Writing as the Marchioness, Scott utilized the opportunity to advance the gossip about Laurier and Madame Lavergne. She describes how during the daughter’s performance “one found one’s gaze straying over to the balcony to see how the Premier was taking it all.” Such comments were a veiled suggestion about their relationship and the paternity of the Lavergne daughter as well as that of the son. In contrast to Agnes Scott’s portrayal of Mme. Lavergne as a femme fatale with a questionable connection to the Prime Minister, Zoë Laurier is always portrayed in her columns as the ideal domestic woman, who properly remains within her feminine sphere and “infinitely prefers women’s society.”

Michael Bliss emphasizes Mme. Laurier’s public humiliation. “Ottawa socialites paid little attention to the retiring Zoë,” he writes, “and gossiped instead about the striking resemblance between Sir Wilfrid and the young Armand Lavergne M.P.” Given Agnes Scott’s impeccable social connections and the popularity of her columns, whether or not Mme. Laurier read the society columns she must have been aware of the gossip swirling around her.

Considering the nature of the sexual double standard, whether writing under her nom de plume as ‘Amaryllis’ or ‘the Marchioness’, Agnes Scott’s columns constituted more of a veiled attack on Emilie Lavergne than on Laurier. However, if we are to understand more completely the nature of the sexual double standard, we should ask how Emilie Lavergne was able to withstand the gossip and maintain her social position when a wife’s conduct was expected to be above reproach. The answer rests with Joseph Lavergne. Certainly he was well aware that the friendship between Laurier and Emilie Lavergne was the subject of gossip. Nevertheless, Lavergne chose to ignore the insinuations. “I have a good wife,” he said. “Why humiliate her unjustly? She admires him as I admire him myself. All things considered, I prefer to live in peace and let people talk.” As Joan Perkin explains,

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91 Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” Saturday Night 19 March 1898.

92 Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” Saturday Night

93 Michael Bliss, Right Honorable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 58.

94 Gwyn, The Private Capital, 257; Fisher, My Dearest Emilie, 22.
upper-class women were permitted a certain unspoken sexual license to pursue extra-marital pleasures without remonstrance, so long as their activities remained circumspect.\(^\text{95}\) Perhaps this was the quiet agreement between Emilie and Joseph Lavergne. Evidently, Lavergne considered that it was better to keep silent, rather than provoke conflict that could only result in open hostility in his marriage and the end of a lucrative law partnership with Laurier, whose name alone attracted business to their firm. Moreover, his appointment as a Judge was a direct result of his personal connection to Laurier.\(^\text{96}\) Thus, Lavergne may have considered it to be in his own best interests to remain silent.

While Agnes Scott was publishing her veiled attacks on Mme. Lavergne, Laurier was protected by a code of silence among political journalists that further highlights the sexual double standard. By and large, the members of the Ottawa Press Gallery turned a collective blind eye to Wilfrid Laurier’s questionable friendship with a married woman. Contemporary political journalist Sir John Willison, editor of the Liberal organ the Toronto Globe, revealed that a gentleman’s agreement existed between the press and public men. As he explained:

>> More than once, I prevented publication of statements that could only hurt private reputations and serve no public object. In the Press Gallery there was a remarkable consideration of men’s private faults and follies. Moreover, so much of what was common gossip at Ottawa was sheer wanton slander that we were reluctant to believe even when the truth was as manifest as the light of day. Whether it be admitted or not, there is a standard of honour among journalists…of restraint and reticence.\(^\text{97}\) <<

\(^{95}\) Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London: J. Murray, 1993), 79; As Mason has argued, “in some upper-class circles there was a very lenient code on adultery, especially when this involved sustained liaisons that did not violate the appearance of a strict marital decorum.” Although he is writing about the elite in Great Britain, it is possible that Laurier and Lavergne shared the same sense of entitlement. Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 114

\(^{96}\) Laurier to Emilie Lavergne, “Everything that I had projected for Joseph has to start again.” Fisher, *My Dearest Emilie*, 30 September 1896.

Public men who indulged in sexual misconduct were generally insulated from scandal unless excessively indiscreet. On the whole, a remarkable tolerance existed for the sexual exploits of public men. Indeed, if their behaviour became public knowledge, “men generally had less to lose in the public airing of their private life.” As Michael Bliss says, “Laurier was admired and respected [and] in those days, journalists respected discretion.” Karen Dubinsky’s extensive research into male sexual transgression of bourgeois ideology makes it clear that “when sexual scandal touched the lives of men in public life, they and their supporters in the press tended to suggest that the real motivation for the story lay elsewhere, usually in the conspiratorial motives of their political enemy.” If the Conservative press emphasized the possibility that Laurier was Armand Lavergne’s father when Armand declared his candidacy for the seat in Montmagny, the accusations were dismissed as fallacious and politically motivated. Here we can see how the sexual double standard was reinforced not only in matrimonial law but also in a code of silence among men, who continued to view male sexual freedom as a masculine prerogative. Accordingly, ‘legitimate journalists’ could dismiss Agnes Scott’s columns as being merely a woman’s slanderous gossip.

While Laurier was insulated from public censure, Mme. Lavergne was not. Agnes Scott purveyed the image of Emilie Lavergne as a designing woman who methodically

98 Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light and Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 30; See also Michael Mason’s discussion of the link between social purity and women’s rights and the control of male sexuality. Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*; Leonore Davidoff addresses the “more generalized fear” of social disorder that they associated with male sexuality. Leonore Davidoff, “Class and Gender in Victorian England” in Judith L. Newton, Mary P. Ryan and Judith R. Walkowitz (editors) *Sex and Class in Women’s History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983): 17-71; As Marks has observed, “certain Upper Canadian churches made a much greater effort to ensure that both women and men adhered to a single standard of sexual behaviour than either the secular courts or the less formal court of public opinion. At the same time, attempts to impose a ‘genderless’ sexual standard were constrained by divergent norms of masculine and feminine behaviour within the larger society.” Marks, “No Double Standard?”


100 Bliss, *Right Honorable Men*, 58.


manipulated her friendship with Laurier in order to advance her own social ambitions. As Gwyn argues, for a while at least, Mme. Lavergne enjoyed “herself as the political hostess, queening over official society as a consort in all but name.” The endless speculative gossip about the relationship between the Premier and Madame Lavergne spearheaded by the vicious innuendoes in Agnes Scott’s columns, culminated with Madame Lavergne’s banishment from Ottawa society. Belanger concludes that the increasing Ottawa society gossip regarding the nature of Laurier’s relationship with the wife of Mr. Justice Lavergne was becoming a political embarrassment. Similarly, Fisher surmises that, “Emilie’s persistence in playing the part of the Prime Minister’s consort became somewhat oppressive.” However, a careful reading of Amaryllis’ column reveals that Mme. Lavergne had overstepped the gendered boundaries of political culture in the Dominion capital. Without naming names, Amaryllis alleged that in December 1901, Madame Lavergne caused a scene at a dinner party, at Government House for the visiting young war hero, Winston Churchill. According to her report, Churchill:

> got into a heated argument with a brilliant French Canadian lady, who for the love of notoriety, pretends to entertain pro-Boer sentiments. Her remarks were not agreeable to her neighbor at dinner and Mr. Churchill rose to the occasion. The ‘belle Canadienne’ has a somewhat high pitched voice and the rest of the dinner party had no difficulty in catching the drift of the argument.

Undoubtedly, the identity of the brilliant lady with the high-pitched voice would have been obvious to the insular Ottawa elite. To express pro-Boer opinions was simply not acceptable in the Capital when imperialist sentiments were running high. It was surely beyond the pale to harangue a man such as Churchill, a celebrated British hero in the war against the Boers. If, as is almost certain, the “brilliant French Canadian lady” was Madame Lavergne, there can be little doubt that her behaviour would have been the topic

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104 As Bélanger has concluded, “Laurier, enfin, comprend qu’il doit agir…Plutot, c’est la raison politique qui tranche.” Bélanger *Wilfrid Laurier*, 235.


of conversation among the elite of the Capital and may well have reflected negatively upon the Prime Minister. In the summer of 1901 Laurier had Judge Lavergne elevated to the Superior Court of Quebec in Montreal, which effectively removed Mme. Lavergne from society at the Capital.\textsuperscript{107} To emphasize that the affair was at an end, Emilie Lavergne “received from the Prime Minister’s secretary a packet containing all the letters she had written to Wilfrid Laurier.”\textsuperscript{108} Without the Prime Minister as her benefactor, Emilie Lavergne’s moment to shine in Ottawa’s elite society had come to an end. After she left the city she all but disappeared from the public radar.\textsuperscript{109}

Patriarchal Bargains

It is evident, from Laurier’s relationship with Mme. Lavergne and Agnes Scott’s reporting of it, that structures of power and male dominance were both contested and supported by women. Patriarchal bargains simultaneously created and limited opportunities for women. Mme. Lavergne was dependent upon Laurier for her social position in the Capital and socially decapitated when he withdrew his support.\textsuperscript{110} In the aftermath, the woman who had once been called “the most brilliant society woman in French Canada” increasingly lived as a recluse.\textsuperscript{111} At the age of seventy-five, two years after her husband’s death, Mme. Lavergne entered the convent \textit{Foyer Saint-Mathieu of the Grey Nuns} in Montreal and there she remained for the last six years of her life. It is unclear whether Emilie Lavergne entered the convent as a member or if she used it as a source for care. As Bettina Bradbury has observed entering a convent was a common strategy for both poor and elite widows in late nineteenth century Montreal.\textsuperscript{112} Still, it

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\footnote{107}{“Mr. Justice Lavergne and his family are leaving Ottawa to take up their residence permanently in Montreal.” Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital,” \textit{Saturday Night}. 15 June 1901.}

\footnote{108}{Schull, \textit{Laurier}, 362.}

\footnote{109}{Fisher, \textit{My Dearest Emilie}, 28.}

\footnote{110}{Gwyn, \textit{The Priate Capital}, 262.}

\footnote{111}{Réal Bélanger, “Emilie Barthe Lavergne” unpublished manuscript.}

\footnote{112}{As Bettina Bradbury has observed, “Elite women also joined these institutions...women who had been closely involved as charity ladies...some made contracts...offering property, goods or sums of money in}
\end{footnotes}
seems a sad ending for a woman who had been described as the “Lady Chesterfield” of Ottawa political culture. As Poovey argues, “Respect and protection that women claimed as their right depended on keeping the sexual spheres separate.” By appearing to play the part of the Prime Minister’s consort, Emilie Lavergne had overstepped the boundaries.

Unlike Emilie Lavergne, Zoë Laurier maintained the separation of the spheres. As we have seen, she accepted her gendered role as the subordinate and supportive helpmeet. This proved to be her strength. Pioneering nineteenth century feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton described how separate spheres ideology positioned womanhood as elevated to a place of reverence within the home, and the considerable self-respect women experienced as a result. “It is,” she said, “a proud moment in a woman’s life to reign supreme within four walls, to be the one to whom all questions of domestic pleasure and economy are referred.” Nevertheless, Stanton also argued that domesticity was a double edged sword since “so long as woman labours to second man’s endeavors and exalt his sex above her own, her virtues pass unquestioned.” “Women” she contended, “ought to be enlightened in regard to the laws under which they live, that they may no longer publish their degradation, by declaring themselves satisfied with their present position, nor their ignorance by asserting that they have all the rights they want.” But she recognized that there were “many women opposed to suffrage who genuinely felt that women were genetically endowed with … ’natural piety’. Their numbers were legion, and they had spent their lives manipulating the idea of their own inborn morality to achieve some

return for care, treatment and the promise of a mass or funeral upon their deaths. Their quarters varied with their class and contribution. Most had a room, some several. A few brought their servants…most came alone.” Bettina Bradbury, *Wife to Widow: Lives, Laws and Politics in Nineteenth Century Montreal* (Vancouver/Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 369.


measure of power … they were the last on earth willing to take a critical look at the bargain such convictions had allowed them to strike.” Zoë Laurier lived within a patriarchal bargain that served to situate her as a ‘bonne femme,’ a domestic woman who did not overstep the gendered boundaries in her marriage. Her reaction to Mme. Lavergne’s constant presence for twenty-five years was simply a manifestation of patriarchal bargains whereby in exchange for Laurier’s support she had to accept his apparent infidelity and the humiliating gossip that ensued.

Zoë Lafontaine Laurier’s life is testimony to the supremacy of patriarchal bargains whereby a woman gives up her independence in exchange for security and support. However, if the bargain is broken, it is the woman who is left in a severely disadvantaged and precarious condition. As Marilyn Freedman asserts and as illustrated by the various protective acts that were legislated across Canada in the second half of the nineteenth century, “the loss of support suffered by abandoned women has often been worse than the heterosexual relationships upon which they depended.” Zoë Lafontaine would have become aware of the brutal reality of female dependence when her father, bailiff Napoleon-Godefroi Lafontaine, abandoned his wife and daughter. Heather Robertson describes their situation: “Mme. Lafontaine eked out a living giving piano lessons to the children of the French speaking bourgeoisie of Montreal, one of the very few occupations open to a respectable single woman in the middle of the nineteenth century.” For Zoë and her mother life was an unremitting regression from middle-class respectability to homelessness. As their resources diminished and Mme. Lafontaine’s health failed, mother and daughter were left dependent upon the kindness of their friends, Dr Seraphim Gauthier and his family, with whom they boarded in exchange for piano lessons to the


118 Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, 99.

119 Robertson, *More than a Rose*, 117. See also “What Did Convent Girls Learn at School? They [the nuns] will teach reading, writing, grammar, geography, history, arithmetic, etc. They must also teach their pupils how to look after a house, and to use their hands in such activities as knitting, sewing, embroidery and the like. They will teach singing, music and drawing and other subjects and social graces…but these subjects of which so much is made of in this world will be viewed by the Sisters simply as an agreeable way of exposing their pupils to the knowledge of salvation.” The Clio Collective, *Quebec Women*, 144.
Gauthier children. Still, Zoë Lafontaine’s disadvantaged position worsened. She was twenty-seven years old, her mother had died and she could no longer depend upon employment as a piano teacher to the Gauthier children who were now grown and leaving the home.\textsuperscript{120} Before long, Dr. Gauthier and his wife would have only Zoë living with them. For women, marriage provided the best route to middle-class status.\textsuperscript{121} However, similar to Matilda Ridout’s position, marriage prospects for Zoë Lafontaine would have been somewhat limited for an impecunious young woman who identified as middle class but possessed no dowry except for her “piano and a certificate for sixteen shares in a building society valued at $800.00.”\textsuperscript{122} Laurier may well have offered the only possibility for marriage.\textsuperscript{123} Despite his recurrent health problems, like James Edgar, Wilfrid Laurier was an ambitious man with a promising future. While a student at McGill University, Laurier became a member of \textit{L’Institut Canadien}, a literary and scientific debating society and the nexus of Rouge political ideology. Twice he served as its vice-president, where he perfected his debating skills. Still in his early twenties, “he was considered a star.”\textsuperscript{124} In addition, he also served as President of the \textit{Institut des Lois} an association of law students.\textsuperscript{125} His education and his natural leaderships skills combined with an active participation in Rouge politics seem to lead irrefutably to public life. Although Laurier was only just beginning his law career and not yet in politics, for Zoë Lafontaine

\textsuperscript{120} According to an interview of her friend, Mme. L.O. David, for an article in the \textit{Montreal Witness} “Mrs. Laurier, Sketch of the Wife of the Premier:” “She taught music for years before she married and is very proud of it, I can assure you.” \textit{Montreal Witness} 12 July 1896, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 27.

\textsuperscript{121} As Danylewycz has argued women could best experience “social mobility through marriage.” Marta Danylewycz, \textit{Taking the Veil: an alternative to marriage, motherhood and spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920} (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991), 70.

\textsuperscript{122} Schull, \textit{Laurier}, 39.

\textsuperscript{123} Was there another suitor? Schull has mentioned another suitor, a doctor named Pierre Valois to whom Zoë Lafontaine was engaged when she married Laurier. Schull, \textit{Laurier}, 69; Moreover, McArthur has described Zoë Lafontaine as “a beautiful good-natured young girl, who refused a very advantageous marriage in preference for Laurier.” Peter McArthur, \textit{Sir Wilfrid Laurier}, 13. See also Robertson, who has argued that “Pierre Valois, (a country doctor and a friend of the Gauthiers) offered love, security and respectability” however, he may have been simply a “‘gooseberry’ and his engagement to Zoë may have been a hoax cooked up, with his acquiescence, to force Laurier’s hand.” Robertson, \textit{More than a Rose}, 127.

\textsuperscript{124} Lapierre, \textit{Sir Wilfrid Laurier}, 47.

\textsuperscript{125} John Willison, \textit{Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the Liberal Party: a political history} Volume 1(Toronto: Morang, 1903) 46.
marriage to Laurier promised a bourgeois respectability that had eluded her. Here was a patriarchal bargain that offered greater security and social status than the independent and respectable but impecunious status of a piano teacher. In exchange for Laurier’s support, she would give him her service to aid his development and through him, her own.

Historians have speculated about the reasons that the Laurier marriage was childless. Schull assumes that Zoë did not want children out of concern that they could possibly inherit what she and Laurier feared might be tuberculosis and the reason for his frequent poor health. Robertson suggests that the marriage was childless because Laurier was a homosexual. As John Crowley has argued, Victorian marriage was often used as a retreat from homosexuality. Perhaps as Gwyn proposes, Laurier was asexual. After all, “whenever Laurier touched on matters of the physical…he seemed to do so with extreme distaste.” Possibly Laurier was impotent, as his friend Judge Plamondon declared or maybe he was sterile. According to Senator David, Laurier had one regret: “It is too bad” he said, “that I will not have a son.”

Whatever the reason for the Lauriers’ childless marriage, apparently no one has considered the possibility that Mme. Laurier was unable to conceive a child. Here it is important to note that Zoë Lafontaine was born in 1841 shortly after the failed rebellions

126 Laurier suffered from what appears to have been bronchitis or asthma but there was a lingering fear within him that he was suffering from consumption, the disease to which his mother had succumbed when he was seven years old. As Schull has argued the Laurier marriage may have been childless because Mme. Laurier was unwilling to risk having children, “who must carry in their veins and tissues the doom of Marcelle Martineau. [Laurier’s mother] Her happiness would be with him and end with him; it must have been her thought from the beginning. It must have been his own thought…an essential part of the marked [doomed] man.” Schull, Laurier, 74.

