CHAPTER SIX

"THE GRIM FACT OF SISTERHOOD": FEMALE COLLECTIVITY IN THE WORKS OF AGNES MAULE MACAR, NELLIE L. McCLUNG, AND MABEL BURKHOLDER

KATJA THIEME

Canadian feminism at the turn of the century was part of a complex network of ideas for social reform. Female writers played a growing role in imagining the composition, workings, and future directions of Canadian society. Differing notions of woman and women saturated the writings on social reforms and women's rights, and a stream of newspaper and magazine articles attempted to define the true woman, a Canadian woman, the working girl, or the girl of the period. The term woman could express a notion of essential womanhood, mark practical political manoeuvres, convey class and racial biases, or be used to refer to a desire for equality with men. Women as a group were, to use Denise Riley's famous phrase, a very "volatile collectivity" in which "female persons can be very differently positioned" (2). Within this volatility, however, we can posit a general direction: feminists were interested in rhetorically producing a collectivity that buttressed arguments for women's social and political participation. In this process, the negotiation of class relations among women was of particular importance in giving early feminism weight as a political movement. Often Canadian writers who took a feminist perspective—in novels, short stories, magazine articles, and newspapers' women's pages—came to an awareness of their privileged position when they envisaged the formation of a female sisterhood. In their fiction, Agnes Maule Machar, Nellie L. McClung, and Mabel Burkholder created female protagonists who pledged to apply their own privilege for the benefit of other women and at the same time used it to uphold and secure their class status. Through these protagonists, Machar, McClung, and Burkholder demonstrate how central considerations of class are to their conceptions of gender. Feminist writing at the turn-of-the-century was used as a way of renegotiating female roles within a patriarchal society, a way of writing new roles for women by shifting the constituent parts of the social texture that circumscribed women's subject positions. While the gendered dimension of this process offers itself most apparently to an analysis of early feminism, the resignification of women's roles was even more concerned with negotiating questions of class. This paper will take a closer look at fictional accounts in order to study how the desire for improving women's status operated through class rather than gender.

Attempts at resignifying women's roles within turn-of-the-century feminism were often carried out so tentatively that in hindsight we tend to think of them as conservative. In Canadian scholarship this conservatism is frequently critiqued in research on maternal feminism—the kind of feminism which insists that it is women's essential femininity and traditional roles as mothers and wives that qualify them to participate in current debates and public politics. Wayne Roberts' "The New Woman and Maternal Feminism" (1979) provides an analysis that lays the groundwork for later work on Canadian maternal feminism's racial and class biases. Roberts describes a trajectory similar to that which had been popularized earlier in American suffrage studies by Aileen Krader (1965): while North American suffragists started out with thorough and far-reaching ideas on women's rights (a natural rights feminism), their goals, unfortunately, were later diminished by political calculations (turning into a feminism of expediency). Roberts says that in Canada the "vigour and experimentation identified with the new woman was absorbed into campaigns for uplift reform" (17). Governed by a belief in a superior female morality, "the movement for women's suffrage lost its connection with women's rights and needs" (Roberts 23). Roberts uses the claim that concern for women's rights and needs was abandoned as a measurement for the effectiveness of turn-of-the-century feminism. His disappointment with this turn away from equal rights speaks to the goals and self-understanding of a later feminism. Australian suffrage scholar Patricia Grimshaw (1994) cautions that our criticism of early feminism is "influenced by the conviction that women had really gained very little from political rights," and that if feminists had been "more radical, and more enlightened," then women today would have a "far more satisfactory, and sexually egalitarian, future" (31). In a Canadian context, Janice Fiamengo (2005) points out that the feminist criticism of the last thirty years has devoted considerable energy to the project of "assessing early Canadian women writers against an evolving ideal of subversion,
resistance, and liberation,” and that such criticism has become an “arena where the political credentials of both scholar and subject are put forward for scrutiny and judgement” (“Baptized” 277). She does not want to make our political judgment the guiding principle, and instead wishes us to “pay more attention to the writer’s context than to our own” (278). Grimshaw’s and Fiamengo’s observations encourage us to turn away from questions of feminist effectiveness in favour of a more nuanced understanding of what it meant to be a feminist at a historical moment different from ours.