127 As Robertson has contended, “Laurier’s sexuality was as ambiguous as everything else about him…speculation about his sexuality would haunt his political career…marriage of course was the sure ‘cure’ for homosexuality.” Robertson, More than a Rose, 129.


129 Gwyn, “Lady Who Loved Laurier”.

130 Gwyn, The Private Capital, 259; Robertson, More than a Rose, 130.

131 Robertson, More than a Rose, 153.
of 1837 and 1838 in Quebec. Zoë Lafontaine’s childhood and coming of age was spent in the years in which the Church, with its increased influence as the chief institution of French Canadian identity, emphasized the importance of the French Canadian family and women’s reproductive role in the preservation of the French race in Canada.\textsuperscript{132} As Allan Greer points out, “the Catholic Church” was a “major winner in the post-rebellion settlement” and “grew in power, influence and institutional elaboration.”\textsuperscript{133} A Sister at the Hopital General in Montreal explained it this way: “It seems that the political troubles, which caused such fear and great alarm among the people were nothing more than mists, which helped provide greater fervor to the Church of Canada. Since 1840, morals have changed noticeably in all classes of society.”\textsuperscript{134} While historically in New France the Roman Catholic Church had provided important moral and spiritual leadership, this was even more so after 1838. R. Marvin McInnes draws the connection between religious influence and the difference between increasing Francophone and decreasing Anglophone fertility.\textsuperscript{135} Mme. Laurier may have felt that she had failed in “her specifically womanly function” to reproduce the French race as advanced by Catholic theologians.\textsuperscript{136} Since there is considerable factual evidence indicating Zoë Lafontaine Laurier’s religious adherence to the precepts of the Church, this could help to explain more fully the unhappiness that Lady Aberdeen recognized in Mme. Laurier from their first meeting.

\textsuperscript{132} Danelywyz has observed the “Church’s teachings on prolific motherhood” Danylewycz, \textit{Taking the Veil}, 127.

\textsuperscript{133} Allan Greer, \textit{The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 358.

\textsuperscript{134} Danylewycz, \textit{Taking the Veil}, 21.


As she recorded in her *Journal*, “Madam Laurier looks sad, feels having no children.”137 How did Lady Aberdeen know this? Was it her facial expressions and body language that revealed her unhappiness? Was it simply intuition, the result of what late nineteenth century journalist Faith Fenton describes as the “inward participation” that “springs up” between women?138 Did Mme. Laurier, feeling Lady Aberdeen’s sympathy, reveal to her that she was an unhappy woman because she was not a mother? Her unhappiness and humiliation would have been compounded by the times in which she was living, when “the prestige of motherhood was on the increase” and motherhood was celebrated as a woman’s main occupation and “the core of her identity.”139 Whatever the reason for the Lauriers’ childless marriage, Zoë Laurier’s maternal urges were confined to caring for her husband and throwing ‘fêtes enfants’ for the children of her friends and neighbors.140 However, while her childless marriage may have been a personal tragedy for Mme. Laurier, it may also have been a political advantage for her husband.

Amidst the virulent anti-French sentiments raging in Ontario, many questioned the wisdom of selecting Wilfrid Laurier, a French Canadian Roman Catholic, to be the Liberal party leader. As one Ontario Liberal explained, “no matter how good the man, no matter how much influence and support he will bring, a large amount of the best support of the Liberal party in Ontario will be alienated by the selection.”141 In the same way, there were those who questioned whether Laurier could achieve “any degree of

137 As Lady Aberdeen recorded her impressions in her *Journal*, “Mme. Laurier is shy and prefers talking French – but is very pleasant when one comes to talk to her – she looks sad feels having no children.” *Journal* 19 May 1894.


140 As newspaper reports described it, “The atmosphere in the Laurier house was a merry one with the feet of young people always in the halls and the voices of young people always in the rooms.” Montreal Herald and Daily Telegraph, 18 February 1919, NAC Abedeen Papers Volume 19.

141 W.M. Gray to Cartwright, 23 June 2 1887, PAO Richard Cartwright Papers.
confidence from the English speaking people of the Dominion.” According to Blair Neatby, Laurier was disinclined to accept the Liberal party leadership because he believed that “a French Canadian will not get cheerful support in the English provinces.” Anti-French Catholic sentiment was as evident in the Capital as it was throughout Ontario, where it was especially hostile. Coupled with an increasing tide of Imperialist pride rising in English Canada such sentiment reinforced the notion that loyalty to the Pope was perfidious to the Crown. Sir George W. Ross, one time Liberal Premier of Ontario (1899-1905) describes the prejudice against French Canadian politicians. “It is,” he writes, “often asserted that the French Canadian allows his racial instincts and partiality for his church and language to dominate all his actions as a citizen and as a legislator.” Laurier disarmed many of his detractors through his assertions that “our parliamentary laws, usage and customs come to us from England” and “I have always proclaimed and again I repeat that in politics we belong to the British Liberal school of Fox and Gladstone.” Laurier’s professed affection for all things English helped to disarm his detractors.

Popular Anglophone concern about invading Frenchness and rampant Catholicism was exacerbated by the considered racial threat to Canada as a nation of British Protestant

Schull, Laurier, 199. As Neatby has observed Laurier declared, “Had I been born on the banks of the Saskatchewan, I would myself have shouldered a musket.” Blair Neatby, Laurier and a Liberal Quebec (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), 32.

Neatby, Laurier and a Liberal Quebec, 44.


Sir George W. Ross, Getting Into Parliament and After (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1913), 286.

As Laurier said, “I have always proclaimed and again I repeat that in politics we belong to the British Liberal school to the school of Fox and Gladstone.” Fisher, My Dearest Emilie, 24; Schull has cited Laurier’s speech. “Our parliamentary laws, usages and customs come to us from England.” he said, “Moreover, the English are better adapted than we are for that system of government. In no matter what deliberative assembly they may find themselves, they are more at home than are the French and where they are in the majority their language must necessarily prevail. The force of circumstance is such that in America the English tongue will always be the language of the million and our ambition should be to make French, here as elsewhere, the language of predilection, good company and polite society.” Schull Laurier, 164. Additionally, Ross has described Laurier as having the “reputation of being one of the most advanced Liberals from his Province.” Ross, Getting Into Parliament, 164.
origin. Consequently, the fact that Laurier was not the father of a large French Canadian family may have been helpful to his political progress. Earlier in the century, the majority of Canadians were of British ancestry but by the close of the century, this was no longer the case; growing concerns about national racial identity and fears of ‘racial suicide’ were becoming an increasing concern. Fears of racial suicide were intensified in Ontario by the perceived prolific fecundity of French Canadian Roman Catholics and the knowledge that Quebec had a significantly larger proportion of children under the age of fifteen, even though David Levine and Julie Savoie argue that it was a “misapprehension” that Quebec women as a group were much more fertile than their counterparts in other Canadian provinces. The reproductive role of Anglophone women was considered vital to a hegemonic vision of Canada as a nation of British ancestry. Could Wilfrid Laurier have withstood the prejudice against Roman Catholic French Canadians to become leader of the Liberal party and the first French Canadian Prime Minister of Canada if he and Mme. Laurier had produced a large number of children? Although there is no clear evidence and no definitive answer, it seems reasonable to speculate that his childless marriage was a factor in his political acceptance by English Canadians. As Tosh and others have contended, in late Victorian society


148 As McLaren and Tiger McLaren have shown, “In 1871, 60% of the population had been of British stock; in 1921, only 40%.” McLaren and Tiger McLaren, The Bedroom and the State, 16.

149 In contrast to the popular notion that Quebec women were more fertile than the rest of Canadian women, David Levine and Julie Savoie have contended that a ‘bi-modal’ fertility pattern was operating in Quebec in which a significant minority of families “maintained extraordinarily high rates of reproduction into the middle of the twentieth century.” David Levine and Julie Savoie, “A Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery Inside an Enigma: Bi-Modal fertility Dynamics and Family Life in French Canadian Quebec” Histoire Social/Social History 37, no.76 (novembre/November, 2005): 308-337; As the research of the Clio collective has revealed “in 1851, they [women in Quebec] had an average of seven children each but by the end of the century the average was five...Demographer Jacques Henripin estimates that there was a 41% decrease in fertility amongst Quebec women between 1831 and 1891...in the towns the bourgeoisie kept the birth rate down.” The Clio Collective, Quebec Women, 134 & 136.

150 Clarkson has made the point that legislation regarding women’s property rights was propelled by a “national vision of dedicated motherhood to shore up the white heterosexual family as a nation building institution.” Clarkson, Domestic Reforms, 9-10.
“husbands without children suffer[ed] a loss of masculine status. However, in Laurier’s case, it may have enhanced his romantic Byronic image of a French-Canadian intellectual admirer of British achievement. This aspect of Laurier’s charismatic personality is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six. It is apparent that Laurier carefully cultivated a chivalrous manner that bespoke of a genteel British persona and served to enhance his political aspirations. Laurier’s “good, kind Zoë” presented the correct image of true womanhood that supported his chivalrous persona to voters in Anglophone Canada.

Through the biography of Zoë Lafontaine Laurier, the historian can extrapolate the ways that political wives could utilize patriarchal bargains to gain some measure of political influence. What developed was a mutually beneficial synergistic relationship between the Governor General’s consort and Mme. Laurier. In Lady Aberdeen, Zoë Laurier found an inspiring friend and influential ally, and under vice-regal tutelage she grew increasingly confident in her role as political wife and ultimately developed into a formidable politically savvy, bilingual woman. When Lady Aberdeen brought Mme. Laurier into the National Council of Women of Canada and Victorian Order of Nurses, she ensured a French Roman Catholic presence on the Executive Committees that strengthened her efforts to create a national ecumenical woman’s philanthropic organization. In the process, she also enlarged Mme. Laurier’s philanthropic presence from a local church-centered philanthropy to a national and political arena and emphasized her influential role as the wife of the leader of the Liberal party. As Mme. Thibadeau, “one of the acknowledged leaders of Montreal society” explained, her close friend Mme. Laurier was continually involved in various philanthropic endeavors through the church, although she

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151 In her autobiography, Madge Macbeth describes meeting Laurier for the first time: he “rose from his chair” she writes, “with a bow that suggested the sweeping off of a hat heavy with plumes…his air of quality was such…that he could wear a ruffled apron without looking silly.” Madge Macbeth, Boulevard Career (Toronto: Kingswood House, 1957), 94.

152 As Robertson has described their friendship, “Ishbel took Zoë under her formidable wing…Zoë was the kind of natural sensitive woman that appealed to Lady Aberdeen.” Robertson, More than a Rose, 136.
would have preferred to decline an executive position on the NCWC and the VON.\footnote{153} She accepted “not because she would choose to but because she could hardly refuse Her Excellency.”\footnote{154} Zoë Laurier’s participation in these two national organizations would prove to be the catalyst to bring her into the mainstream of Ottawa society. It would also help position her in her rightful place close to the summit of Canadian political culture, first as the wife of the leader of the Liberal party and ultimately as wife of the Prime Minister, second only in status to Her Excellency, Lady Aberdeen, the wife of the Governor General. As a result of her friendship with the vice-rein, “she would develop into an active and sympathetic patron of a wide variety of charities and organizations, ranging from the Sons of Scotland to the Salvation Army Rescue Home, as well as President of the Canadian Immigration Guild.”\footnote{155} Additionally, she was honorary president of three organizations: the Catholic Women’s League of Ottawa and Hull, the Ottawa Reform Association and honorary president of the Eastern Ontario Liberal Association.\footnote{156}

With Lady Aberdeen as her muse, Lady Laurier became increasingly engaged in political culture. She often sat in the Visitors’ Gallery of the House of Commons “listening to debates and knitting.”\footnote{157} In a letter to Lady Aberdeen, Zoë Laurier revealed an active interest in what she termed “the good cause” of Liberalism. “I know that you have always

\footnote{153} Ottawa Evening Journal, 22 April 1895, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19; See Ottawa socialite Lilian Scott Desbarats’ memories of her friend Lady Laurier: “She was constantly involved in parish bazaars, in raising funds.” NAC, Lilian Scott Desbarats Papers, “My Recollections of Laurier House.” As Lapierre has summarized, “She went to many meetings, charitable and religious.” LaPierre, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, 114-5.

\footnote{154} Montreal Witness, 12 July 1896, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 27.

\footnote{155} Laurier House, Parks Canada, Ottawa; See letter from the Imperial Daughters of the British Empire “To Lady Laurier Ottawa, May it Please Your Ladyship, I take the liberty of enclosing to you the Constitution of our newly formed Federation., which will explain to you that we aim at a bond of union among the women of the Queen in all parts of Her Majesty’s Empire and that after securing a strong sympathetic interest in the Dominion, we intend to approach every other Colony…I write to beg that Your Ladyship will give us your name at the head of our Honorary Vice Presidents. I shall have much pleasure in keeping Your Ladyship duly informed concerning us and we hope to receive from you a favourable reply.” 24 March 1900, NAC Laurier Papers, Volumes 809, 814A-B.

\footnote{156} “Lady Laurier Life Partner of Liberal Statesman Dead” Ottawa Evening Journal 19 November 1921, NAC Laurier Papers, Volumes 809, 814A-B.

\footnote{157} Carol McLeod, Wives of the Canadian Prime Ministers, 80; NAC, Lilian Scott Desbarats Papers.
taken such a great interest in the good cause” she writes, “if our friends are rejoicing – our adversaries are devastated. They were counting I presume on this cry of race and religion, which they used so much against my husband. Our side was certain of victory. As for myself, I did not worry a moment.”\(^{158}\) As Schull acknowledges, the woman who was known to prefer a quiet life had “converted herself into a remarkable political asset.”\(^{159}\) Letters that Lady Laurier wrote to Liberal politicians celebrating their victories and commiserating their losses indicate that she remained sensitive to anti-French bigotry.\(^{160}\) After the Aberdeen’s vice-regal tenure had ended, Lady Laurier remained a close personal friend to her political mentor, keeping her informed of political developments in Canada.\(^{161}\)

The Transformation of Lady Laurier From Bonne Femme to Grand Dowager

To what extent Zoë Laurier view her role as politically influential? The idea that a woman owes service to a man was the linchpin that guided and gave meaning to her life. From this starting point, Lady Aberdeen proved the stimulus to Zoë Laurier’s public service by helping her recognize herself as a political wife and as a woman with mediated access to political power, one thus possessed the means to give service on a grander scale as the “solution to the problem of life.”\(^{162}\) Lady Laurier proved herself to be the ideal

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\(^{158}\) Zoë Laurier to Ishbel Aberdeen: “Cher Lady Aberdeen, je vous remercie de tant ma cœur de vos amiables félicitations et laissez moi vous dires combien je suis fière de votre haute appréciation du rémittent des dernières élections en faveur de mon mari. Je sais que vous avez toujours pris un si grand interdit [sic] succès de la bonne cause que je n’ai pas été étonnée de la satisfaction que vous exprimez dans votre lettre.” 28 November 1900, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 3.

\(^{159}\) Schull, Laurier, 221.

\(^{160}\) John Haser to Lady Laurier, “Dear Lady Laurier…it was exceedingly kind and considerate of you to thus remember me in my hour of political adversity…your expression of the opinion that I have not been defeated on my own merits but rather because of the fact that my leader is of French origin…the fact however is that the French cry was not used here to a very appreciable extent, but two or three of our French public men were made the subject of special attack.” 24 November 1900, NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 80.

\(^{161}\) As is apparent in the letters, politics played a major part in their friendship. Zoë Laurier to Lady Aberdeen, 28 November 1900, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 3.

\(^{162}\) Lady Aberdeen’s speech as reported in the Ottawa Journal: “The only true solution to life is SERVICE …we must leave the world better than we found it by yielding ourselves to the working of the principle which recognized service as the solution to the problem of life, and which, in other words, is the essence of
political wife and gracious support to her husband’s political identity, through her self-presentation as the domestic ideal of womanhood, and through her philanthropic and patronage endeavors that emphasized her character as “pure and just and good.”\textsuperscript{163} From an ideology of service, Lady Aberdeen provided Lady Laurier with an example to practice a maternal feminism that validated patronage on a new scale in Canadian political culture. Lady Aberdeen’s inspiring message was clear. Women are “not all called upon to be mothers of little children but every woman is called upon to mother in some way.”\textsuperscript{164} Lady Laurier would turn her mothering skills to sponsoring Canadian artists and dispensing patronage. She was the first Prime Minister’s wife to become Patron of the Arts by utilizing her social and political connections to promote Canadian musical artists, holding musical recitals around the grand piano at the Prime Minister’s residence and gala recitals at the Russell House.\textsuperscript{165} Her patronage provided many talented Canadians with the opportunity to be seen and heard and to raise funds for their artistic studies.\textsuperscript{166} As the wife of the Prime Minister, she possessed the social capital that made it difficult to refuse her invitation to her protégés’ recitals. Moreover, she used her position as the Prime Minister’s wife to request vice-regal patronage in support of the various artists she favoured.\textsuperscript{167} Heather Robertson emphasizes the nature of Lady Laurier’s social capital, observing, “Culture of any kind was new to Ottawa, and the idea that to curry favour with the Prime Minister’s wife one should have to sit through an hour of noise by

\textsuperscript{163} \textit{Toronto Empire}, 4 November 1893, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 13.

\textsuperscript{164} Lady Aberdeen’s Address to the first annual meeting of the NCWC, 11 April 1894.

\textsuperscript{165} Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” \textit{Saturday Night} June 1901. See also Gwyn, \textit{The Private Capital}, 268; Robertson, \textit{More than a Rose}, 146.

\textsuperscript{166} The Lauriers’ close friend, David has described Lady Laurier’s efforts to support musicians and artists, Elle se plaît à favoriser les musiciens, les artistes, achète et fait acheter leurs compositions, ouvre des souscriptions pour leur permettre d’aller compléter leurs études en Europe, se rend à Montréal ou à Québec pour assister a des soirées organisées a leur profit. (FN 235) L.O. David, \textit{Laurier: Sa Vie, Ses Œuvres} (Beauceville, Québec: L’Éclaireur, 1919) David, \textit{Laurier: Sa Vie, Ses Œuvres}, 240.

\textsuperscript{167} From Lady Mary Minto to Lady Laurier: “Dear Lady Laurier, I shall be delighted to give my name as patroness to Mrs. Soutillier and shall hope to go and hear her concert.” 11 April no year, NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 809.
some unspeakable German caused a great deal of resentment.” 168 Ottawa society columnist Amaryllis somewhat sardonically expresses this sense of resentment when writing about Lady Laurier’s musical protégés. “Shortly before leaving for Paris under the patronage of Lady Laurier [Miss Helen LeBouthillier] gave a concert at the Russell Theatre. Those who heard her …say she has improved greatly.”169 Her active support of the arts illustrates that she had developed a sense of her own social capital, which bestowed upon her the ability to martial the cream of capital society to support her artistic causes. But did Lady Laurier develop the sense that she had political influence? Sandra Gwyn argues that after Laurier became Prime Minister, Lady Laurier “gradually began to develop an appetite for the exercise of power and patronage.”170

Her daily game of cards with Sir William Mulock provides a fine example of Lady Laurier’s network of powerful political and financial connections. Mulock, a lawyer, was “connected to one of Toronto’s oldest, staidest [sic] and most wealth encrusted families.”171 As Charlotte Gray emphasizes, aside from his position as Postmaster General in the Laurier government, “there was barely an institution in Toronto, in which Mulock did not play a role.” He “helped make the University of Toronto a major educational establishment, and was among the founders of the Dominion Bank, the Toronto General Trust [both part of the TD Bank group today] and the Wellesley Hospital.”172 According to Heather Robertson, when he discovered that the newly elected Prime Minister Laurier “could not afford to buy a house in Ottawa” Mulock “immediately raised $100,000.00 to ensure that the Prime Minister and his wife would be able to live in appropriate style.”173 From this evidence, one can conclude that Sir

168 Robertson, More than a Rose, 146.

169 Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” Saturday Night, 1901.

170 Gwyn, The Private Capital, 269.


173 Robertson, More than a Rose, 143.
William Mulock was amenable to assisting Lady Laurier in any request that she might make of him.

What is remarkable is the fact that Lady Laurier, through her socio-political connections, evolved from a woman who appears to have had no interest in political life into a woman who recognized her influence to wield patronage and used it. Lady Aberdeen had set the example that a political wife could operate in the public sphere from the domestic sphere through mediated access to political power. Thus, just as Lady Aberdeen used her position to appeal to powerful men to support her causes, Lady Laurier urged Cabinet Ministers to provide employment for the various supplicants who petitioned her for help.\(^{174}\) Gwyn enumerates Zoë Laurier’s efforts through her political connections to give assistance “to the ranks of the indigent post mistresses and widowed stenographers and musical protégés."\(^{175}\) As Robertson informs us, “Laurier jokingly called her his Minister of Public Charity.”\(^{176}\) Her efforts to enlist support from various Cabinet Ministers were not so unusual. As Perkin explains, “although women did not sit in Parliament, they expected to exert direct influence over their friends who did and gain patronage for their relatives, friends and protégés.”\(^{177}\) The orphaned apolitical piano teacher developed into a formidable woman who became a patron of the arts, “accumulated chairmanships,

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\(^{174}\) David has described Lady Laurier’s efforts to assist others through her political connections. Elle “ne recule devant aucune fatigue pour aider cieux qui s’adressent à elle, à obtenir l’emploi qu’ils sollicitent, la faveur qu’ils demandent. Elle donne à lors l’assaut aux places fortes du gouvernement avec une énergie et une impétuosité qui forcent les ministres à capituler.” David, *Laurier: Sa Vie, Ses Oeuvres*, 240. See also: a letter from Yvonne Honan to Lady Laurier, “Dear Lady Laurier, You will pardon me I hope if I once more take the liberty of writing you this letter. Cornelius had made application for a vacant position in the Post Office and knowing your sincere desire to help us I ask as a favour to try and aid him in securing it. I feel sorry to trouble you again as you have already been very kind to us and I think I should perhaps not have taken such liberty, but you may rest assure [sic] it would give us great comfort if Cornelius could obtain a position. I hope dear Lady Laurier you are quite well also Sir Wilfrid. Again asking your forgiveness for this epistle. Believe me your loving godchild Yvonne Honan” Thursday 5 February no year, NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 809 B.

\(^{175}\) As Gwyn has remarked, Lady Laurier did not confine her efforts to assisting only artists and the unemployed. “There was Sidney Fisher…the stylish bachelor Minister of Agriculture; Henry R. Emmerson, Minister of Railways, both of whom she was forever trying to marry off. There was another bachelor Deputy Minister of Labour, William Lyn Mackenzie King…to whom she had willed the house on Laurier Avenue…as a testament of her affection.” Gwyn, *The Private Capital*, 269.

\(^{176}\) Robertson, *More than a Rose*, 147.

addressed women’s meetings and encouraged good works.” Lady Laurier had access to political power and utilized that access for charitable and artistic causes; however, it remains unclear whether she saw herself as harnessing political influence or simply performing ‘good works’ as a philanthropic endeavor separate from political culture.

Nonetheless, any doubt that the ‘bonne femme’ from Arthabaska had developed into a politically savvy woman who enjoyed her public presence is dispelled through an examination of the final years of her life as a frail and elderly widow. One can surmise that after Sir Wilfrid Laurier died (on the 17th February 1919) if Lady Laurier had preferred a quiet and domestic life away from the political limelight, she would have withdrawn completely from public life, as her rival Emilie Lavergne had done. Instead, she continued to be pro-actively engaged in political culture. In the summer of 1919, although nearly blind, Lady Laurier attended the Liberal Party Convention that was held to elect a new leader, receiving a warm and enthusiastic reception. Lilian Scott Desbarats recorded that, “As she entered Howick Hall, cheers and applause went up from all the delegates who were there to name a successor to her husband. It was well known that she favoured Mackenzie King.” After he became the leader of the Liberal Party, Lady Laurier in an act that was both personal and political, presented Mackenzie King with a book from Sir Wilfrid Laurier’s library: *Leaders of Men: or Types and Principles of Success as Illustrated in the Lives and Careers of Famous Americans of the Present Day*. The inscription that she wrote inside the front cover of the book further reveals her politically astute mindset. “Au jeune nouveau chef de parti Liberal” she writes, “en souvenir de son accueil ainsi Sir Wilfrid mes meilleurs brillaient carrier et l’assurance ce des ma haute estime.”

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179 NAC, Lilian Scott Desbarats papers; See also McLeod, *Wives*, 80.

180 Letter of sympathy and thanks from William Lyon Mackenzie King to Lady Laurier, “Dear Lady Laurier, the volume you have sent me from Sir Wilfrid’s library, the significance of its title and above all, the inscription in your own hand, with the words therein expressed, bespeak so much of thought and interest in your gift, that I have been unwilling to send a hurried acknowledgment, much as it would have been necessary at the time your gift arrived. And have waited for the quiet of this Sunday afternoon to tell you with what feelings of gratitude I shall ever treasure this most valued and precious remembrance. It touches me very deeply that you should have thought of so beautiful a way of linking Sir Wilfrid’s life and
In her final years, Lady Laurier appears to have taken pleasure in her status as the widow of the late Prime Minister. Although nearly blind, “Lady Laurier attended the reception on Parliament Hill [for the new Governor General, Lord Byng] and was the first Ottawa lady with whom Lady Byng shook hands on arrival at the platform which had been erected.” Moreover, “since then she had attended one or two gatherings of women in connection with the Liberal election campaign.”¹⁸¹ When she died (November 19th 1921) Lady Laurier was honored with a magnificent public funeral and celebrated as “one of the most remarkable women of her time.”¹⁸² “Ministers of the Crown, judges of the Supreme and County Courts, parliamentarians as well as men prominent in the political and business world were in the long cortege”; Mackenzie King and Sir William Mulock were two of her pallbearers.¹⁸³ At the close of her life, she had become the dowager Liberal wife representing the apex of political culture as she filled the vacancy created by a bachelor Prime Minister. Lady Laurier’s metamorphosis from Arthabaska bonne femme to the grand dowager of Canadian political culture was inspired by and facilitated through Lady Aberdeen’s formidable influence and enduring friendship.

The historian’s examination of private letters provides personal insights into the character and relationships of political wives in nineteenth century Canada. From Wilfrid Laurier’s letters to Zoë Lafontaine, one can discern to some extent the nature of their courtship,

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¹⁸² *Ottawa Evening Journal*, 19 November 1921, NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 814 B.

¹⁸³ ibid.
while gaining a measure of insight into the patriarchal aspects of their subsequent marriage. Letters between Lady Aberdeen and Lady Laurier reveal not only the warm and enduring friendship that sprang forth between the women but also the growing development of a politically aware French Canadian Roman Catholic woman married to political culture. Their letters frequently touch on politics and when Lady Aberdeen asks Lady Laurier to “please do write me a good gossip in French” it is political gossip to which she is referring.\(^{184}\) Furthermore, Liberal candidate John Haser’s reply to Mme. Laurier’s letter indicates her increasingly active involvement in political life as well as her firm conviction that English Liberal candidates were defeated in their election bid because of continuing anti-French bigotry against her husband.\(^{185}\) Finally Mackenzie King’s letter of thanks to Lady Laurier clearly illustrates that she had developed from a private ‘bonne femme’ to the political grand dowager of her time.

Patriarchy gave meaning to Lady Laurier’s life. Thanks to Lady Aberdeen’s friendship, Lady Laurier came to recognize that as the wife of the man at the summit of political life in Canada she had some measure of influence from within the domestic sphere by utilizing patriarchal bargains. The same ideology that had once held her captive in the humiliation of her husband’s scandalous relationship with another woman also empowered her as the ideal political wife. On the occasion of their fiftieth wedding anniversary, Sir Wilfrid Laurier addressed the House of Commons, saying, “My wife has been a help to me, an inspiration and a comfort, a good soldier alike in prosperity and adversity, probably greater in the latter than in the former.”\(^ {186}\) As Jo Margadant has argued, “identities are mobile, contested, multiple constructions of the self and others that depend as much on context as any defining character traits.”\(^ {187}\) During her lifetime, the context of Zoë Lafontaine Laurier’s life changed and while she remained a woman

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\(^{184}\) Lady Aberdeen to Lady Laurier: “and fancy Sir Mackenzie Bowell coming out against Haggart. We are longing for more detailed news. Please do write me a good gossip in French.” 8 November 1906, NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 814 A.

\(^{185}\) John Haser to Lady Laurier 24 November 1900, Laurier Papers, Volume 809.

\(^{186}\) *Montreal Herald* and *Daily Telegram*, 17 February 1919.

identified with the domestic sphere, by working from within a patriarchal framework of separate spheres ideology, Zoë Lafontaine Laurier in her “devotion to Sir Wilfrid” and through her “innumerable acts of kindness” was celebrated as a “venerable and noble hearted woman,” and regarded as “one of the most remarkable Canadian women of her time.” 188

188 As the Press reported, “A notable tribute to the memory of Lady Laurier was the presence of a large number of boy and girl orphans from St. Joseph’s Orphanage, an institution on which Lady Laurier bestowed charities and favors on numerous occasions.” Ottawa Evening Journal, 19 November 1921, NAC Laurier Papers, Volume 814.
Chapter Six
Separate Spheres Ideology and Political Influence

“Don’t you realize my dear chap that the women of our day are the chief factors in our government?”

“She cannot vote, yet she is allowed to have an opinion, and at times, even flatter herself that she has influenced brothers or husbands to vote as they did.”

This chapter contributes to a greater knowledge of how women’s political influence was tempered by formal and informal patriarchal structures that served not only to underpin sexual hierarchy, but also gave meaning to their lives. An analysis of the real lived experience of Annie Affleck Thompson and of Ishbel Marjoribanks Gordon, Lady Aberdeen enables the historian to understand that gender boundaries were not rigidly enforced and indeed were often porous, although contingent upon the manner in which women approached those boundaries. These two women used separate spheres ideology as a vehicle to influence the public sphere. Through an examination of the points of conflict and agreement in gender identity, the nuanced process of social change that validated female agency while continuing to pay homage to sexual hierarchy becomes clearer. The synergistic friendship that developed between Ladies Thompson and Aberdeen enabled them to productively utilize late nineteenth concepts of womanhood to influence the careers of two Prime Ministers of Canada: Sir John Thompson and Sir Charles Tupper.

The first part of this discussion considers the ways in which Lady Thompson utilized separate spheres ideology to motivate and guide her husband’s political career, and thus contributes a new understanding to how women could work within existing gender boundaries; yet also manipulate and sometimes circumvent their subordinate and


2 Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” *Saturday Night*
supportive role to achieve political influence. Without the influence of Annie Affleck Thompson, John Thompson would never have become the first Roman Catholic Prime Minister of Canada. A key point will explore the questions raised regarding Lady Thompson’s personal ambition and her insistence that Thompson pursue a political career, rather than the legal career he preferred. Furthermore, the machinations of Lady Thompson and Lady Aberdeen to thwart Sir Charles Tupper’s efforts to become Prime Minister reveals the impact of patriarchy upon the influence and dependence of political wives.

The second part of this discussion challenges the opinions of numerous historians that Lady Aberdeen was “Governor General in all but name” or that she was “Canada’s first Governess General.” Instead, I argue that although she utilized separate spheres ideology and maternal feminism to take on a more public role than previous wives of Canada’s Governors General, nevertheless her political influence was tempered by patriarchy.

Lady Thompson: Architect of Thompson’s Political Career

Lady Thompson was the architect of John Thompson’s remarkable political career. His meteoric political ascendancy from Halifax alderman to Canada’s first Roman Catholic Prime Minister was the result of his exceptional ability and her perspicacious ambition. “You know how fond I am of you,” she told him, “and if I were able how much I would do to push you to the first.” Contemporaries who knew him well were of the opinion that Thompson did not want a political career. When he agreed to run for provincial political

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3 Sandra Gwyn, The Private Capital: Ambition and Love in the Age of Macdonald and Laurier (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), 276

4 Ibid

5 Thompson first entered political life when he was elected to the Provincial Assembly at the age of twenty-two. Within two years he was a member of the Executive Council, then Premier of Nova Scotia, then Judge on the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia, then Privy Councilor of Canada, Minister of Justice under Macdonald and J.J. Abbott, then Prime Minister. He was knighted in 1888. See P. B. Waite, The Man from Halifax: Sir John Thompson, Prime Minister (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985)

6 Annie Thompson to Thompson, 18 November 1885, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.
office, he did so “without enthusiasm, if not with reluctance.” It was Annie who recognized the opportunity and convinced him to run. “You will know,” she said, “for the first time what you are capable of.” When he talked of quitting politics, Annie convinced him to stay. “No you shall not,” she insisted, “you are there and the world must see what you are made of.” Thompson preferred to practice law as a Judge on the bench of the Nova Scotia Supreme Court. He made it clear to Annie that he was anxious to leave political life as soon as she would agree. “I could not stand the depression so long as this,” he told her, “but for the feeling all the time that you wished me to do what I have done.” When he became Premier of Nova Scotia, it was only due to “overwhelming pressure” from his colleagues and his sense of duty that he accepted the position for the good of the provincial Conservative Party.

Recognizing Thompson’s political

7 Waite, The Man from Halifax, 159. As journalist, John Willison has suggested, “No man ever attained high office more absolutely and unequivocally by sheer force of character and ability than Sir John Thompson. It is doubtful that he ever spoke a single word or took a conscious step to secure the leadership of the Conservative Party.” John Willison, Reminiscences, Political and Personal (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1919), 138; According to The Honorable David Mills Liberal Member of Parliament, Thompson once said to him: “Do you like this life? I confess it has no charms for me; and I cannot help thinking that any man with ability is a fool to come here. In private life you can be pecuniarily better off; you have peace of mind, domestic enjoyment and reputation about such as you merit; but here what have you got. A blackened reputation, which as bad as it may be, some think is better than you deserve. My advice to any man of ability and sense is to keep out of parliament.” J. Castell Hopkins, The Life and Work of Sir John Thompson (Brantford: Bradley-Garretson & Co., 1895), 462.

8 Waite, The Man from Halifax, 71. See also Halifax Evening Mail, 15 December 1904, Aberdeen Papers, Volume 25.

9 Annie Thompson to Thompson, 7 November 1885, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 288; As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her Journal: “It was Lady Thompson who persuaded her husband to come into Dominion politics when Sir John A asked him to do so. Sir John himself wished to remain on the Bench but Lady T was so convinced of his great ability that she wanted him to show what he was made of and thought it was a shame that his poverty should stand in his way.” J. T. Saywell, editor, The Canadian Journal of Lady Aberdeen (Toronto: Champlain Society 1960), 13 December 1894.

10 Annie Thompson to Thompson, 11 December 1885, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.

11 Hopkins cites a speech given by: Mr. Fielding when Thompson was Premier of Nova Scotia in 1879: “It is well known that the Hon. Gentleman who temporarily fills that office has no intention of remaining in politics but will at the earliest opportunity, take a seat upon the Bench, which his recognized ability as a lawyer fits him to adorn.” Hopkins, The Life and Work of Sir John Thompson, 65. See also Waite, The Man From Halifax, 344.