The criticism that we now bring to early feminism is a criticism of how feminists like Nellie McClung and Emily Murphy arranged themselves within the political field of their time. As we investigate the way in which a collective notion of women or woman was configured rhetorically in the name of a political project, we must also come to view expressions of maternal feminism as parts of rhetorical processes. In her analysis of how varied and ambivalent Nellie McClung’s feminism (and racism) was, Fiamengo (2002) argues the we should not assume maternal discourse to be a coherent and singular discourse, and instead recognize “that it could mean different things and be put to vastly different rhetorical uses in different contexts” (“Legacy” 158). To some degree our discomfort with maternal feminism is a reaction precisely to the way in which it was so very responsive to its rhetorical situation—because this responsiveness spells out feminists’ diverse involvement in the debates of their time, and thus their alignment with what are now very controversial issues.

Several recent research projects have expressed uneasiness with the way in which early Canadian feminism was aligned with other political projects. For instance, Mariana Valverde (1992) argues for understanding the racism and racist theories of Canadian feminists not as an aberration but as an integral part of early feminism. In her book on Settler Feminism and Race Making in Canada, Jennifer Henderson (2003) demonstrates how deeply white women were involved in racial and social control of the settler colony particularly as they celebrated the freedom which they found there. In “Feminist ‘Memory Work’ and the Production of REAL Womanhood,” Tracy Kulba (2003) explores what the legacies of first-wave feminism mean for the present by drawing out the memory work produced by REAL Women of Canada—a socially conservative lobby group, REAL standing for “Realistic, Equal, Active, for Life”—when they promoted the statues of the Famous Five in the 1990s. Most recently, Cecily Devereux (2005) thoroughly situates the writings of Nellie McClung within a discourse of eugenic feminism and suggests that eugenics was a movement led largely by feminists, that first-wave feminism “was tainted and undermined by its involvement in the full spectrum of eugenic ideas” (16).

Analyses such as these demonstrate some of the ways in which women and women’s rights as topics of turn-of-the-century feminism were at the same time produced and restrained by the structures of discourse through which feminists sought emancipation. The writing of gender as a means of fostering women’s emancipation (in this case, the writing of novels and short stories which focused on reform-minded female characters) emerged from within these discursive constraints, from within the discursive fields of social reform, eugenics, and settler colonialism (political discourses which now mark nineteenth-century feminism as different from ours), and also from within the ubiquitous constraints of class. My argument proceeds not from a critique of the Anglo-Saxon and middle-class centeredness of early Canadian feminism, but from the assumption that attempts to improve women’s social and political status cannot but operate through existent constraints, including those of class. When writers like Machar, McClung, and Burkholder imagined a politically motivated female collectivity it was particularly structures of class which dominated the re-negotiation of female roles—to the degree that we can think of the turn-of-the-century writing of gender as another way of articulating class identity. On the one hand, class underwrote gestures of division—for instance, as my example of Lady Gay will show, in the way in which some women writers set themselves apart from what was termed the militancy of the English suffragettes, separating political activists from the genteel class and the status of the lady. On the other hand, as Machar’s and Burkholder’s novels attest, class consciousness also motivated cautious attempts at inclusion and a tentative sense of solidarity across class boundaries—for instance when middle-class reformers attempted to broaden the base of women which they hoped to represent.

**Writing Class as Gender**

In her study of nineteenth-century commonplace writing (including scrapbooks, family histories, letters, diaries, social advice, affidavits, travel notes, and recipes), rhetorical scholar Susan Miller (1998) coins the term “the class on gender”: gender boundaries obscure class prejudice regardless of whether these boundaries are assumed to be functional or essential. She points to the conduct book tradition as an authoritative source for prescriptions of how males and females should fit themselves into the ways of maintaining their relative class positions. Being a lady signifies femininity in relation to lower-class culture (be it feminine or masculine) more so than it signifies femininity in relation to masculinity.
Miller says that the writing of gender—that is, when men or women take up gendered positions in their writing—"is a literate diversion that symbolically enacts entitlement" (149). Commonplace writing organizes gender in such a way as to fund the exchange of another cultural property, "discursive assurances of class superiority" (149). In turn we might suggest that the writing of gender is occasioned particularly when the stability of class status is challenged. When writers bring gender into play, suggests Miller, the primary purpose is often to "manage anxieties about class standing" (172). Middle-class feminist writers were anxious not only to avoid losing class status but also to gain it in the form of political participation.

Other researchers, too, have noted that educational and legal regulation of women’s gendered behaviour was concerned mostly with enforcing class distinctions between women. In her study of the Toronto Women's Court, sociologist Amanda Glasbeek (1998) emphasizes the influence of first-wave feminism on the establishment of the court in 1913. Glasbeek finds that in place of paternalist justice, the court’s judgements were saturated with what she calls "familialism"—a rhetoric of maternalist family values. She argues that it was a classed, rather than a biological, version of motherhood that was expressed in the decisions and vision of the court. Familialism was a way of "both talking about, and rendering visible, class relations between women," and in the process it made "the exercise of class authority palatable to a broader reform community interested in 'social uplift'" (483). The fact that the court was founded in response to ideological rather than material needs is also reflected in the relative lack of female crime: Glasbeek finds there was no evidence to suggest a change in either the number or types of crimes for which women were arrested in order to warrant the establishment of a special criminal court. Maternal feminist reformers did, however, perceive the 1910s as a "period of profound disorder and upheaval" particularly with regards to classed identities (484).