12 Thompson to Annie Thompson, July 20, 1891, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.

13 Waite has described the “overwhelming pressure” for Thompson to take the leadership of the Conservative Party in Nova Scotia at the time when he was making preparations to resign. Waite, The Man from Halifax, 109; Thompson wrote to his wife insisting that he preferred to practice law rather than
brilliance, Sir John A. Macdonald attempted to recruit him for the position of federal Minister of Justice. He preferred to decline the offer, but Macdonald was persistent. Thompson turned to Annie for advice: “It does not seem that I could ask advice outside” he said, “for no one knows how things are so well as you and I.” Annie instructed him to accept. Recognizing that the pinnacle of his political career had not been reached, she argued that he was too young to remain on the Supreme Court for the rest of his career where, in her view, his brilliance would fade. “I don’t think” she wrote, “that at your age I would want you to go on the shelf.” In the end, as Thompson’s biographer P. B. Waite emphasizes, “It was up to Annie, Thompson would abide by what she wanted.” What we can say from the evidence presented in M.J. Peterson’s study of Victorian gentlewomen is that Annie Thompson’s role was not unusual. Often “wives had the longest standing and most direct influence on their husband’s career decisions.” Nevertheless, a comparison to Peterson’s research emphasizes the remarkable degree of influence Annie Thompson had on her husband’s career path.

Annie Thompson was politically astute, seeing politics as a game of chess and always considering ahead the best move for her brilliant husband. When Thompson took over the leadership of the federal Conservative Party as Prime Minister, he did not seek the position; rather it was thrust upon him. In fact, as Waite concludes, “the choice was barely his at all.” He was planning to resign from the federal cabinet in order to become

14 Thompson to Annie Thompson, 3 June 1885, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 281.
16 Annie Thompson to Thompson, 5 November 1885, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.
19 As Lady Aberdeen described Lady Thompson in her Journal: “She is unfortunately a bit cynical and looks on politics as a game of chess, but she has a clear head and good judgment and has been of infinite use to Sir John.” Journal, 7 August 1894.
Chief Justice, but with Macdonald dead and his successor J.J. Abbott in failing health, the task fell to Thompson to hold the party together. “There is no doubt,” Abbott told him, “the feeling of the party points directly and unmistakably [sic] to yourself.”

Annie agreed. “They cannot do without you,” she told him. As later events proved, Lady Annie Thompson was correct. Without Thompson’s leadership, the Conservative party was doomed to spend fifteen years in opposition.

As Waite contends, it was Annie who possessed the political ambition for her husband: “she seemed rarely to look at his life in the short term; she had her sights set on distant horizons.” Indeed, Waite maintains that it was Annie Thompson who was the driving force behind Thompson’s political career, emphasizing that “he was not ambitious but she was.” In his memoir, Lord Aberdeen also credited Annie Thompson for her husband’s impressive political career:

Regarding his [Thompson’s] rapid advancement to high position, it is worth recording as an indication of his natural disposition, that he was by no means eager to seize opportunities for advancement. Thus, it is said that when he was urged to become a candidate for a seat in the Legislature of his native province, Nova Scotia, his wife packed his portmanteau, put it in a cab and almost forced him out of the house to catch the train to the place of nomination.

Without her encouragement, by his own testimony, Thompson probably would not have pursued a political career and thus would not have become Prime Minister. “It may be indolence,” he told her. “I suppose that I should not have made any change had it not

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22 *Journal*, 13 December 1894.


24 Waite, 131.

been for your wish and probably, I should not do anything like that now unless you feel pretty strongly that I should.”26

Notwithstanding Waite’s assessment of Annie Thompson’s role in her husband’s political career, crucial issues remain in dispute. For example, popular historian Heather Robertson suggests that it was not Annie Thompson but John Thompson who was politically ambitious, and “clearly had his eye on the Prime Minister’s job.”27 Canadian poet, literary critic and popular historian George Bowering takes a different view. He argues that Thompson was not particularly interested in politics but Annie Thompson was ambitious for herself. “She wanted” he says, “to be the Prime Minister’s lady.”28 Yet in her Journal Lady Aberdeen describes Annie Thompson’s selfless devotion to her husband, explaining that “he had been her all and there was nothing else she cared for in life – society and other people were all indifferent to her unless she could through them do something to help him.”29 While some evidence certainly supports Lady Aberdeen’s assessment, a closer examination suggests that Annie Thompson was ambitious for herself as well.

Was Annie Thompson’s ambition for her husband a veiled reflection of her own ambition, to be the wife of a cabinet minister with all of the trappings of success that it entailed? As Pat Jalland determines from her research into late nineteenth century British political wives, “such motivation in a woman was not freely acknowledged and the attraction of political power is usually impossible to disentangle from accompanying social, economic and sentimental

26 John Thompson to Annie Thompson, 19 June 1885, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.
28 George Bowering, Egoists and Autocrats: The Prime Ministers of Canada (Toronto: Viking, 1999)
29 Journal, 13 December 1894.
considerations." It is significant to bear in mind that Annie Affleck and John Thompson both came from lower middle-class beginnings. While Victorian ideology celebrated the notion of the self-made man, the cultural construction of appropriate roles for men and women meant that not only was Annie Thompson dependent upon her husband for economic security, she also relied on him for her social position. As prescriptive literature of the period makes clear and popular discourse emphasized, "a wife owes all of her importance to that of her husband." If she was a socially and materially ambitious woman, her only hope of economic and social progress was to be achieved through her husband’s success. Any doubt of Annie Thompson’s awareness of her material and social dependency upon her husband is dispelled in her letters to Thompson. “Just think for a moment,” she told him, “what would become of us without you.” Thus, when Annie Thompson wrote, “I would dearly like to see you a minister with a big house, plenty of servants and the best table that money could set,” she was expressing her ambition for both Thompson and for herself. After all, his success was her success as well. Nonetheless, she downplayed her own ambition and emphasized to Thompson her subordinate female role in which her only need was for his love and her sole desire was to serve him. “You know my dear that I have no ambition for anything in this world but your love, having that I have everything that I want,” she wrote to him, “but you know I am so proud of you that even if I am doing wrong, I cannot help pushing you on, and please God it

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31 As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her Journal, Lady Thompson had been, “employed for a time in some capacity in a shop at Halifax.” *Journal* 13 December 1894. As Waite has argued, “it would be an exaggeration” to describe his life as one of poverty but he[Thompson] had “materially speaking a close enough life” in fact it would be more accurate to describe his early life as one of “frugality.” Waite, *The Man from Halifax* 10.


33 Annie Thompson to Thompson, 23 October 1881, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.

34 Annie Thompson to Thompson, 29 October 1881, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.
will turn out right.”\textsuperscript{35} As later events proved, despite her best efforts it did not ‘turn out right.’

While historians have drawn various conclusions about Lady Thompson’s motivation to direct Thompson’s career, it cannot be overlooked that the Thompson marriage was a symbiotic relationship in which each was dependant upon the other. Thompson was clearly the uxorious husband, anxious to please and generally although not always submissive to his wife’s wishes. Unlike Matilda Edgar, Annie Thompson never referred to her husband as her “Lord and Master.” Instead, she addressed him as Child, Pet, Dear old Tory and Dear Baby. The affectionate and loving nature of their relationship is evident in their letters. “Good night,” she wrote, “with ever so much love and kisses, without number.”\textsuperscript{36} Through her letters she also radiated a maternal persona that both comforted and encouraged Thompson to continue to advance politically whenever he wanted to quit. In turn, Thompson’s letters expose his emotional dependency, not only in his need for his wife’s love and guidance but also his need for her approval. “You have discussed my satisfactions and dissatisfactions,” he wrote, “but you have never told me whether or not you are satisfied with what I have done in the world.”\textsuperscript{37}

Although he frequently complained of the loneliness of political life and his desire to give it up, she encouraged him to stay the course. “Everything is so lonesome that Ottawa seems more hateful and I am blue about everything,” he complained, “and I want a judgeship again.”\textsuperscript{38} Her response was to admonish, encourage and reassure him in motherly tones to remain: “Oh my pet my pet” she wrote, “can’t you bully things out when I am trying to do so”\textsuperscript{39} “When you come home,” she reassured him, “I’ll be able to

\textsuperscript{35} Annie Thompson to Thompson, undated, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 281.

\textsuperscript{36} Annie Thompson to Thompson, 6 September 1878, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.

\textsuperscript{37} Thompson to Annie Thompson, 19 June 1885, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.

\textsuperscript{38} Thompson to Annie Thompson, no date, 1886, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.

\textsuperscript{39} Annie Thompson to Thompson, 21 January 1886, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.
stay all the time with you and I know that I won’t want to let you out of my sight at all.”

Thompson often wrote despairingly to her complaining that he has had “a very lonesome and nervous day”

He told her that when he was away from her he was unable to get any rest “unless I get my head on your shoulder,” adding “So, am I not a great fool and very childish?”

Further evidence of Annie Thompson’s maternal role in encouraging her husband can be seen in the ways she addressed and signed her letters. She began with “Dear Baby,” and closed with “lots of love to the only child in the world worth having.”

When Thompson was feeling downhearted and lonely, wanting to return home, she encouraged him again to remain: “My poor kitten,” she wrote, “could you step out of your shell and be a little friendly with the men? You must not mope it will never do.”

Always the reticent political candidate, it has been said that Thompson would never exhort his audience to vote for him, rather he would say, “When you vote remember me.”

Annie Thompson, playing the part of a ‘stage mother’ pushing her talented child onto the political hustings, encouraged her husband to speak up. “My dear Baby” she wrote, “You remember the wisdom of the little newsboy, sing out or you’ll never sell Bill.”

In addition to her roles as the loving wife and the guiding and reassuring mother, Annie Thompson was a companion to her husband. When he was on the campaign trail and feeling defeated, Annie gave him the support that he needed:

I know that you are feeling badly. I wish that I could be with you for one ten minutes to talk square to you. We never gave up a fight yet, it is better

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40 Annie Tompson to Thompson, 13 December 1885, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 281.

41 Thomspn to Annie Thompson, 27 July 1891, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 281.

42 Thompson to Annie Thompson, no date, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 281.

43 Annie Thompson to Thompson, 3 February 1886, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 281.

44 Annie Thompson to Thompson, 29 October 1888, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 281.

45 Waite, *The Man from Halifax*, 139.

46 Annie Thompson to Thompson, 29 October 1881, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 281.
to fight as long as you are started and be beaten than not fight at all. So keep up your courage and I’ll go part of the way to meet you coming home, win or lose they can’t keep you from me much longer.\textsuperscript{47}

It is significant that Annie Thompson places herself with her husband in the campaign when she tells him, “We never gave up a fight yet.” While she used the traditional roles as wife and mother to encourage her husband, the language of her letters also indicates that she perceived herself to be Thompson’s partner in a companionate relationship.\textsuperscript{48} Thompson’s need for Annie’s encouragement and active role in his political career was not as unusual as it might seem. As M.J. Peterson argues it was customary for genteel Victorian ladies to assist their husbands. They were a one-career family (his) and “both husband and wife partook of that single career.”\textsuperscript{49} Thus, while her husband was out on the campaign trail, Annie Thompson was fighting alongside him from the location of the domestic sphere, advising and encouraging.

From the location of the private sphere, Annie Thompson provided the impetus for her husband to move to the forefront of the political landscape. She also carefully managed their financial affairs. As Jalland’s study indicates, within the framework of separate spheres “the management of household finances was considered a crucial part of the mistress’s duties.”\textsuperscript{50} However, Annie Thompson was responsible for substantially more than the household expenses. Beyond her traditional role as wife and mother, she controlled their overall financial well-being.\textsuperscript{51} While she struggled to pay off debts and to acquire desperately needed funds, Thompson had little concern about money.\textsuperscript{52}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} Annie Thompson to Thompson, 6 June 1882 and 14 June 1882, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 281.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Waite, \textit{The Man from Halifax}, 189.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Peterson, \textit{Family, Love and Work}, 166.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Jalland, \textit{Women, Marriage and Politics}, 191.
\item \textsuperscript{51} As Waite has argued, “No miser ever held onto a bankbook more tightly than she did.” Waite, \textit{The Man from Halifax}, 155.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Many of Annie Thompson’s letters included a detailed list of expenses and bills paid. For example: Annie Thompson to Thompson: “It’s quite enough to discourage a person, something will have to be done to manage better. I won’t even part with 2 cents for a newspaper until we are out of debt.” 9 January 1883, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.
\end{itemize}
Aberdeen described him as a “generous hearted man” who “gave more than they could probably afford to cases in distress.”\textsuperscript{53} Knowing her husband’s generous impulses and penchant for helping ‘hard luck stories,’ Annie Thompson took control. “Do not,” she instructed him, “lend any money without telling me.”\textsuperscript{54} As Davidoff and Hall have shown in their illuminating study of the middle-class, separate spheres were permeable and for those “men who sought to be somebody” it was ‘female support’ that “underpinned their rise to public prominence.”\textsuperscript{55} J.I. Little’s study of mid-nineteenth century Canadian merchant politician Marcus Child provides additional evidence that the domestic/private divide was not rigid in practice.\textsuperscript{56} Just as Child depended upon his wife to run the business while he was away in Parliament, so too did Thompson depend on his wife to take care of their overall financial concerns while he concentrated on the business of Parliament. As the evidence clearly illustrates, beyond her traditional roles as wife and mother, Annie Thompson had a head for business. When she was trying to collect an overdue mortgage payment, she warned Thompson “Don’t be afraid that I’ll be fierce but mind now when I go to business, it will be business.”\textsuperscript{57} In her letters to her husband, she regularly detailed expenses and bills paid.\textsuperscript{58} He in turn did not pay a bill without her authorization. “I send you the Rodderick’s bill,” he wrote. “If it is alright, telegraph me or write and I will pay it.”\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{53} Waite, \textit{Man from Halifax}, 165.

\textsuperscript{54} Annie Thompson to Thompson, 9 January 1883, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 283.


\textsuperscript{57} Annie Thompson to Thompson, 20 October 1885, NAC Thompson Papers Volume 281.

\textsuperscript{58} “You see dear, I have paid off $200.00 on last year’s debts and hope to pay $200.00 more next month.” Annie Thompson to Thompson, 21 January 1886, NAC Thompson Papers Volume 281.

\textsuperscript{59} Thompson to Annie Thompson, 17 July 1891, NAC Thompson Papers Volume 283.
Even though Annie Thompson directed and motivated her husband in his political career and controlled their finances, “patriarchal bargains” underscored the entirety of the Thompson marriage. For example, to justify her control of the finances, she utilized the language of separate spheres when she wrote: “You can look at the bills passing through the House,” she told him, “and I will fight ours at home.”

To further emphasize the point, her decision to sell their horse Charlie in order to relieve their financial stress provides a cogent example of her subordinate and dependent position in the marriage. “I am not willing to let anyone have a bargain in him” she told Thompson. “If there is a bona-fide offer, I will telegraph you but I am not willing to let him go for anything less than $200.00.” Thompson’s response was to suggest “letting someone have him for a year” to decide if they wanted to purchase the horse. In response, Annie Thompson gently explained to her husband that his plan was not well thought out since “it would make a delay and perhaps they might refuse because they would not like the responsibility of him.” “But” she wrote, “You do whatever you think is best.”

Even though Annie was well aware that hers was the better strategy, her response to his suggestion was to offer to acquiesce to her husband’s patriarchal authority, regardless of his imprudent plan. Most importantly, her response reveals the informal psychological restraints that buttressed the gendered nature of power relations within their marriage. Consider, for example, how Thompson openly expressed his patriarchal authority over his wife. When he instructed her on what to wear to the opening of Parliament he wrote, “Remember, these are commands, not mere advice.”

In another letter, Thompson lamented his loneliness while in Ottawa. “I reproached myself for not forcing you to come,” he wrote. “I suppose if I had given you a good whipping at the outset, you would not have refused so obstinately but you know I never had the heart to do that.”

While this may have been Thompson’s attempt at humour, admitting that he “never had the heart to do that,” he nevertheless expressed his right to do so.

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60 Annie Thompson to Thompson, 9 January 1883, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 281.
61 Annie Thompson to Thompson, 23 November 1885, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 281.
62 ibid
63 Thompson to Annie Thompson, 22 October 1881, Volume 281.
Late nineteenth century feminist and pacifist Alice Chown declared that a good wife was one who was “eager to help her husband realize his ambition.” 64 Always keen to assist her husband, Annie Thompson was the supportive wife but within a shifting gender paradigm which permitted her to ‘go to business’ while maintaining her genteel identity by making “patriarchal bargains” ones in which status and influence were only possible through subordination and dependence. In exchange for her subordinate position and material dependence, Annie Affleck Thompson gained a measure of influence and status as the wife of a rising and respected Supreme Court Judge and politician who reached the political summit when he became Prime Minister. In turn, former shop assistant Annie Affleck, became Lady Thompson, wife of the Prime Minister. Although it was Lady Annie Thompson’s ambition that drove her husband to the political summit, her subordinate position is emphasized by the fact that she was financially dependent upon a husband who “believed that it was impossible for a man with right instincts to derive satisfaction from wealth.” 65 As Lady Aberdeen emphasized, “Sir John’s honesty was scrupulous, no public moneys ever found their way to his pocket.” 66 Joseph Schull described Ottawa political culture during those years as a “place where money flowed with almost automatic ease into the hands of the willing,” but rather than tapping into the flow, Thompson “had lived on his nine thousand dollars a year and deprived his family of much.” 67 Thompson’s behaviour overall exemplifies what Anthony Rotundo has identified as the nineteenth century construction of the Christian gentleman who “discouraged self seeking and condemned the rewards offered to successful men by commercial society.” 68 The sense of duty and self-sacrifice that Rotundo identifies as the

64 Alice Chown, The Stairway (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 175.

65 Waite, The Man from Halifax, 404.

66 Journal, 13 December 1894.


68 As Rotundo has argued, “The Christian gentleman discouraged self seeking and condemned the rewards offered to successful men by a commercial society” instead, he “stressed love, kindness and compassion…philanthropy, church activities, self sacrifice…the ideal of the Christian gentleman was in essence an ethic of compassion that directed a man’s attention to the needs and concerns of others.” Anthony Rotundo, “Learning About Manhood: Gender Ideals and the Middle-class Family in Nineteenth
essence of the Christian gentleman, was evident when Thompson reluctantly took on the job of Premier of Nova Scotia, and, later, the leadership of the Conservative Party.\textsuperscript{69} Thompson became Prime Minister on November 23\textsuperscript{rd} 1892. In September 1894, he was diagnosed with a valvular disease of the heart. Joseph Pope, civil servant and Macdonald’s long time secretary, believed that although Thompson was “aware that his health was in an unsatisfactory condition, it is doubtful that he realized how far the condition had progressed.”\textsuperscript{70} In December of the same year, shortly after he was sworn in as a member of Her Majesty’s Privy Council,\textsuperscript{71} John Thompson died suddenly during a luncheon at Windsor Castle with Queen Victoria.\textsuperscript{72} Annie Thompson was left nearly penniless.\textsuperscript{73} Here we can see the harsh reality of her widowhood that emphasizes the potential pitfalls of economic dependence for women.