In the Canada of the turn of the century, the class anxieties that fed articulations of gender as class had a variety of sources. There was an influx of immigrants from different parts of the world, as well as from rural into urban areas; women were employed in factories and the service industry, and their numbers grew at universities and in the educated professions; a large number of women were taking activist roles in politics and social work; and the affluence of the upper and middle class increased. Class anxieties could easily be mobilized by writers who opposed certain aspects of feminism and wanted to set their feminine and class identity apart from those of more unconventional feminists, as the following example of Lady Gay’s encounter with English suffragettes will attest.

In one of her columns Lady Gay (1909)—a pseudonym for Grace Denison, an anti-suffragist columnist for Saturday Night—criticized the unladylike behaviour of English militant suffragettes. She wrote that she was puzzled by reports that said that “the women engaged in militant activities are nice looking and pleasant-voiced” (17). To her, “the actions of these women suggest a coarseness of fibre and a vulgarity of nature the very opposite to our notions of a gentlewoman” (17). She reported that she observed “all the militant females who came in my way during a recent visit to old London, and in no case was I struck by the beauty of their language or the refinement of their expression” (17). They were “a rather sloppy lot of women, with hard and unlovely expressions, both in word and look” (17). Lady Gay expressed regret that the militants were of her own sex, and felt uneasy about possible results if these women won the vote. In her description the signs that gender suffragettes as mannish are indistinguishable from the signs that class them as unladylike. Lady Gay joined categories of gender and class in such a way that lower-class femininity could be interpreted as masculine, while upper-class femininity set itself apart from masculine and feminine lower-class characteristics.

In her column, Lady Gay used her privileged access to the articulation of her gendered subject position in order to both assert her class standing and refute suffragism. Susan Miller contends that in nineteenth-century writing, gender “was only one of many subject positions” (193). In her analysis the feminine is not conceived as an opposite to the masculine. Rather, different kinds of femininity are part of a variety of qualities which can be called upon in the articulation of subject positions. Miller’s perspective on gender as class invites us to index our understanding of genders in more detail, more classed detail, and to analyze how conventional (or intelligible) gender identity might be foregrounded more in some situations than in others. I would suggest that classed detail plays a predominant role in making sexual behaviour intelligible, in making it readable within the current conventions of gender practice. Despite attempts to envision the “true woman” or the “Canadian woman” as comprehensive categories, intelligible gender identities were more discriminate when used to negotiate specific subject positions. Such identities could come in the form of categories such as the English gentlewoman, the Ottawa aristocrat, the wife of the prairie farmer, the Irish domestic servant, or the Toronto woman journalist. The codes of gendered intelligibility—clothes, speech, gestures—were quite different for each of these categories, different in terms of class. Miller’s analysis suggests that female writers had an awareness of the provisional nature of
their gender articulations. She says that gender "was taken up provisionally, not as an absolute purchase on an identity," and that it could only be taken up by writers to whom it was available, who had the privilege to refer to gender in their attempts to manage their class identity (173). The rules of privilege modulate the provisional nature in which subject positions are articulated. Therefore, to say that these formulations are provisional does not mean that every speaker can take them up freely and indiscriminately, but rather that within the rules of privilege they are reconstituted with each utterance, affirming once more the rules of their engagement.

**Women's Work**

Agnes Maule Machar’s (1892) novel *Roland Graeme: Knight* can be read as a platform from which Machar fleshed out her vision of a social gospel. Ruth Brouwer (1984) has called it “a pioneer social gospel novel” which “provided a summary statement” of the direction in which Machar’s religious thought had moved since the mid-1870s (348). Brouwer describes this direction as “away from conventional theology on the one hand, and towards applied Christianity on the other” (348). It is a novel that is very actively interested in the project of social reform. *Roland Graeme* is also a feminist novel pondering the political possibilities of female relations across class boundaries. One of its main characters is Nora Blanchard, a well-off young woman who becomes acquainted with poor mill-workers as she stays with her brother’s family in the imaginary American town Minton. Her interest in labour issues is awakened and directed towards applied Christianity when she meets Lizzie, a mill-owner’s favourite daughter, Clara, learns of the working conditions in the town, and convinces her father to cut the women’s daily working hours by half an hour without a reduction in pay. She also meets the mill-owner’s wife, Mrs. Pomeroy, becomes somewhat of an activist when she helps the women and sends to the doctor to treat Lizzie’s work-inflicted pneumonia.