Lady Aberdeen recalled the sad irony of Lady Thompson’s loss:

The devoted wife who had urged him to enter public life was in favour of his relinquishing the highest position in his country rather than risk his health. But he refused since his retention of the office was indispensable to the interest of his party.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{69} As Schull has argued Thompson “ had left a promising career to come to Macdonald in a time of need and he stayed on after Macdonald because a steadily decaying Ministry would have gone down without him.”Schull, \textit{Laurier}, 290.

\textsuperscript{70} Pope, \textit{Public Servant}, 104.

\textsuperscript{71} This was a tremendous honour as Waite relates, “the only other Canadian admitted to Her Majesty’s Privy Council had been Sir John A Macdonald.” Waite, \textit{The Man from Halifax}, 424.


\textsuperscript{73} As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her \textit{Journal}, “They have all unhappily been left very badly off, - in fact they are penniless.” \textit{Journal}, 13 December 1894; As a result “In the end Parliament was called in …not only to pay the expenses of Thompson’s funeral, but also…for a Parliamentary contribution of $35,000.00 to the Lady Thompson Fund. It was embarrassing that it was opposed. The motion to strike it out of the estimates was defeated… The final total fund was $62,500.00.” Waite, \textit{The Man from Halifax}, 440-441.

\textsuperscript{74} Aberdeen and Temair, \textit{We Twa}, Volume 2, 24.
As the nearly destitute widow of the late Prime Minister, she had to endure the humiliation of a national subscription for the ‘Lady Thompson Fund.’ In the end, “patriarchal bargains” for Annie Thompson were no bargain at all. She had shared in his career, but when it was over she was left financially unprotected, directionless and rudderless. “If it were not for the children,” she said, “I would creep away in some corner and die.”

Despite the shock of her sudden loss, Lady Thompson did not ‘creep away.’ There were three tasks she set out to perform for her husband: to preserve his memory, commemorate his achievements and guard his legacy. First, within three days of his death, Lady Annie Thompson gathered up her husband’s papers from his parliamentary office and saved them along with his letters to her and their children and her letters to Thompson. Lady Thompson had wanted the world to see what her husband was made of and set out to guarantee that what she determined as his greatness would not be forgotten.

Throughout their marriage, she had guided her husband’s career. Now that he was gone, her second task was to make every effort to carry out his wishes as he had expressed them to her regarding his successor. Bruce Hutchison describes Thompson’s unexpected death as one of the “Conservative Party’s greatest losses since Confederation” especially

75 The public subscription and money awarded by Parliament was enough to provide Lady Thompson with a lifetime income of $2800.00 a year. With Frankie to care for she would be able to just get by, as she had always done. For further details see Waite, *The Man from Halifax*, 441. As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her *Journal*, “The Ministers have announced that a national subscription would be open for Lady T – this seems an ill considered step & one that will pain her much. It cannot either be national started by the Government, It would have seemed better to have a Parliamentary grant, supported by both parties – or else if need be an outside Committee of men of both parties.” *Journal*, 14 December 1894.

76 “Poor Lady Thompson is feeling the reaction now badly – we went to see her after Church last Sunday & [sic] she drove with me yesterday but she scarcely knows what to do with herself & [sic] by way of relief has begun tearing the house to pieces and packing up everything which makes her surroundings look very desolate, seeing that she is not to make her move to Toronto for three months yet.” *Journal*, 9 February 1895.

77 *Journal*, 13 December 1894.

since “the party had no adequate successor.” As Schull expresses it, the Conservative “government was headless and locked in crisis.” Who could effectively lead the party? Unquestionably, Thompson was a difficult man to replace. He had been the third Prime Minister in three years and the one most able to hold the Conservative party together. On the basis of seniority alone, Sir Charles Tupper - a Father of Confederation, a former Premier of Nova Scotia, a senior Cabinet Minister under Sir John A. Macdonald as well as High Commissioner to London - seemed to be the obvious choice to succeed Thompson. Many in the Conservative Party believed that Tupper was the man most competent to lead the party away from the factionalism that threatened to engulf and capsize it. With Thompson gone, the party needed a strong hand to unite the “constituent parts, each with members who displayed individual prejudices and jealousies.” Sir John Willison, editor of the Toronto Globe described how Macdonald had relied upon Tupper “as a commander relies upon a reserve army.” Certainly, Joseph Pope believed that Tupper was the logical choice to hold the party together and that he should have been summoned without delay. Yet Lord Aberdeen seemed never to have considered Tupper for the position. Pope expressed his incredulity regarding the Governor General’s inexplicable reasoning in passing over Tupper as choice for Prime Minister and attributed what he perceived to be a mistake as the result of simple incompetence. As he put it, “it was especially unfortunate that at a time of this national loss, the office of Governor

79 Bruce Hutchison, *Mr. Prime Minister: 1867-1964* (Don Mills: Longmans, 1964), 104; See also Bliss who has argued, “There was no one in the party fit to succeed him.” Michael Bliss, *Right Honorable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Chretien* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994, 2004), 29 See also Lady Aberdeen’s impression that: “there is a very general feeling that only his [Thompson’s] presence could enable them to win and that now the Liberals are exceedingly likely to be successful, taking all things into consideration … [and] the want of any strong man or outstanding figure among the crowd of commonplace in the [Conservative] Cabinet.” *Journal*, 13 December 1894.

80 Schull, *Laurier*, 292.

81 As Laurier wrote to James Edgar: “The death of poor Thompson is a most shocking event. It has strangely affected me. He was a gentleman and an able man, and there was a genuine pleasure in a fight with him. Who is there now on the other side who can maintain the contest on the same level?” Schull, *Laurier*, 291.

82 Ramsay Cook and Réal Bélanger, *Canada’s Prime Ministers: Macdonald to Trudeau: Portraits from the Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 121.


84 Pope, *Public Servant*, 104.
General should have been a man so little fitted for its responsibilities as the Earl of Aberdeen.” However, it was not the result of Lord Aberdeen’s incompetence that caused him to pass over Tupper as Prime Minister; the reason was Lady Thompson, who was determined to fulfill what she believed were her husband’s wishes. As Lady Aberdeen indicates in her *Journal*: “She was quite clear that Mr. Haggart was the man that would best be able to keep the party together.”

Once again Annie Thompson took action within a paradigm of separate spheres. Just as she had directed Thompson’s public career from her place within the domestic sphere, she now worked from within the private sphere to affect the choice of her husband’s political successor. Rather than approaching Lord Aberdeen directly, she made her wishes known to the Governor General through her good friend Lady Aberdeen. She would, she said, consider it an insult to her husband’s memory if Tupper succeeded him as Prime Minister. Her reasons were clear. John Thompson had repeatedly found Tupper’s abrasive, manipulative, overbearing manner and questionable ethics intolerable. Thompson told his wife that his rule for dealing with either Tupper (father or son) was to “remember the alleged derivation of their name, from the French ‘Tu perds’ – you lose.” As Lady Aberdeen records in her *Journal*, “I was able to reassure

85 As Pope has recorded in his memoirs, he blamed Lord Aberdeen, believing him incompetent to make the choice. “It was especially unfortunate” he writes, “that at a time of this national loss, the office of Governor General should have been a man so little fitted for its responsibilities as the Earl of Aberdeen.” Pope, *Public Servant*, 104.

86 *Journal*, 13 December 1894.

87 Lady Aberdeen recorded in her *Journal* her conversation with Lady Thompson. “When I first began to ask Lady T for HE whether Sir John had ever expressed an opinion about his successor, she burst out about old Sir Charles, “There is only one thing – if he were sent for I should look upon it as an insult to my husband’s memory.” *Journal* 13 December 1894

88 As Cook and Bélanger, have argued, “The one person in the Conservative party left out of the consideration was old Sir Charles Tupper…Thompson had grown to dislike Tupper Sr., his pushy ways, his penchant for the improvement of Tupperdom. Thompson’s view was shared by his widow.” Cook and Bélanger, *Canada’s Prime Ministers*, 121.

89 Thompson to Annie Thompson re Tupper: “His manner was almost unbearable but I was too cute for him. I strengthened myself with my colleagues and avoided him and pretended not to notice his antagonism. Of course there was always a danger of my bad temper exploding but when such was the case
her as to H.E.’s [His Excellency’s] intension about this. Never, if he could help it would Sir Charles [Tupper] be again in Canadian politics.”

Two important issues emerge here. The first is to understand the gendered nature of Lady Thompson’s actions in discussing the choice of her husband’s successor with Lady Aberdeen. The second is to recognize the motivation behind choosing Mackenzie Bowell to form the government. First, it is significant to note that three years earlier, when Sir John A. Macdonald died, Lady Macdonald wrote directly to Governor General Lord Stanley, suggesting that Sir Charles Tupper should be called to lead the party. Instead, Lord Stanley called upon J.J. Abbott. In a letter to Tupper, J.A. MacDonnell outlines Lady Macdonald’s error. He writes:

Lady Macdonald sometimes did not do wise things, and sometimes she did not do wise things in a wise way. When Sir John died, she assumed the responsibility of writing to Lord Stanley recommending that you should be sent for. Whether it was wise in her to have done this is one thing, but as to the wisdom of the course she advocated, there has never been the slightest doubt in my mind.

Simply stated, Lady Macdonald had overstepped the gendered boundaries of political culture. It was inappropriate for the wife of the Prime Minister to “assume the responsibility” of making a request or recommendation regarding political office. It appears that all of Lady Thompson’s requests and recommendations where channeled ‘woman to woman’ through Lady Aberdeen to His Excellency, the Governor General. In this way, Lady Thompson continued to work to assist her husband in what she thought were his wishes, while remaining within the gendered preserve of the private sphere. Lady Aberdeen assured her “I have noted down your wishes as you expressed them to me and you may rely upon His Excellency and me in the matter, we should look upon it as a

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90 Journal, 13 December 1894.

sacred privilege to aid in their being carried out. In this way, the synergistic friendship between two political wives influenced the political sphere to block Sir Charles Tupper from becoming Prime Minister.

As a result of Prime Minister Thompson’s unanticipated death, Lord Aberdeen was facing a political crisis in which there was no obvious successor to Thompson. Uncertain about how best to proceed, the Governor General cabled London “to ask for advice as to whether the fact of Mackenzie Bowell being temporary acting Prime Minister gave him any right to be asked first” to take over the party leadership. The response from Colonial Secretary Lord Ripon was oblique. This was, he replied, a case in which no instructions could be given but as a friend he would advise Aberdeen to instruct Bowell to seek advice from his colleagues. Following Lord Ripon’s suggestion, Aberdeen sent for Mackenzie Bowell “to talk over the situation in a preliminary way and suggested that he might consult his colleagues.” Additionally, Aberdeen “sent for old Sir Frank Smith…to ask how Mr. Bowell’s appointment would be regarded generally. So, in spite of what Lady Thompson had said, Aberdeen came to the opinion that Mr. Bowell would under the circumstances suit best.” Thus, historians can conclude from Lady Aberdeen’s testimony that Tupper was not considered at least partly as a result of Lady

92 Lady Aberdeen to Lady Thompson, 21 December 1894, NAC Thompson Papers, Volume 291.

93 As Cook and Bélanger have argued, “Any prejudice that Lord Aberdeen had against the elder Tupper via Sir John Thompson had ample domestic reinforcement.” Cook and Bélanger, Canada’s Prime Ministers, 122.

94 Journal, 13 December 1894.

95 Lady Aberdeen recorded in her Journal the Governor General’s uncertainty about how to proceed: “There was no one to consult and we have little indication of Sir John’s feelings. HE telegraphed Lord Ripon for advice…Ripon cabled back…” This is not an occasion on which instructions can be given by Her Majesty’s government. But my advice as a friend is to ask the acting Prime Minister after consultation with his colleagues to come and advise you as to whom you should send for to form an administration. This is preferable to your making any independent decision.” Journal, 11 December 1894; See also Doris French, Ishbel and the Empire: A Biography of Lady Aberdeen (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1988), 167.

96 “H.E. had just received his telegram from home. He therefore wrote a line to Mr. Mackenzie Bowell asking him if he would come and talk over the present positioning a preliminary way…” Journal, 13 December 1894.

97 Ibid.
Thompson’s wishes, and Haggart was not considered for the position despite Lady Thompson’s recommendation.

The facts as Aberdeen considered them were as follows: the only suggestion of Thompson’s choice was the information provided by Lady Thompson that Haggard was the man to choose. However, Aberdeen eliminated Haggard as a possibility because of his less than ideal domestic life. Second, although many assumed that Sir Charles Tupper was the man to lead the party, Aberdeen was aware of and agreed with Thompson’s assessment of Tupper. Not only was Tupper a man who had been “a bitter enemy of Sir John’s and gave him much trouble and constantly tried to trip him up, to step in his shoes and make difficulties so to pave the way for either himself or his son” but in Lady Aberdeen’s assessment he was also “a dodger” and a “schemer.” Rather than working for the best interests of the country, Tupper was more concerned with promoting his own interests, what Lady Aberdeen called “Tupperdom.” Lady Thompson’s declaration to Lady Aberdeen that she would consider it an insult to her husband if Tupper was chosen served to emphasize the point. Thus, while Lord Aberdeen struggled over the decision of the best choice to succeed Thompson, he immediately eliminated Tupper as the possible leader of the Conservative party. With no one to consult and no direction from the Colonial Office, Aberdeen regarded Mackenzie Bowell as a likely candidate because he was the designated acting Prime Minister whenever Thompson was away and the Cabinet Minister of longest standing. As Canadian political historians Ramsay Cook and Real Belanger have maintained, “his selection had nothing to do with his talents it was simply the custom that the senior minister assumed this duty.” Lady Aberdeen judged Bowell as “a good man and a straight man” with “great ideas about the drawing together of the colonies and the Empire.” Hence, after considering the

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98 Journal, 13 December 1894.

99 As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her Journal, “Mr. Haggard’s private life is not supposed to be able to bear inspection.” Journal, 13 December 1894.

100 As Schull has argued, “The principle of seniority was to prevail.” Schull, Laurier, 292.

101 Cook and Bélanger, Canada’s Prime Ministers, 120-121.
Still, despite Lady Aberdeen’s explanations, historians continue to muse over this great puzzle of Canadian political history. What circumstances, they wonder, could possibly justify the choice of Bowell, a man who would prove to be completely incapable of holding together the various factions within the party and lead it toward another Conservative victory in an election that was by law scheduled to occur within the next eighteen months. Why was Mackenzie Bowell chosen rather than Sir Charles Tupper to lead the Conservative Government? Hutchison says that it is unclear even today why Bowell was chosen and describes him as a “tiny stupid man.” He accuses Aberdeen of “scraping the bottom of the barrel.”

Bowell was not a member of the House of Commons but was Senator and did not enjoy the support of the Conservative Cabinet. Thus when Aberdeen asked Bowell to form the government, to many the choice seemed lacking in sound judgment.

In her biography of Lady Aberdeen, Doris French argues that Bowell was “foisted” on the Conservative party as a deliberate plot to “put in office an incompetent” in order to facilitate “an early election” and an “easy Liberal win.” However, French absolves Lord Aberdeen of any nefarious plot and places the responsibility completely on Lady Aberdeen. The Governor General may have made a “foolish choice,” she says, “but he had a high sense of propriety of doing the right thing.” More exactly, French maintains that it was “Ishbel Aberdeen who was the politician” and her “dominating role during

102 Journal, 13 December 1894.
103 Hutchison, Mr. Prime Minister, 109.
104 As Ondaatje and Swainson have argued, “The Cabinet was weak and undistinguished. Thus when Bowell accepted Aberdeen’s invitation, the cabinet could not rally around any potential leader.” Christopher Ondaatje and Donald Swainson, The Prime Ministers of Canada: Macdonald to Trudeau (Toronto: Pagurian Press, 1975), 57.
105 French, Ishbel, 196.
Aberdeen’s term was well known”; and seeing the opportunity for a Liberal government, she pressed her acquiescent husband to choose Bowell in order to further her plan of a Liberal victory.\textsuperscript{106} At the same time, while absolving Lord Aberdeen of deliberately plotting a Liberal triumph, French suggests he was a willing conspirator in the scheme that she envisions took place. Indeed, French argues that “it is not even possible that the Aberdeens were unaware of Bowell’s limitations” since they had been in Canada for a year.\textsuperscript{107} An alternative point of view is that although the Aberdeens had been in Canada for a year, they probably had no sense of Bowell’s inability to lead. All they had to go on was the fact that he was the acting Prime Minister at the time of Thompson’s death. Thus they could reasonably assume that he was capable of taking on the challenge of leading the party. Instead of a deliberate miscreant plot to further their own political agenda, over the following months Lord and Lady Aberdeen grew increasingly concerned and evidently surprised by “the weakness and consequent shiftiness of Sir Mackenzie Bowell.”\textsuperscript{108}

Further to French’s assertion that “they must have known” the political consequence of choosing Bowell, the only real knowledge that Lord and Lady Aberdeen had of the man was of a very formal nature. Indeed, the Governor General did not sit in the House nor did he sit in the Senate to witness first hand what Lady Aberdeen described as the “real difference in the knowing and understanding of the men to see them as they are in the House, instead of merely in dress clothes at our Parliamentary dinners.”\textsuperscript{109} In fact, it was only after Thompson’s death, not before, that Lady Aberdeen made the unprecedented move by a Governor General’s wife of taking a seat on the floor of the House. Only then did she conclude that, “there is no manner of doubt that Mr. Laurier looks [sic] the finest man in the House & [sic] especially among the leaders.”\textsuperscript{110} Additionally, when Lady

\textsuperscript{106} French, Ishbel, 176-177.

\textsuperscript{107} French, Ishbel, 170.