In her analysis of the representation of working women in turn-of-the-century Canadian fiction, Lindsey McMaster (2002) argues that even though Roland Graeme, as the title character, ostensibly fulfills the role of the male hero, the central figure of the novel is clearly Nora Blanchard. Her awakening to class inequity provides her character with the most development, while Roland remains virtuous but static (6). Nora is not the only female character to develop a new class and political consciousness in the course of the narrative. In general, the occasions on which middle-class women encounter working women and listen to their stories are moments in which middle-class women awaken to the privileges of their class. The women eventually turn these privileges into political responsibilities. It is when they recognize their gender as class that middle-class women are able to re-signify their positions as having political importance. Capitalizing on their “class on gender” allows them to imagine themselves inside politics.

Turn-of-the-century feminists knew that they needed to be attentive to the possibilities of their class privileges in order to give their movement political importance. In 1895, Machar wrote in her report on the National
Chapter Six

Council of Women of Canada:

For if class interests or even class prejudices are to be allowed to affect the action of a council supposed to represent the interests of the women of Canada, then indeed this hopeful movement must abandon its high pretensions, and, merit the premature condemnation it has received, must sink to the level of a "fashionable fad" (968).

Here Machar makes clear that the political thrust of the National Council of Women came from representing all women. Such an ambition demanded that middle-class reformers also turned their attention toward women outside their class. Anything short of that would have made the council into a body with no claim to social and political issues—its feminism would have turned into a "fashionable fad.

Machar was a maternal feminist writer. In her vision, female political influence was primarily directed toward the care of other women, of children, and of the sick and disabled. Among these responsibilities, it was the care of lower-class women in particular which most effectively enabled middle-class feminists to organize themselves. In this way, Machar's figure of the maternal feminist—the woman who campaigned out of motherly concern for her and other women's children—stood in contrast to the New Woman—the educated, independent, and somewhat selfish young woman who participated fervently in political discussions and generally defied social norms. After the New Woman of the 1890s drew criticism for her egotism and disregard of established rules of class and gender conduct, the maternal feminist set herself apart through her call for female collectivity. As she embraced the responsibilities of motherhood, she also extended her concern and control toward those whom she called her less privileged sisters. As such, the image of the maternal feminist was one that managed underlying class anxieties with the controlling hand of soft feminism. Maternal feminism allowed writers such as Machar to position themselves more favorably in relation to critics of feminism, and also opened lower-class women's lives to their political purview.

In a 1919 article on the Canadian women's movement, Marjory MacMurchy echoed Machar's assessment on the need for female organization. MacMurchy herself was a founding member of the Canadian Women's Press Club and served as its president from 1909 to 1913. In her article, MacMurchy states that in the 1880s "the women of Canada began to organize themselves with a definite plan to include women in all parts of the country in their bonds of organization" (155). She admits, "Generally speaking, the movement belongs to the well-to-do, but it cannot rightly be described as fashionable. It belongs indeed to the world, and to the times" (MacMurchy 156). More specifically, the movement for women's rights allows women to become, as MacMurchy says, "members of a race which is moving on an upward course" (155). Women who enter the world of work do not only improve their own lot, but they can also claim to serve their country, to participate in the project of civilization's progress, and to strengthen their race.

The idea of a maternal feminist collectivity worked both as an expression of essentialist femininity as well as a call for political organization. In her article, MacMurchy writes that for the "women of tomorrow" progress consists of the three elements "organization, employment, and the franchise," and that they function like the "three spans in the bridge" which "will lead us safely over into the unknown country" (159). Aware of the contested public nature of female engagement in public life, MacMurchy immediately adds that there is no need to speculate, however, about "the eternal qualities in women, because they remain the same" (159). In fact, she continues, "All that the woman wants from organization, employment and the franchise is an opportunity to be more perfectly a woman, to develop to her full stature, whatever that may be, and not mainly for her own sake" (159). MacMurchy brings into play both a notion of essential womanhood (the eternal qualities which remain the same), and a notion of a new feminist collectivity (new subject roles which arise from organization). In MacMurchy's description, this organized collectivity has a political quality and is responsive to social and economic changes, and, in this sense, is far from being essential.