\textsuperscript{108} Journal, 18 July 1895.

\textsuperscript{109} Journal, 17 July 1895.

\textsuperscript{110} Journal, 17 July 1895.
Aberdeen was informed that some believed the Governor General was so “desperate a partisan in politics that he would be likely to carry his predilections into Canadian politics and try to work for the return of the Canadian Liberals to power” her incredulous response undermines French’s argument. “It seems almost too absurd to be true,” she writes, “that they should think HE would try to take an unfair advantage like that for the sake of one party or the other in his present position.”

There was no iniquitous plot to cripple the Conservative party in order to achieve a Liberal ascendance. Instead, Aberdeen chose to honor the wishes of a ‘dear friend’ by not calling Sir Charles Tupper.

There can be no doubt to the sincerity and permanence of the Thompson/Aberdeen friendship. The fact that Lady Aberdeen sewed the gold and white funeral pall for Thompson accentuates the authentic nature of the friendship. Moreover, after Thompson’s death, the Aberdeens acted as foster parents to the Thompson children, arranging and hosting the coming out parties for the daughters and paying for the education of the sons. There was no partisan plot as “the friendship between Thompson and both the Aberdeens would never have flourished had Aberdeen in mind bringing in the Liberal party by the back door.” Additionally, Thompson reportedly informed a

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111 Journal, 18 July 1895; Additionally Messamore has cited “Nineteenth-century Canadian constitutional expert Alpheus Todd [who] insisted that the governor’s position must be one of strict neutrality. He must manifest no bias towards any political party, but on the contrary be ready to make himself a mediator and a moderator between the influential of all parties.” Barbara Messamore, Canada’s Governors General, 1847-1878: Biography and Constitutional Evolution (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 25.

112 I still had a bit of gold fringe to sew on the pal for the funeral so I took rather a melancholy pleasure in finishing the old year & [sic] in beginning the New Year in doing this & [sic] it was not an unfitting nor a gloomy task. The sheeny white and gold are a fit emblem for him & [sic] make one dwell more on the glory with which he has been crowned than of the sorrow and blankness in which he has left us all.” Journal, 31 December 1894.

113 As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her Journal, “HE. told me to offer from him to undertake to provide for the maintenance and fees of the two older sons while they are finishing their education – the eldest is in his second year and the second has but just begun….They are both good boys and hardworking boys and already stinting themselves in every way so as not to be a burden on their parents….So that they will not require much and $400. or $500 a year for both will see them easily through…and Lady T seemed to like it and not mind it from us.” Journal, 13 December 1894; See also Lord and Lady Aberdeen hosted a coming out party for Babe Thompson. Journal, 10 January 1896.

114 Waite, The Man from Halifax, 388.
colleague that he “was quite satisfied that there need be no fear of this kind.”

Moreover, it seems unlikely that either Lord or Lady Aberdeen would veer away from their own moral code, one that Gwyn has described as “earnestly moralistic Gladstonians” in order to conspire against one party in favour of another.

Political Influence

French is not alone in her assessment that Lady Aberdeen was the dominant personality, able to influence her compliant husband. Indeed, Bowering endorses the idea that the vice-reign was in charge and directed Aberdeen’s decisions. He concludes that the decision to choose Mackenzie Bowell was taken because “Lady Aberdeen was a feminist and she did not like the stories that she had heard about Charles Tupper and his extramarital affairs.” Further to his argument, Bowering describes Lord Aberdeen as a man who “spent much of his time skating and curling,” and to drive the point home he states that it was Lady Aberdeen who was the “real activist of the two.”

Gwyn, also describes the Governor General’s wife as “clearly the dominant partner.” In fact the inference that Lady Aberdeen guided her husband’s decisions is almost universal among historians.

115 Journal, 18 July 1895.
117 Bowering, Egotists and Autocrats, 117.
118 Gwyn, The Private Capital, 276.
119 Indeed, the Aberdeen marriage has been characterized frequently as a self-effacing man married to an aggressive domineering woman. Saywell has described Aberdeen as “not tough minded and even in his official duties leaned on his wife for support and direction.” Saywell, editor, The Canadian Journal of Lady Aberdeen, introduction. Saywell is not alone in perpetuating the idea that “Lord Aberdeen was known as much for his weakness and indecisiveness, as she was for her strength and leadership.” Douglas Featherling, editor, The Broadview Book of Canadian Anecdotes (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1988), 57. As Downie has shown, contemporary journalist Faith Fenton refers to Lady Aberdeen’s “obvious manipulation of her husband.” Jill Downie, Passionate Pen: The Life and Times of Faith Fenton (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1996), 185.
Overall, historians’ assessment of Lady Aberdeen as the dynamic force in her marriage is based upon contemporary nineteenth century descriptions that are generally critical of an assertive woman. For example, political culture and society columnist Amaryllis described what she seemed to interpret as the disconcerting inclination of Lady Aberdeen “pulling on his sleeve and offering suggestions” to her husband. In this instance, Amaryllis presents a picture of a domineering woman guiding her ineffectual husband. For further testimony that depicts Lady Aberdeen as a forceful woman, historians need only to look at the testimony of Sir Charles Tupper who complained bitterly that Lady Aberdeen was “an ambitious and meddlesome woman” who controlled a “weak and incapable governor.”

Ottawa civil servant Joseph Pope described in his memoirs an incident related to him by Mr. J.M. Courtney, the Deputy Minister of Finance that highlights the vitriolic attitude by many toward Lady Aberdeen’s perceived overstepping of appropriate gender boundaries. As Pope describes the incident, Mr. Courtney was invited to a dinner party at Rideau Hall and during the course of the evening, Lady Aberdeen backed (emphasis mine) Mr. Courtney into the Governor General’s private office, showed him the treasury minutes, passed at a recent meeting of the Cabinet, and asked him whether he thought they were such as His Excellency could properly be asked to sign. Mr. Courtney, …furious at being made the recipient of this confidence, giving the Lady to understand that in the first place she should never have seen those minutes, and secondly, that if Lord Aberdeen had any doubts as to the propriety of the recommendations they contained, his proper course was to consult his Prime Minister.

Lowell Clark, in his detailed account of The Conservative Party in the 1890s, stresses that Lady Aberdeen should not have been privy to nor been “permitted to discuss such matters”

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120 Amaryllis, “Society at the Capital” *Saturday Night*

121 French, *Ishbel*, 177.


However, rather than perceiving Lady Aberdeen as the dominant, overbearing force in her marriage, some historians have taken the position that the Aberdeen marriage was a companionate relationship. While Schull describes Lord Aberdeen as a man who “sometimes looked in public as if he expected to be hit with a brick,” he veers away from the image of a man who is a milksop and instead describes him as “a handsome and extravagantly wealthy Scot who supported his wife in everything.” Moreover, to underscore the companionate nature of their relationship Schull contends that rather than a domineering woman leading an acquiescent man, “the two worked together as a team.”

Thompson’s biographer P.B. Waite also describes Lord and Lady Aberdeen as a “remarkable pair.” His assessment of their relationship as complementary falls somewhere between the overriding view of most historians that Lady Aberdeen was the more aggressive of the two and Schull’s assertion of a more unified team. While Waite describes Lady Aberdeen as the more vigorous, intense and confident of the pair, he is clear that Aberdeen was gentle and retiring but intelligent, tolerant and understanding, suggesting that instead of one dominating the other their personalities complemented each other.125

Why was it that so many of her contemporaries and the majority of historians examining the period viewed Lady Aberdeen as domineering? How much influence did she have over her husband, especially regarding political influence? The answer lies within the two competing concepts of marriage at the close of the nineteenth century: the companionate marriage and the patriarchal standard. The concept of a companionate marriage in which the idea developed that husband and wife enjoyed a loving friendship was based upon shared values. This is where the criticism of Lady Aberdeen originates. It seemed too apparent to many people that here was a woman not fitting into the hegemonic sexual paradigm. As the Montreal Daily Witness noted, “Lady Aberdeen has much more prominence than the average wife of a Governor General, and in fact, much more is
written about her than His Lordship.” Since she did not appear to follow where Aberdeen led, many of her contemporaries were critical of what they perceived to be her leadership role. While Victorians increasingly celebrated the ideal of a companionate marriage, egalitarian sex roles were not the intended result. On the whole, womanly submission continued to be a fundamental aspect of late Victorian married life, and well into the twentieth century, this same ideology is presented as a legitimate critique of Ishbel Aberdeen. For example, Saywell, French, Gwyn and Bowering have based their critical assessment of her behaviour on a late nineteenth century sexual paradigm of appropriate feminine behaviour. Thus, the complicating factor in their analysis of Lady Aberdeen’s supportive role to the Governor General is the perception that she was overstepping her bounds and pulling the strings behind the scenes.

However, as Peterson has shown, Lady Aberdeen’s role as assistant, partner and colleague was not that unusual. Although Mr. Courtney, the Deputy Minister of Finance took umbrage with what he perceived to be inappropriate behaviour to her gendered position, it is clear that Lord Aberdeen encouraged her to take on an active role in his work. As she reported in her Journal, her husband made a “special request” that she remain as a witness while he spoke with Bowell. She recorded that Aberdeen “was glad under the circumstances to have a witness.” Additionally, it is clear that others recognized her position as assistant to her husband. When, for example, it became increasingly apparent that Bowell’s leadership was unraveling, Mr. McNeil, a Conservative Member of Parliament, sent a message to Lady Aberdeen requesting a meeting to inform her that “there were some in the party who were greatly afraid of a Tupper regime,” and they “urged that another should be sent for who could begin with clean hands.” McNeil and possibly other Conservative members, whom he represented, viewed Lady Aberdeen as possessing the Governor General’s ear and thus better able to present the case in their favour. Moreover, during the mounting leadership

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127 Peterson, Family, Love and Work, 166.
129 Journal, 7 January 1896.
crisis in the Conservative party, Sir Frank Smith made the trek to Rideau Hall especially to talk over the situation with the Governor General’s wife. Clearly these men considered Lady Aberdeen as a liaison who would represent their concerns to the Governor General as they expressed them to her.

Lady Aberdeen also served as assistant to her husband when she took on the role as intermediary for the Governor General, whose actions were limited on constitutional grounds. During the summer of 1895, in order to ascertain political information without overstepping constitutional limitations on his role, the Governor General enlisted his wife to ask Tupper’s son and Conservative cabinet minister, Sir Charles H. Tupper, to keep her informed by writing to her “as a friend [sic] so that there might be no impropriety about seeming to pass by the Premier.” It was for the same reason of constitutional limitations on the Governor General that Lady Aberdeen sat in the House. She was there as the eyes and ears of her husband. As she wrote in her *Journal*: “This going to the House may be a real help in the future both for H.E. and myself. He cannot come in any fashion.” These incidents highlight Lady Aberdeen’s role as assistant, partner and colleague in the work of the Governor General, and each provided an opportunity by contemporaries and historians to misinterpret her role and thus, to view her as the dominant force in her marriage. Although she was a dynamic and forceful personality, rather than the domineering partner Lady Aberdeen was generally the proper Victorian wife, dutiful and submissive to her husband’s authority.

Here we can see the infinite complexities in the nuanced process of social change, how old forms take on new patterns, and the ways that change and continuity are interrelated and encapsulated in the lived experience of Lady Aberdeen. As stated earlier, Gwyn

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130 As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her *Journal*, “Sir Frank Smith came to see me and talked over the whole situation…” *Journal*, 12 January 12 1896.

131 “As HE cannot do anything in the matter, it was decided that it would be well for me to say a word to Sir Charles (H) Tupper whom we think we can trust & who is clearly the man of the future in the Conservative Party.” *Journal*, 18 July 1895.

132 *Journal*, 17 July 1895.
describes Lady Aberdeen as “the most remarkable new woman of them all.”

French depicts Lady Aberdeen as quintessentially a leader whose “natural element was the vigorous adrenalin rousing battle of reform, where she stood armed with conviction and faith in a just cause.” Both interpretations fail to address how, through her actions, Lady Aberdeen both resisted and supported patriarchy. Despite the prevailing image of the Governor General’s wife as a woman with an indomitable personality, the companionate nature of the Aberdeen marriage remained essentially a patriarchal relationship, in which she was the traditionally subordinate partner. Before their arrival in Canada, Aberdeen accepted the dangerous assignment as Lord Lieutenant to Ireland without first consulting with his wife. The potential for violence in Ireland against representatives of the British Crown was a serious concern. Four years earlier, their friend Lord Frederick Cavendish, Chief Secretary to Ireland and nephew by marriage to Prime Minister Gladstone, had been murdered by Irish nationalists. Nevertheless, Aberdeen made the decision alone irrespective of his wife’s desires. In despair, Lady Aberdeen wrote to her friend Henry Drummond complaining bitterly. “Don’t you think,” she said, “that I should be very offended at not being consulted, I who have registered a solemn vow never to set foot in Ireland? Plunging into the unknown, it all seems dark ahead and I just feel overwhelmed.” All the same, she dutifully followed. Yet again, when Aberdeen accepted the appointment as Governor General to Canada, it was not

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135 As Noonan has observed, “Lord Aberdeen spent 6 months as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1886 and supported the Home Rule Bill. Its defeat along with the defeat of Gladstone’s government that year ended the Aberdeens’ term of office in Ireland.” James Noonan, *Canada’s Governors General At Play: Culture and Rideau Hall from Monck to Grey, with an Afterword on Their Successors, Connaught and leBlanc* (Ottawa: Borealis, 2002), 199; Margaret Keane, *Ishbel: Lady Aberdeen in Ireland* (Newtonwards: Colourpoint, 1999), 30-31.


137 In his memoirs, Aberdeen explained his reason for embracing the onerous appointment: “Very well” he said, “I accept and I’ll tell you Sir why I do so with some confidence; it is because of the help I shall get from Lady Aberdeen.” Aberdeen and Temair, *We Twa*, Volume 2, 248.

138 French, *Ishbel*, 76.
Lady Aberdeen’s decision.\textsuperscript{139} Once more, she dutifully followed. Why would ‘the most remarkable of new women’ accept a subordinate role as the dutiful wife?

Undeniably, Lady Aberdeen pushed the gender boundaries but she was cautious also not to push too far beyond the “safety of protected subordination,” understanding that political and social impotence rested in “vulnerable freedom.”\textsuperscript{140} Instead, she consistently emphasized women’s nurturing qualities as their natural role and the source of their greatest influence. While her public discourse was often about the “enlargement of the sphere of women,” she invariably put it into a maternal feminist context of femininity and domesticity under the standard of homemaking as nation building.\textsuperscript{141} For example, Lady Aberdeen located the “vast power” of women under the banner of service. Upholding the feminine nurturing qualities in the value of service would, she said, “work a revolution” in the “home and in society” and in this way empower women.\textsuperscript{142} Notwithstanding her efforts to locate women’s influence within a paradigm of feminine service, the criticism leveled at Lady Aberdeen was based upon the frequently perceived lack of femininity in a dynamic woman who displayed a tendency to take action. As Saywell explains, it was simply a case that “at times she was too zealous, too overbearing, too critical” and thus

\textsuperscript{139} As French has argued, “Lady Aberdeen accepted the post with downcast resentment…She had been interested in Canada and Canadian politics, particularly vis a vis the United States. But it was a terribly Tory place. The Conservatives were in power- Macdonald had just died - and it seemed that everyone of wealth and position was a Tory. And she was not sure that there would be anything for her to do in Canada…She saw the Canadians overall as a tediously parochial population, far too close on sentiment to their republican neighbors, suspicious of lords and ladies lacking Celtic charm…She proceeded to Canada reluctantly.” French, \textit{Ishbel}, 7.

\textsuperscript{140} As Bennett has suggested determined, “We must examine the patriarchal ideologies and realities that have assured women that there is safety in protected subordination and danger in vulnerable freedom.” Judith M. Bennett, \textit{History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2006), 59.

\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Toronto Mail} 28 October 1893, NAC Aberdeen papers, Volume 14.

\textsuperscript{142} Lady Aberdeen’s speech to the inaugural session of the May Court Club, Edwina von Baeyer, \textit{The May Court Club: One Hundred Years of Community Service} (Ottawa: May Court Club, 1999), 10-11; See also Lady Aberdeen’s article in the \textit{Ottawa Journal}. “What Girls May Do. SERVICE – It is very evident that women will be called on to take part in the solution…by yielding ourselves to the working of the principle which recognized service as the solution to the problems of life.” \textit{Ottawa Journal} 13 April 1895, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.
perceived by some as stepping beyond a woman’s subordinate role. Gwyn goes so far as to describe Lady Aberdeen as “bossy, meddlesome and domineering.” The succeeding Governor General, Lord Minto, was expressing his personal opinion and the view of many when he said, “it seems to me entirely out of place that women should speak as they did here for many hours on public platforms and still more out of place that the wife of the Governor General should do so.” As a correspondent writing for the Toronto Saturday News argued, “if Lady Aberdeen were not the clever woman that she is, able to take a hand in many affairs of the public nature, no objection of this kind would probably have been offered.”

Lady Aberdeen straddled two worlds. She was both her husband’s colleague and subordinate wife. In doing so, she was left open to criticism from a more traditional way of thinking of appropriate gender roles. However, while numerous historians and contemporary political commentators have accused Lady Aberdeen of partisan maneuvering to influence her husband to choose a “lame duck” Prime Minister in order to cripple the Conservative Party and clear the way for a Laurier Liberal government, this was not the case. Many misinterpreted the degree of influence that she possessed. Her role was to assist not to direct the Governor General. As we have seen, various political men tried to make their case to the Governor General through his wife, believing perhaps that their position would be stronger if presented by Lady Aberdeen on their behalf. Laurier also seems to have overestimated Lady Aberdeen’s influence with her husband. Evidently, he assumed there to be the opportunity through her to further his own political

143 Saywell, *The Canadian Journal of Lady Aberdeen*, xxvi; See also Lord Minto’s letter to his brother: “The whole country seems to have given a sigh of intense relief [at Aberdeens’ departure]...She has set a great many people by the ears. She went in for everything she could think of and invented other things to go in for...I am really sorry for all that has occurred here. We are rather nervous lest she should reappear to superintend her Women’s Councils.” Paul Stevens and John T. Saywell, editors, *Lord Minto’s Canadian Papers: A Selection of the Public and Private Papers of the Fourth Earl of Minto, 1898-1904* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1981), 23-4.