We might argue that the co-existence of these notions of essentialism and political responsiveness are contradictory and illogical. But these two aspects appear less incongruous if we understand them as different ways of articulating gender. Each of these ways is provisional, and each manages a different aspect of MacMurchy's position vis-à-vis different audience constituencies. MacMurchy speaks to at least two kinds of audiences. To the men whose class standing will be challenged by organized, independent women, she appeals by saying that in fact women will not change, that in essence they will remain the same. To women she promises greater recognition of their work at home as well as greater opportunities when entering the world of paid work.

Work plays a central role in the arguments of feminist writers like Machar and MacMurchy. Work provides an opportunity to become independent; it emancipates women from men. Work is viewed as a way to level women's relationships with men, to make women serious participants in public and political life, including the effort to acknowledge that child-
rearing and home-management are work. Work can also add to women’s class status. Work is also configured as a way for middle-class women to learn about the living conditions of lower-class women. In this way, the argument goes, middle-class women can become more effective advocates for working women, help lower-class women to socially improve themselves, and through their influence raise the wages paid to working women. Such arguments about women and work illustrate the difficulty involved in the project of writing gender and female collectivity. It takes rhetorical work to create a notion of women as a unified and organized group. It takes active gestures of identification across class boundaries to create a sense of a unified female collectivity while at the same time the writing of gender continues to be motivated by a middle-class desire to control class anxieties and maintain class boundaries.

Social Improvement and Social Stability

Mariana Valverde (1991) observes that the class basis of the social reform movement is not a “simplistic matter of middle-class reformers imposing their values on working-class communities,” but is as much concerned “to make itself as to make others” (29). Thus, she suggests that the process of imposing values on another class simultaneously creates one’s own class. The Canadian movement for social purity, she says, was a by-product of a newly developing urban bourgeoisie, a movement that sought to restructure, or “regenerate,” Canadian society through the work of citizen philanthropists rather than through state action. As part of this process, class boundaries were created and maintained in the form of discursive rules, rules about how classed subject positions could be articulated. The rules of articulating class and gender identity did not remain an unspoken presupposition but became a subject of the discussion. That articulations of subject positions are always provisional does not exclude a desire for their stability. Provisionality might, in fact, be the source of a desire for stable relations. As writers like Machar and MacMurchy imagined possible avenues for the social improvement and class mobility of lower-class women, the idea of movement between positions demanded that these positions be relatively stable and identifiable. This imagined stability of the social order is necessary for the regulation of movement between different subject positions, for being able to make claims about the effects of called-for initiatives and the outcomes of the proposed behavioural rules. A sense of a well-established social order among women is, in effect, the condition for the well-governed social improvement which social reform texts so often promised to poor, immigrant, and also middle-class women. If subject positions could be perceived as stable in relation to each other and could clearly be identified, and if movement between them could be portrayed as controlled and predictable, then the prospect of slow and diligent improvement would appear very promising. Nellie McClung’s 1925 novel Painted Fires illustrates this intimate connection between the idea of a stable social order and the possibility of social mobility.

McClung’s novel tells the story of a young Finnish immigrant girl, Helmi, who starts out as a domestic servant with barely any knowledge of English. She has to her advantage that she is Scandinavian and, therefore, very close to Anglo-Protestanism in the perceived racial hierarchy as it was laid out in the table of contents of James S. Woodsworth’s Strangers within Our Gates (1909). Helmi is also eager to learn Canadian customs. However, the story does not only trace her assimilation into Anglo-Canadian society. More importantly, it reveals Helmi as a model of the moral female citizen. In the process, she temporarily falls under the influence of an all-too-idle upper-class lady, Mrs. St. John. When Helmi unwittingly runs an opium errand for Mrs. St. John, she is arrested, and subsequently has to flee to a rural area. Twice in the novel Mrs. St. John dresses Helmi up in some of her own stylish clothes; once to enhance one of her parties by claiming Helmi is the Finnish prime minister’s niece, and another time when she disguises Helmi’s identity in order to help her flee. Each time Helmi leaves her “honest dress” behind in order to dress up in “finery” (Valverde “Love of Finery” 169). Both times Helmi gives herself away by not fully mastering the body language of an upper-class girl. In these scenes, McClung demonstrates her belief that this kind of social dress-up cannot stand in for true social improvement, that changes which aim to disguise one’s social station are destined for failure.