146 *Toronto Saturday News*, 1 February 1896 NAC Aberdeen papers, volume 27.
agenda. Laurier would use all of his legendary captivating charm to enlist Lady Aberdeen’s assistance to achieve his ambition to become Prime Minister.

Rather than Lady Aberdeen directing her husband’s choice of Mackenzie Bowell to succeed Thompson in order to guarantee an easy Liberal victory in the upcoming election, it was actually Laurier who tried to manipulate Lady Aberdeen in his mistaken belief that through her he could influence the Governor General. With Thompson gone, Laurier saw an opportunity to seize power. Thus, by March of 1895, (just three months after Bowell had taken over the leadership of the governing party) Laurier revealed his hankering for power. In a letter to Liberal Party Treasurer, Charles Hyman, Laurier complained that, “the postponement of elections has been a very severe disappointment to me.”

Nevertheless, despite his intentions, his methods of gaining Lady Aberdeen’s assistance were understated enough that she had no sense of his ambition. She records in her Journal her naïve impression that, “he does not grasp at power.” He would surreptitiously lead the wife of the Governor General so effectively that many historians conclude mistakenly that it had been her plan from the start to create the scenario that would effectively lead to a Laurier government. Certainly Lady Aberdeen was impressed with Laurier from their first dinner meeting at Government House in May 1894. She recorded in her Journal her impression of him as a “brilliant man and very agreeable socially.” He was careful at that first meeting to mention that he was “a great admirer of the Scots” and Mr. Gladstone. Both statements seem calculated to win her approval, especially since her admiration of Gladstone was evident with a picture of him displayed in every room of Rideau Hall. We can see from this initial meeting that Laurier was the type of man with an “infallible knack of adjusting his makeup… to any occasion from which he could extract profitable publicity.”

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147 Schull, Laurier, 301: citing Laurier’s letter to Hyman, March 1895.


149 Journal, 19 May 1894.


151 Augustus Bridle, Masks of Ottawa (Toronto: Macmillan, 1921), 42.
death that Laurier “called or dined rather more frequently at Government House.”

From then on, he would martial all of his charm in his attempt to build a politically advantageous relationship with the Governor General’s wife.

Despite Lady Aberdeen’s impression that Laurier was not one to “grasp at power,” contemporary observers held a different opinion. He was a man “ambitious” for power but too proud to “stoop.”

From his front row seat as a political journalist and senior editor of the Liberal organ the Toronto Globe (1890-1902), John Willison describes Laurier as a man of “ruthless will.” However, Laurier’s ambition was contained within an unpretentious charismatic allure. Bowering describes Laurier as the antithesis of a man “lurching across the stage, throttling his foe. He had a certain hauteur.”

Sir George W. Ross, Liberal Premier of Ontario (1899-1905), described Laurier’s magnetic personality as a “mesmerist or a shepherd” who could “lead his flock along the pathway he desired them to take.”

Those who knew him portray Wilfrid Laurier as a “human solar system in which many kinds of people wanted to gravitate.” He was elegant and gracious, and to women he had a “fatal gift” so that the “women in Ottawa” reportedly made “delirious conversation” about his charming and chivalrous manner.

Heather Robertson also asserts that he was “fatally attractive to women, knew it and used it.” In the same vein, political and social columnist for the Toronto Empire, Faith Fenton, admitted, “I like Mr. Laurier, every woman does.”

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152 Schull, Laurier, 301.


155 Bowering, Egotists and Autocrats, 132.

156 Ross, Getting into Parliament, 166. Ross was a former Liberal Member of Parliament, 1872-1883 and later Liberal Premier of Ontario, 1899-1905

157 Bridle, Masks, 346.

158 As Bridle has described Laurier, “He was an imperial matinee idol in London.” Bridle, Masks, 346

159 Robertson, More than a Rose, 121.
succeeding Aberdeen recalled years later her impression of Laurier in her memoirs. She described him as “a French Canadian of exceptional charm.” Lady Aberdeen was no more immune to his charm than other women.

During the intervening months between Thompson’s death in December 1894 and the elections in the summer of 1896, Laurier focused his allure on the vicereine. When Thompson died, Lady Aberdeen recognized the possibility of a Liberal government but she questioned whether Laurier was capable of taking over the reigns of parliament. He set about to convince her and through her, the Governor General, that “he could form his cabinet in three days” and was “very confident” of winning the upcoming election “if he is in power at the dissolution” of parliament. His efforts to win her support were notable. He dropped by for breakfast and “a pleasant talk about things in general” He enlisted the aid of Emily McCausland Cummings, a journalist for the Toronto Globe and corresponding secretary of the National Council of Women of Canada. Her function was to act as a go-between to make Laurier’s position known to Lady Aberdeen, so that he could better advocate his own political agenda. Here again historians differ on the role played by Lady Aberdeen in the recruitment of Mrs. Cummings. French views Lady Aberdeen as the instigator, claiming that, “it was Ishbel’s idea to use Mrs. Cummings as the go-between.” Conversely, Gwyn contends that Laurier and Lady Aberdeen conspired together to select Mrs. Cummings as their messenger. However, in her

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160 Downie, A Passionate Pen, 204.


162 Lady Aberdeen considered that Sir John Thompson’s unexpected death had provided “the greatness of the opportunity” for a Liberal government but added, “if only Laurier proves to be enough.” Journal, 16 December 1894.

163 Journal, 11 January 1896.

164 Journal, 18 July 1895.

165 As Morgan has described her, “Emily McCausland Cummings was the corresponding secretary for the NCWC, 1894-1910 and the first woman in Canada to receive an honorary DCL from King’s College, Windsor in 1910.” Henry Morgan, Canadian Men and Women (Toronto: Briggs, 1912)

166 French, Ishbel, 200.
Journal Lady Aberdeen revealed that it was Laurier who chose Mrs. Cummings as his messenger, apparently without first consulting her.\textsuperscript{168} Indeed, as Lady Aberdeen wrote she was lunching at the Russell House, a fashionable hotel across from the Parliament buildings and the sessional residence for numerous politicians of both parties, when Mrs. Cummings approached her and said “Mr. Laurier had sent her to explain what he intended to do.”\textsuperscript{169} He chose her because her position in the NCWC allowed her to freely communicate with Lady Aberdeen without arousing suspicion as to his purpose. Through Mrs. Cummings, Laurier pressed his case again for the Governor General to send for him “despite the fact of the Conservative majority in the House.” Again, through Mrs. Cummings to Lady Aberdeen, he put “forward his reasons and also precedents for such action on the part of H.E.” Later that same evening Laurier sent Mrs. Cummings back to Government House to reiterate his position and to “give further assurances as to their belief in success at the polls.”\textsuperscript{170} The following morning, Mrs. Cummings arrived again at Rideau Hall to press the case and to emphasize once more that, “the Liberals are confident of sweeping the country if they can come into power now.”\textsuperscript{171} Three days later, although not one to participate in winter sports, Laurier attended a skating party at Government House and took the opportunity to discuss “the whole matter over and what would be the course to take if he did come in.”\textsuperscript{172} Unwilling to wait for an election to be called, Laurier wanted the Governor General to give him the opportunity to form the government immediately, and so he continued to court Lady Aberdeen’s support. Previously, while Thompson was Prime Minister Laurier had shown no interest in addressing Lady Aberdeen’s major project, the NCWC, and had bowed out at the last

\textsuperscript{167} As Gwyn has suggested, “as a third party go-between they selected Emily McCausland Cummings.” Gwyn, \textit{The Private Capital}, 280.

\textsuperscript{168} As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her \textit{Journal} “Mrs. Cummings whom M. Laurier chose as his messenger” suggests that it was Laurier’s decision alone to enlist Mrs. Cummings as the go between. \textit{Journal}, 7 January 1896.

\textsuperscript{169} \textit{Journal}, 7 January 1896

\textsuperscript{170} “I had another visitor twice here today – Mrs. Cummings.” \textit{Journal}, 7 January 1896.

\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Journal}, 8 January 1896.

\textsuperscript{172} \textit{Journal}, 11 January 1896.
minute. But now seeing the opportunity to further win her support, he made himself available to speak to the women of the Council.\footnote{173}

Nevertheless, despite Laurier’s intense efforts to convince the Governor General through Lady Aberdeen to send for him to form a government before the 1896 election, Lord Aberdeen continued to support the Bowell administration and repeatedly refused to accept his resignation in the face of what amounted to a mutiny of seven Conservative Cabinet members.\footnote{174} Here again historians puzzle over the reason. Was it a deliberate ploy on the part of the Governor General to undermine the Conservative party? Or was Lord Aberdeen simply acting in “strict neutrality” as nineteenth-century Canadian constitutional expert Alpheus Todd insisted?\footnote{175} Ramsay Cook and Real Belanger contend that Aberdeen repeatedly discouraged Bowell’s resignation because of “his dislike of calling in Tupper as Prime Minister.”\footnote{176} Certainly Tupper’s behaviour supports Willison’s description of the man as “unscrupulous”.\footnote{177} In this instance, Tupper’s

\footnote{173 Laurier was supposed to address the NCWC however, Lady Aberdeen reported in her Journal: “M. Laurier failed us at the last minute.” Journal, 14 April 1894. Later on as Laurier sought Lady Aberdeen’s assistance, she recorded in her Journal that “Both Mr. Laurier and Mr. Foster spoke very nicely for us …giving speeches that will be useful but not touching that of Sir John Thompson two years ago.” Journal, 3 February 1896.}

\footnote{174 Lady Aberdeen summarized the political crisis in her Journal: “Yesterday the storm burst over the political horizon …7 [sic] Ministers, namely Foster, Haggart, Tupper, Montague, Ives, Wood & Dickey – … The resigning Ministers apparently thought that Sir Mackenzie would resign at once, recommend Sir Charles as successor and thus the matter would end. But … we urged him to make every effort to get men to join him to keep his pledge of bringing in remedial legislation & [sic] putting it to the test - & [sic] not to throw the country into the hands of one who would doubtless deal with it only in such a way as would suit himself.” Journal, 5 January 1896. And again three days later, Lady Aberdeen recorded in her Journal: “Meanwhile Sir Mackenzie had been closeted with HE & [sic] had tendered him his resignation. ‘Put that back in your pocket please’ were the words with which this offer was met. And then this autocratic Governor General proceeded to explain that as the Speech from the Throne had not been answered that he thought that the head of the government who was responsible for it should be given all the time possible to reconstruct his government & [sic] carry through the policy outlined before resigning. The old gentleman quite plucked up courage again and left HE saying he was determined to do his best and that with this mandate his task would be much easier.” Journal, 8 January 1896.}

\footnote{175 Messamore, Canada’s Governors General, 25; As French has reported, Lord Aberdeen “was pleased with the prospect of going to Ottawa, and he assured the nervous Colonial Secretary, Lord Ripon that there would be ‘no whisper of complaint’ on partisan political grounds.” French, Ishbel, 7.}

\footnote{176 Cook and Bélanger, Canada’s Prime Ministers, 122.}

aggressive manner is apparent. He was ready to martial every effort to become leader of the Conservative Party. But at seventy-five years of age, Tupper’s time was running out. In order to achieve his goal, he aggressively attempted to negotiate Mackenzie Bowell’s resignation by offering him a prestigious sinecure, such as “the Lieutenant Governorship of Ontario or as High Commissioner to London.” However, the Governor General repeatedly frustrated Tupper’s ambition by encouraging Bowell to remain. Finally, without the support of his caucus, Bowell had no alternative but to agree to Tupper assuming the leadership of the party. It was a distasteful outcome for the Governor General and Lady Aberdeen. As Christopher Ondaatje and Donald Swainson observe, because of Bowell’s inability to hold together the various factions of the Conservative Party or to reach a satisfactory resolution regarding French language instruction in the Manitoba schools debacle, his “regime was an unmitigated disaster.” Pope bitterly lays responsibility for “the proximate cause of Sir Charles Tupper’s reverse at the polls in June 1896 primarily [on] the failure of the Bowell government” and in turn on Aberdeen for not calling Tupper in the first place. As Michael Bliss points out, by the time Tupper took over the damage to the party was unsalvageable: “Replacing him [Bowell] with old Tupper had been a bravura attempt to apply last minute polish to a deeply tarnished organization.” Thus, when Sir Charles Tupper finally took over as leader of the Party, he “was left with the job of presiding over a long political wake.” In the summer election of 1896, Laurier realized his ambition to become Prime Minister while the Conservative administration was soundly defeated and with it Tupper’s last opportunity to achieve the summit of his political career.

178 Journal, 5 January 1896.
179 As Lady Aberdeen recorded in her Journal, “we” urged him to remain. Journal, 6 January 1896.
180 Ondaatje and Swainson, The Prime Ministers of Canada, 59; See letter J.A. MacDonnell, to Sir Charles Tupper, 3 January 1896: “it is patent to everyone that the party is on the rocks.” Saunders, The Life and Letters of the Right Hon. Sir Charles Tupper, 192-3.
181 Pope, Public Servant, 108.
182 Bliss, Right Honourable Men, 39-40.
183 ibid.
Viewed from the vantage point of the lives of Lady Thompson and Lady Aberdeen, we can see how the political influence of these two women was tempered by formal and informal patriarchal structures that served to underpin sexual hierarchy. At the same time, separate spheres ideology encouraged and supported, gave and constrained political influence. By claiming allegiance to late Victorian gender identity, Lady Thompson and Lady Aberdeen were able to validate female agency while paying homage to sexual hierarchy. The lives of Ladies Thompson and Aberdeen provide a micro-history that illustrates how in this particular context gender boundaries were porous, depending upon the manner in which women approached and challenged those boundaries. The synergistic friendship between Lady Thompson and Lady Aberdeen enabled them to productively utilize late nineteenth century hegemonic concepts of womanhood to influence the political defeat of Sir Charles Tupper. All the same, in the final analysis, despite their contributions, it was Aberdeen alone who made the decision not to call in Sir Charles Tupper. A careful reading of Lady Aberdeen’s Journal provides no indication that she had any influence in the choosing of Thompson’s successor other than to suggest on behalf of Lady Thompson that Tupper not be considered. The final decision was always Aberdeen’s. Furthermore, while Laurier attempted to achieve power before an election was called by finessing Lady Aberdeen, his efforts were futile. The Governor General continued to support Bowell’s regime and repeatedly refused his resignation.\footnote{As Messamore has observed, “The Governor General’s role after 1849 became as Lord Aberdeen put it ‘one of ceaseless and watchful readiness to take part.’ The real difficulty of course lay in knowing when to take part.” Messamore, \textit{Canada’s Governors General}, 217.}

If Lady Aberdeen was able to dominate her compliant husband, if indeed she was the “Governess General” in all but name, then axiomatically she would have been able to persuade the Governor General to call Laurier who was prepared with reasons and precedents to justify the action. However, there is no evidence that she attempted to sway her husband on this point. Given her position, Lady Aberdeen, like the political wives in Jalland’s study “automatically had more inside knowledge of high politics” but she had “no role in political decision making even indirectly” and her “influence on political
issues was negligible.” In the final analysis, Ishbel Aberdeen was an assistant to her husband but she was not, as many have argued, the “Governess General” guiding an acquiescent husband.

Through the lived experiences of Ladies Thompson and Aberdeen, students of Canadian political history have a better understanding of the nuanced process of social change, and how late nineteenth century female agency was validated while at the same time sexual hierarchy was reinforced. Without a doubt, Annie Thompson was the architect of Thompson’s career but her political influence was limited to advising her husband solely on his career advancement. While Lady Thompson surreptitiously pushed gender boundaries, she was working from within a paradigm of domestic womanhood. Moreover, although Lady Aberdeen was a “model wife and mother” and repeatedly paid homage to separate spheres ideology nevertheless her public performance rankled the more conservative elements that continued to subscribe to a patriarchal discourse that placed women firmly within the domestic sphere.

\[185\] Jalland, Women, Marriage and Politics, 204.

\[186\] Utica Globe, 1 June 1895, NAC Aberdeen Papers, Volume 19.
Conclusion

In the autumn of 1898, Lady Aberdeen departed Canada confident that, under the aegis of her loyal friends, the social reforms she had set in motion would continue to improve the lives of less fortunate women. This work unpacks the importance of a mutually beneficial synergistic friendship as a force, which enabled these socially and politically elite women, who shared a separate but equal maternal feminist ideology that facilitated an expanding public female voice, to influence social reform. As Kathleen McCarthy argues, philanthropy is an act of power, and ultimately, through their philanthropic efforts the women in this study created a womanly woman-centric parallel power structure within Canadian politic culture.¹ Beverley Boutilier concludes in her examination of the creation of the VON that some women: “might have authority to influence but no real power to effect social reforms and challenge institutionalized male prerogative or authority.”² But how do we define power, if not by the ability to influence?

Boutilier’s work underscores the impact of the medical profession’s interference and obstructionist methods against the creation of the Victorian Order of Nurses. As Wendy Mitchinson reports “the Canadian medical profession was so aghast at the idea that they opposed the VON altogether.”³ However, not one to accept defeat, Lady Aberdeen, through a pragmatic combination of education and negotiation leading to compromise, successfully overcame opposition that had effectively stymied political support for her medical home help scheme.⁴


⁴ John Saywell has summarized Lady Aberdeen’s uphill battle to execute her plan. “In the face of such opposition neither the Liberals nor the opposition could endorse the proposed parliamentary grant …the project seemed certain to fail…(thus Lady A was advised to forgo any effort to establish the VON at that time.)” J.T. Saywell, editor, Canadian Journal of Lady Aberdeen (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1960), xxx.
Without a doubt, the systemic nature of gender inequality in late nineteenth century Canada shows, as Boutilier stresses, that “women’s actual power was circumscribed.”\(^5\) Nevertheless, in order to overcome this political liability, Lady Aberdeen pragmatically utilized the support of leading male authority to garner acceptance of her home help scheme. To view her actions as evidence of political impotence belies the efficacy of Lady Aberdeen’s methods. In the end, as a result of her persistent effort, the VON was established with government financial assistance, and proved to have a far-reaching and an unquestionably positive impact on the lives of women in urban and rural regions of the country, up to and including the present day.