In contrast, if improvement of one’s clothing follows the guidelines of social mobility, if it happens step by step and in a timely fashion, then it can have a lasting effect. Accordingly, McClung’s novel is also filled with examples of how to appropriately pursue social advancement, including through improving one’s dress. After her arrival in Canada, McClung describes Helmi in the following way:

Helmi’s hair was no longer brushed straight back, braided and tied with a black ribbon. It came down over her ears in the “buns” so favored at that time. The high collars on Helmi’s print blouses had disappeared, and a quite sufficient white neck was revealed; and when [Miss Abbie] took her down to see the stores she noticed how [Helmi] lingered in front of the pretty dresses; and when she came to a millinery window Helmi stopped so suddenly that Miss Abbie collided with her ... (36)
We are here informed that Helmi is making progress in adapting herself to life in Canada. She starts to fit into urban Canadian life by way of gradually updating her dress and hair, taking an interest in the fashions of the day, and improving her English.

Despite the abuse and poverty that Helmi suffers, McClung's novel ultimately offers a tale of how the Canadian nation can be redeemed morally. In her study of the role of sentiment in American nationalism, Lauren Berlant (1997) posits that such a fictional or non-fictional tale of national optimism often "fuses private fortune with that of the nation," addresses "the fear of being stuck or reduced to a type," and offers "a redemptive story pinning its hope on class mobility" (4). Stories of national optimism thus outline the "privatized, intimate core of national culture" where citizenship is produced through everyday encounters (4). McClung's narrative is attentive to the intimate details of the private life and interactions of her characters—the way people dress, talk, and move, what kind of work they do and how, and what their living quarters look like. With the help of these details, Helmi's story gains national dimensions. In its national optimism, McClung's novel serves as a counter-narrative to the tales of fallen women and white slaves that proliferically circulated from the 1880s onwards. Anecdotal stories and fictional accounts described poor white working women whose low wages were not enough to sustain them, and who, as a result, fell into prostitution. Often, this was prostitution at the hands of foreigners; in Canada the idea of white girls working in Chinese opium dens, or even Chinese restaurants, was considered particularly frightful.2

Such racial anxiety arises from fears related to imperial expansion, fears that saw Anglo-Saxon dominance undermined if white women became subjects of foreigners (see also Devereux 2001). The white slave panic became pervasive at a time when prostitutes were increasingly seen as victims of class and gender inequities alongside the contention that they were sinful women living lives of moral vice. In her study of the Toronto Women's Court, Glasseck (1998) observes a "double danger" which the social imagination attributed to the women who came in front of the court. On the one hand, they were seen as agents of moral decline, and thus "threats to the emergent modern nation," while on the other hand they were also victims of this decline, and thus "symbolic of national degeneration" (485). Where fallen women tragically sink along a scale that simultaneously signifies class and womanliness, a figure like Helmi, with the help of her moral vigour, is allowed to rise gradually through measured improvements—though always against the threat of a potential fall. As Devereux (2005) points out in her thorough analysis of the novel, Helmi is always like a potential fallen woman or white slave. However, "while Helmi's narrative thus appears to reproduce a story of decline and sexual danger, it maintains the upward movement that is based on her virtue and value" (Devereux, Growing 107). In a didactic reversal, it is instead the well-established Eva St. John who, on account of her idleness and hedonism, risks becoming the truly fallen woman, if not in an economic or social sense, then at least in a moral one. In McClung's view, Mrs. St. John's stylized femininity diminishes the virtue of her womanhood because it lacks social purpose and concern. As her physician husband observes, conversations between her and her lady friends are spiked as with needles by "points of antagonism" amid "tinkles of laughter, high-pitched and nervous"; at the end of these evenings of idle banter, no-one is "any wiser or better, more inspired to nobler living" (McClung 287). While the senior Mrs. St. John, who has spent her years "on a treadmill" and is still an avid worker for Christian charity, has remained "sweet-tempered, interesting, sympathetic," the younger Mrs. St. John, having nothing to do and doing nothing, has "degenerated": she "grew shallow, selfish, cross-grained and hard" (McClung 288). In McClung's view, upper-class women have a responsibility to work, to take care of lower-class women. This responsibility provides privileged women with a better kind of womanliness as well as a more wholesome class consciousness.

A Middle-Class Sisterhood

"The Grim Fact of Sisterhood" (1996), a short story that McClung did not publish during her lifetime, offers a blunt lesson on the question of privileged women's responsibility to take care of lower-class women. Mrs. E.P. Smith of Prince Edward Island moves to Northern Alberta with her husband. She discovers that her Ruthenian neighbours are not familiar with proper techniques for doing laundry, and are also more generally in need for instruction as regards clean, Anglo-Saxon housekeeping. When her husband encourages her to teach them, she refutes him: "It is impossible to teach these people—they are too dirty—too foreign, and I do not intend to go near them" (218). She and her eight-year-old daughter prefer to keep to themselves, making twice-yearly trips to Edmonton where they stay in hotels and shop for fashionable clothes.

The local teacher, who is running a campaign to instruct the women in Canadian ways, including child-rearing, asks for Mrs. Smith's help. The teacher explains that Mrs. Smith's rejection and unfriendliness encourages the Ruthenian women to go back to their "old ways," for instance, feeding their babies coffee. The teacher is convinced that Mrs. Smith could do a
great deal of good by helping the women take up Canadian housekeeping
and child-rearing methods. She entreats, “Mrs. Smith, there is no such
thing in life as ‘our own affairs.’ It is a false phrase. What concerns one,
concerns all... You are keeping back the progress of these women, and
we will all suffer for it, some way” (219). But Mrs. Smith will not be
convinced, even when scarlet fever breaks out and she is urged to help
nurse the patients. She isolates herself even more throughout the outbreak,
and, at the end of the story, is punished with the death of her daughter
from scarlet fever after the rest of the community has already overcome
the disease.

As this story makes clear, McClung’s vision of a female collectivity
that can exercise political influence centres on a socially engaged female
middle class. This is the middle ground where social interest and political
ability come together. In order to reach this ground, lower-class women
who would like to have more influence first need to pass through the right
stages of social improvement, and upper-class and middle-class women
are required to show evidence of their social concern. Mabel Burkholder’s
novel The Course of Impatience Carningham (1911) exemplifies this
convergence through the development of two of its central characters.
Silas Wickins has just taken over the management of a factory from his
father; and while the father ran the factory without mercy and with a strict
eye to his own profits, the son has ambitious schemes for improvement.
At the coffee table the younger Mr. Wickins explains to his wife, Isobel, that
he plans not only to update the equipment but also to improve sanitation,
light conditions, and ventilation for the benefit of his workers. While
Isobel is “thoughtfully silent” during her husband’s explanations, we learn
that:

When she married Si Wickins a few months before, she had had small
notion of being burdened with the cares of his working-people. They were
to her mind part of an elaborate system of machinery, bound to turn out for
her all the money she needed and whenever she needed it without
grumbling. It seemed funny to think of their rights. She was rich, and
they were poor; they must work, and she must spend. That’s all there was to it.
Isobel Mercer had come from a very proud and very honourable family.
She had lived an extremely sheltered life, with every wish granted upon the
asking. (46-47)

However, in the face of her husband’s struggle to finance and
implement his improvements and due to his involvement “with every
charitable scheme in the town,” Isobel can no longer remain indifferent to
the workers’ conditions (Burkholder 47). We are informed that Isobel is
not without feeling towards the factory workers, it is only that she has
been ignorant until now.

A lively young factory girl, Patience Carningham, particularly arouses
Isobel’s sympathies. Now that Isobel’s eyes are opened to her
philanthropic responsibilities, however, she also realizes that she cannot
concentrate them on a single person. Her plan is to invite the girls from
the factory’s cutting room for a Saturday luncheon at her house. She hopes to
study them in order to help them: “They will open their hearts to me. Trust
a girl to win the confidence of a girl” (Burkholder 53). Alas, Isobel’s social
gathering does not work out as planned—except for Patience Carningham
none of the working girls attend. The seamstresses are hesitant because
they do not know what it means to go to an “informal luncheon party,” nor
what one wears at such an occasion, what one should say at table, and how
long one stays. When they receive the invitation, they think it is
“ridiculous nonsense,” that Isobel “doesn’t mean it,” and that it “looks
suspicious” (Burkholder 63).

To Pat, who is “always looking forward for something to happen,”
the luncheon seems to promise to be “the golden gate to her land of dreams”
(Burkholder 64). She is on a self-designed course towards “personal
improvement” (13), and hopes to become a beautiful lady, “large and tall,
with long waving hair, all natural too, and plump, white arms” (14). In her
attempt to convince her colleagues to take up Isobel’s invitation, she
details some of the things she has already learnt: informal means the
opposite of stylish; if you do not know what is in a dish you simply say
“no thanks”; it is better to go hungry than to make a mistake; you talk
about who is getting married or who is going to give a party; after a little
while you get up to leave and you say “I’ve had a very pleasant evening,
and I’ll come again, thank you” (65).

Isobel’s attempts to deal with “the poor problem” are unsuccessful not
only due to her luncheon’s low attendance (Burkholder 69). At the end of
the event, after she has given Pat a five-dollar bill and an old silk
underskirt of hers, she exclaims: “I love you just as I would a sister if I had
one” (73). But she realizes immediately how strange this sounds—“A
sister like this dear, queer little thing!”—and she understands that “she was
not ready for such a close relationship yet,” that “the child seemed to her
more like a doll which needed a new dress” (73). Later, the narrator
explains that Isobel “found herself rather badly bitten from her attempt at
playing with the poor problem” because “it required more radical
mentreatment than she had been willing to give it” (139). To step forward and
increase her relations with the working women meant “cutting herself
loose from the friends and the comfortable, carefree life of her girlhood”
(140). But to move back into her old life also has its price as it requires
that she abandon her husband’s philanthropic reforms just when they are beginning to pay off. As a result, Isobel, who used to be the “counsellor and adviser” to her husband and his friends, “simply stood still and endured” (140).