As this thesis demonstrates, ‘circumscribed’ did not mean powerless. As Lady Aberdeen surmised, “in union there is strength.”\(^6\) Thus, the synergistic friendship of the four women in this study strengthened their collective as well as individual influence and ultimately created a notable measure of female political influence within a paradigm of male authority.

While Jalland determines that political wives were restricted to the role of confidantes without political influence, Elizabeth Kirkland draws a more nuanced conclusion from her examination of late nineteenth century elite women in Montreal arguing that they “shaped an identity that was both maternal and political” and thus “created opportunities to wield power and to see it multiplied.” Still, “when push came to shove elite ladies bent to male authority.”\(^7\) Moreover, Nancy Cott’s examination of the development of a women’s sphere in eighteenth and nineteenth century New England has shown that the concept of a woman’s domestic vocation “formed a source of strength and afforded supportive sisterly relations” among women of all social classes.\(^8\) My work adds a new

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\(^6\) Journal, 14 April 1894.


perspective to the discussion and it is this: while it must be conceded that these four women had little overt role in political decision making and found it necessary to acquiesce to male authority; nevertheless, through friendship they were able to create for themselves, “a “source of strength and identity” that afforded remarkable opportunities to wield political influence.⁹

Despite, for example, Lord Minto’s scathing criticism of Lady Aberdeen’s behaviour as vice-regal consort, he was obliged to support, or at least not to oppose, the continued operation of the various organizations that she had set in motion. As Lady Aberdeen reported in her journal, Lord and Lady Minto were “most kind and cordial to us, promising to do all they could for all the things we were interested in & [sic] especially the Victorian Order.” The incoming Governor General and his Lady had little choice but to comply since the NCWC and the VON enjoyed the political support of late Conservative Prime Minister Thompson and incumbent Liberal Prime Minister Laurier; thus, the political acceptance of these women’s organizations, initiated by Lady Aberdeen and supported by her friends, was firmly established.

In a perspicuous article published in the *Canadian Historical Review* (March 2008) Bruce Curtis points out that, “Canadian political historians have had little to say about the domestic domain in politics.”¹⁰ The purpose of the work presented here has been to address the place of the domestic domain in the political culture of late nineteenth century Canada. As Karen Dubinsky and Lynne Marks suggest, “many ‘political’ subjects could certainly benefit from a discourse analysis which focuses on issues of race, class and gender.”¹¹ From this perspective, the gendered analysis provided here of Canadian

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⁹ Cott has appraised the effects of the interpretation of the meaning of domesticity and ‘women’s sphere’ as a source of “strength and identity [that] afforded supportive sisterly relations” that is, close friendships among women, “women’s reliance on each other … which could develop into a political consciousness.” Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 194.


political culture that includes a discussion of race and class during the Aberdeen years articulates the emblematic role of elite women in political culture and the way it was tempered by formal and informal structures and ideologies that served to support and reinforce patriarchal and imperialist discourse.

To this end, the lives of the four women, who are the focal point of this work, demonstrate the ways that they internalized patriarchal hegemony as the natural law of gender hierarchy, and in turn highlight the continuing impact of patriarchy on the role of the political wife. It was by means of their shared “women’s consciousness, how they defined themselves and saw themselves in the world” that they were able to productively utilize evolving concepts of womanhood to marshal powerful male support and to have an effect on public policy. In the end, while they experienced a “circuitous and limited access to male power;” nevertheless, by developing a synergistic friendship and utilizing separate spheres discourse as a political strategy they were able to make an impact on late nineteenth century Canadian political culture.

Political wives played a critical part in the evolution of political culture and national identity during the years under examination. While separate spheres discourse defined their responsibility ostensibly as solely domestic, in fact, they held an iconic role of ideal womanhood that functioned in the public sphere as a symbol of Canadian national identity. In his examination of Upper Canada: The Formative Years, 1784-1841, Gerald M. Craig reports that, “the greatest weight in Lord Durham’s mind was the ‘raising up for the North American colonist some nationality of his own’ as the only way of resisting the all pervasive influence of the United States.” Less than thirty years after Confederation, the underpinning of a national Canadian identity remained at the forefront of political culture. Thus in the post-confederation period of the late nineteenth century, Canadian

12 ibid Dubinsky and Marks: women’s consciousness: “the way women see themselves and define themselves in the world.”, 210.


national identity was built at least in part on the emblematic role of political wives in public pageantry. This symbiotic connection between the domestic and public spheres served to buttress perceived male moral qualifications for political leadership and emphasized the advanced civilization of Canadian society. Although associated with the domestic sphere, the political wives in this study were public women in their supportive role, effectively blurring the ideological constructs of domestic and political life while serving as symbols of Canadian national identity.

As gatekeepers to capital society, the influence of political wives on political culture effectively delineated the social boundaries by evaluating and excluding newcomers seeking social and political standing. Through the social milieu of dinner party diplomacy, political wives played a key role by reinforcing and expanding their circle of socio-political connections that ostensibly served to advance political careers and facilitate political alliances. We have seen for example Lady Aberdeen’s apparent influence in bringing together arch conservative, anti-French dogmatist D’Alton McCarthy and Roman Catholic, French Canadian Liberal Sir Wilfrid Laurier. In this particular example the evidence supports the argument that social and political life were inextricably linked in late nineteenth century Canadian political culture.

The nucleus of this work is the intimate and enduring friendships that Lady Aberdeen developed with three political wives that crossed and united political, domestic and social boundaries, thus facilitating political friendships and political accommodation across partisan lines. 15 Grand balls organized by Lady Aberdeen, in which her friends participated as the principle organizers, were both social and political occasions supporting Canadian nationalism and British Imperialism and accentuating the social and political position of the participants. The personal narratives of Lady Aberdeen’s three closest friends in Ottawa underscore the meritocratic nature of late nineteenth century Canadian political culture. As wives of prominent politicians these women were largely

15 As Jalland has pointed out in Britain “throughout most of this period, …political differences did not prohibit social friendships.” The evidence suggests that this was also true in Canadian political culture during the same period. Pat Jalland, Women, Marriage and Politics: 1860-1914 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 90.
seen to represent genteel norms of late-Victorian womanhood, when their individual narratives indicate a more marginal socio-economic reality in their early lives. Lady Thompson’s business-like manner for instance suggests she is a woman who is well acquainted with financial struggle.

Lady Aberdeen’s closest friends in Canada included three women at the apex of political culture who self identified as genteel but in fact their personal narratives reveal that as young women they experienced a less than genteel pecuniary reality.

While Matilda Ridout Edgar’s family history as a member of the provincial elite is associated with the political influence of the Family Compact in early Upper Canada; by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the glory days of the Ridouts were past and Matilda’s widowed mother was reduced to providing for her large family, in what was a common economic strategy among working-class women, by operating a boarding house.16 However, to emphasize her superior social status, Mrs. Ridout’s paying residents were identified as ‘guests’ rather than boarders

Although quickly glossed over by Edgar biographers, McLean and Stamp, the death of Lady Edgar’s father Thomas Gibbs Ridout raises some suspicion of ignominy to the family name and social standing. As they observe: “Forced to resign” from his position “as a result of imprudent land and railway speculation…he died [conveniently perhaps] the day before his Bank affairs were to be examined.”17 After the collapse of her family’s economic and social position, Matilda Ridout Edgar worked throughout her life to re-

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16 As Wendy Mitchinson has pointed out “taking in laundry, sewing [and] boarders” was a common survival strategy among women “in an attempt to keep the family together and healthy.” Mitchinson, The Nature of Their Bodies, 52. Additionally, Bettina Bradbury’s examination of working class families in industrializing Montreal illustrates that many widows “turned space in their homes into money-making propositions by taking in boarders.” In Bettina Bradbury, Working Families: Age, Gender and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993), 198.

17 Maud J. McLean and Robert M. Stamp, My Dearest Wife: The Private and Public Lives of James David Edgar and Matilda Ridout Edgar (Toronto: Natural Heritage/Natural History Inc. 1998) 71. To further emphasize Ridout’s close connection with the Family Compact see Gerald M. Craig, who has argued that, “It is no exaggeration to say that the Bank of Upper Canada was a creature of the emerging Family Compact…it was a creature that the Compact could carefully protect and foster…” See also: Craig, Upper Canada: The Formative Years, 162.
establish and advance her elite status. Her father told her once that he did “not like second class anything;” apparently neither did she.\textsuperscript{18} James Edgar’s mother described her son’s fiancé, Matilda Ridout, as practical: “She looks upon the affair seriously & rationally & not with a foolish sentimental self facedness [sic] … she seems to know so much of the world and her own mind too, - and yet withal there is a serene & innocent look about her.”\textsuperscript{19} It was under a mantle of serene innocence and genteel womanhood that existed within Matilda Ridout Edgar a steely determination to restore, strengthen and advance her elite social status.\textsuperscript{20} Her historical writing centered upon her familial achievement, and in the process effectively authenticated her colonial aristocratic identity.\textsuperscript{21} In an act of aggressive self-promotion, Matilda Edgar sent unsolicited copies of her book on Upper Canada to British Prime Minister W. E. Gladstone and to the Queen. Her close personal friendship with the wife of the Governor General further strengthened her elite social position. Moreover, researching her husband’s apparently illustrious ancestor and his connection to the Stuart royal dynasty served to emphasize her husband’s claim to political stewardship, as well as further substantiating publicly her superior social standing (and that of her children) by birth and through marriage. Here once again, her friendship with Lady Aberdeen benefited Matilda by providing access to the Royal Library at Windsor Castle.\textsuperscript{22}

Lady Edgar’s intellectual accomplishment, social graces, and firm commitment to her place in the gendered world of Canadian political culture underscore her acceptance of maternal feminist ideology as the natural order of civilized society. Did she view herself as powerless? Not likely. Instead she constructed her life around an ideology of

\textsuperscript{18} McLean and Stamp, \textit{My Dearest Wife}, 69.

\textsuperscript{19} McLean and Stamp, \textit{My Dearest Wife} 73; PAO Edgar Papers.

\textsuperscript{20} Lady Edgar to Lady Aberdeen: “The Queen has been graciously pleased to accept my other book (\textit{Ten Years of Upper Canada}) and to have it placed in the Royal library.” 9 December 1900, PAO, Edgar Family Papers; McLean and Stamp, \textit{My Dearest Wife}, 244.

\textsuperscript{21} “It was not until the rising of Canadian nationalism of the mid-nineteenth century that a Loyalist Cult began to form.” See also 34: “Simcoe hoped to build up the aristocracy that was central to all of his plans for Upper Canada.” Craig, \textit{Upper Canada: The Formative Years},12.

\textsuperscript{22} Lady Edgar to Lady Aberdeen: “Perhaps now that you know I have applied [for access to the library at Windsor Castle] you will put in a word in my favour.” PAO, November 1899, Edgar Family Papers.
patriarchal bargains, an exchange of power according to gender roles, separate but equal, that served to accentuate her genteel social status.

There is no evidence that Lady Edgar supported woman suffrage or that she championed the increasingly popular ‘new woman’ discourse; yet, it was during her presidency of the NCWC that the Council publicly favoured and passed a resolution in support “of the enfranchisement of women.”

Here we can see the synergistic or mutually beneficial friendship of these two women in action. Lady Aberdeen supported woman suffrage but considered the issue too controversial to be accepted by a majority of Canadians. At the same time, Matilda Edgar’s life was the quintessence of maternal feminist ideology that claimed female dignity and agency within a patriarchal structure. Lady Aberdeen benefited from her synergistic friendship with Matilda Edgar in the confident knowledge that she was leaving the NCWC in the hands of a woman who would continue to steer the organization quietly along progressive lines in the same maternal feminist philosophical direction, and safely away from radical leadership that threatened the cooperative, ecumenical, non partisan design of the NCWC.

Elizabeth Kirkland makes an important point about the gendered nature of influence and power that is germane to this discussion. “What is apparent,” she writes, “is that elite women created strategies whereby they could position themselves at the center of influence and power…[by shaping] an identity that was both maternal and political.” It was a comfortable role for the ambitious Matilda Ridout Edgar, anxious to position herself securely among the social and political elite in what she would have considered most certainly her rightful place.

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24 As Lady Abeden recorded in her *Journal*, “I oculd take no part in their movement [woman suffrage] in Canadaas the subject though not touching party politics was of a controversial character.” *Journal*, 27 October 1893.

However, a political identity was not a comfortable role for Zoë Lafontaine Laurier. At least not before Lady Aberdeen befriended her. In contrast to Matilda Ridout’s experience of an affluent childhood that included summer holidays in Niagara-on-the-Lake, trips to England and the United States, and effectively reinforced her sense of her family’s elite social standing, Zoë LaFontaine’s formative years were spent in a respectable but precarious social and economic status that seems to have been the defining factor in her young life and would supercede any notion of herself at the “center of influence and power” as incomprehensible.

Despite Mme. Laurier’s position as the wife of the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, she was a social outsider among the Anglo-political elite in the Canadian capital. The pervasive anti French Roman Catholic bias in Ottawa government circles reflected old racial prejudices dating back at least to Lord Durham’s assessment of “a nationality more destitute of all that can invigorate and elevate a people…which is exhibited by the descendents of the French in Lower Canada, owing to their retaining their peculiar language and manners.”

Durham’s recommendation to form a legislative union was intended to provide English Canadians with a clear political majority, thus effectively forcing French Canadians to assimilate so that they “would abandon their vain hopes of nationality.” In response to Durham’s recommendation, Robert Baldwin Sullivan articulated the view of “the inner circles of the Family Compact” that were generally opposed to the union. However, he suggested that Montreal alone be annexed to Upper Canada thus leaving the remainder of the lower province in the hands of the French under an appointed government. “The government” he argued, “need seldom find itself in opposition to them. They may enjoy bad laws, bad roads, bad sleighs, bad food and ignorant legislation in peace and quietness, injuring no others and not being interfered with themselves.” Sullivan’s assessment of French Canadian culture in the 1840s reflected a discourse that continued to find substantial support in Anglo Ontario after

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27 ibid.

28 Craig, *Upper Canada: The Formative Years*, 266.
Confederation. Indeed, in the last decade of the nineteenth century “race and religion” continued to be a deeply divisive issue in Canada. Christopher Pennington’s investigation of the 1891 election reveals anti-French Roman Catholic sentiment in Ontario reached a point that, “the Liberals had actually worried for Laurier’s safety.”29 As Lynne Marks emphasizes in her assessment of late nineteenth century small town Ontario, “anti-Catholicism ran deep in Victorian Canada…most evident in 1880s and early 90s, a time of considerable Catholic-Protestant tension in the national political arena.”30 As we have seen, Mme. Laurier was aware of and sensitive to the continuing anti-French Roman Catholic bigotry.

Anglo imperialist chauvinism coupled with the emergence of motherhood as a social role would have set Mme. Laurier (childless and with an errant husband) apart from the center of political culture in the capital.31 After all, as Wendy Mitchinson has shown there were those who “tended to link inability to conceive to the fault of the woman rather than the man.”32 Zoë Laurier’s childless status at a time when women’s “destiny as a child bearer became paramount,” as well as her husband’s publicly questionable ‘friendship’ with the wife of his law partner must have deepened a sense of humiliation and undermined her sense of self worth.33 As Real Belanger points out, Laurier’s relationship with Emilie Lavergne was common knowledge: “Et tous se dit.”34 Fortunately, Mme. Laurier found a supportive and influential friend in the wife of the Governor General.


31 As Wendy Mitchinson has pointed out, “Motherhood as a social role had emerged.” Mitchinson, The Nature of Their Bodies, 153.

32 “As long as men were not impotent …they could impregnate a woman.” Mitchinson, The Nature of Their Bodies, 155.

33 Mitchinson, The Nature of Their Bodies, 81.

Lady Aberdeen proved to be her political mentor. Even before Wilfrid Laurier became Prime Minister, Lady Aberdeen was the catalyst that increased substantially Zoë Laurier’s active involvement in elite society and political culture at the capital. It was a synergistic friendship that would benefit both women. Zoë Laurier gained knowledge from Lady Aberdeen’s example of how to employ mediated access to political power as a means to achieve patronage. Moreover, she learned to use her social and political influence as the wife of the Prime Minister to appeal to powerful men to assist in her various philanthropic causes. In turn, Lady Aberdeen benefited from her association with Mme. Laurier by recruiting her as vice-president, and thus, providing a leading Roman Catholic presence to underscore the ecumenical character and to encourage further Roman Catholic membership in the National Council of Women of Canada, and the Victorian Order of Nurses. Moreover, after Lady Aberdeen departed Canada, at the close of her husband’s abbreviated term as Governor General, Lady Laurier kept her informed with political news from Canada.

Nancy F. Cott points to the “doctrine of women’s sphere” that “articulated a social power based on their special female qualities.” Maternal feminism and separate spheres were complimentary discourses that made an impact on Canadian political culture. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the actions of Lady Annie Thompson. Apparently content to remain in the domestic sphere, Annie Affleck Thompson was an indomitable force guiding John Thompson’s political career. Her friendship with Lady Aberdeen made it possible for Annie Thompson to ensure that her late husband’s wishes, as she perceived them, were fulfilled and to direct the befuddled Lord Aberdeen as to how to proceed in dealing with Tupper’s designs on the leadership of the Conservative party. In turn, Lady Aberdeen benefited from Lady Thompson’s Roman Catholic presence in the NCWC that further emphasized the ecumenical framework of the NCWC.

Finally, while Lady Aberdeen had no direct authority in political decision-making, she did possess the authority to influence social reform through political culture. She clearly understood where the limits of her influence lay; witness for example her determination

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35 Cott, Bonds of Womanhood, 200.
to skirt the issue of woman suffrage, recognizing that it was simply too controversial an issue to receive popular support. Clearly, Lady Aberdeen was a pragmatist who recognized the effectiveness of what Smith Rosenberg has termed a “highly integrated women’s network” and utilized existing social and political paradigms to achieve her goals of social reforms.\(^{36}\)

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