Towards the end of the novel Isobel gradually gains her foothold again. Significantly, this happens in tandem with Pat’s movement up the social ranks—Pat gains the trust of the older Mr. Wickins; she becomes engaged to one of the younger Mr. Wickins’ business partners (who is also Isobel’s cousin); and she inherits a good deal of money when the old Mr. Wickins dies. Pat’s engagement and inheritance elevate her socially and also make her a permanent part of the influential Wickins family. Although she continues to encourage her friends from the cutting room to take up self-improvement schemes of their own, she does not have the same influence over them and instead has to contend with their feelings of jealousy and doubt. She is not one of theirs anymore. At the very end of the novel, Pat and Isobel meet again; this time on even ground, no longer as an ambitious factory girl encountering her upper-class benefactress. They embrace as family friends, and, according to the very last words of novel, Pat’s fiancé (and Isobel’s cousin) has “the satisfaction of seeing the two he loved best in the world locked in each other’s arms” (Burkholder 327).

In Burkholder’s novel, Isobel Wickins, the privileged woman with social reform aspirations, cannot as easily devote herself to the well-being of lower-class women as Machar’s Nora Blanchard seems able to do. At the same time, Isobel is more concerned and has a more genuine interest in social work than the selfish upper-class ladies of McClung’s fiction. In showing her character as wavering between the possibilities of oblivious consumption and committed social activism, Burkholder imagines the negotiations that can occur when producing a female sisterhood. In the narrator’s comments on the character of Isobel Wickins, Burkholder highlights the material conditions which form Isobel’s upper-class identity—property ownership, leisure, social relations. Some of these conditions will be challenged if an all-too-inclusive notion of female sisterhood is put in place; Isobel recoils from that possibility. On the other end of a well-regulated movement toward middle-class sisterhood, Pat Cunningham’s story emphasizes the idea that working-class women must work towards their own improvement. In all three novels, working-class women also have to fulfill certain pre-conditions that make upwards mobility possible: they have to be young, unmarried, white, intelligent, hard-working, of pleasant character, brimming with initiative, and also endowed with much humility.

As Machar’s report to the National Council of Women made clear, early Canadian feminists actively sought to represent an inclusive notion of womanhood for their political purposes. If early feminist writing set out to make political demands on behalf of Canadian women, then it had to make sure that it could credibly say to represent all women. In other words, there was an awareness, from the start, that constant discursive work was required to create the sense of a collectivity. As Denise Riley has put it, at any time “women” is “both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity” (2). Or, in the words of Susan Miller, gender categories are “an unevenly adopted functional system, often ignored but as often enforced or resisted for political and social gain” (173). Attempts to create the image of female collectivity worked with the unevenness that Miller describes. However, there is also a pattern behind this unevenness (the discursive employment of gender is not quite as erratic as Riley says): in my examples, gender becomes particularly relevant when women’s class status stands to be defended and when political, social, and moral gain are to be made. It was women’s essential association with the “maternal” which enabled the use of women (as a collectivity) for political ends. A maternal, rather than a sexualized, concept of women enabled the production of a “proper field on which female goodness could be exercised” (Riley 55). The inclusion of lower-class women within the social realm offered welcome opportunities for the political positioning of middle-class feminists—at times with lower-class women for the benefit of portraying a more numerous female collectivity, but also separate from them in order to stabilize middle-class status. Miller reminds us that while stable gender identities are deployed to reinforce legal, economic, and class desires, what is perhaps more significant for our analyses of texts and writing is that they are also “a means to achieve rhetorical authority” (173). In the cases of Machar, McClung, and Burkholder, the authority gained through their writing is one that confirms these three women in their class (and gender) identities, as well as in their roles as activists and writers.

Notes

1. Woodsworth’s book discusses the situation of immigrants in Canada and describes them in order of their desirability, giving the highest ranks to those whom he considers most similar to Anglo-Canadian Protestants. The first three on the list are immigrants from Great Britain, the United States, and Scandinavia.

2. On this topic, see Devereux’s “The Maiden Tribute” and the Rise of the White Slave in the Nineteenth Century: The Making of an Imperial Construct.”