



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

by Dan Azoulay

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The Man of Her Dreams

If it's clear what Canadian bachelors wanted in a partner in the early 1900s, it's *less* clear what Canadian maidens wanted. One reason is that women who wrote to the *Family Herald* were more reticent when it came to describing their ideal. Why? Maybe it was because they were expected to act modestly at all times, and describing their ideal man so publicly was, after all, somewhat brash. It was a form of solicitation, and many Canadians believed that women who solicited male correspondents through personal columns for romantic purposes were behaving unwomanly.¹ Or maybe women were simply less *discriminating* when it came to prospective husbands, as in "any man will do." Lacking the financial means to support themselves comfortably and terrified of becoming "Old Maids," most of them *had* to get married; marriage was both their livelihood and the key to complete social acceptance. Or perhaps they were tight-lipped because they had great faith in their ability (and obligation) to mould a man's character. As New Brunswick's "Plain Jane" put it, plainly, "Men will rise to meet the highest expectations of womankind, and will be what women demand of them.... I've seen men become ideal through the clever management of women. There is no over-estimating the power of women in making or marrying men."² Such thinking was part of the mindset of the age and this, too, may have made women reticent about describing their ideal man. Why should a woman solicit a particular man, through the personal columns, when she could basically *create* her ideal man once married?

What women wanted in a man is also unclear because, when they did specify their preferences, they were less likely to be of one mind. In July 1909, a twenty-six-year-old B.C. fruit rancher, writing under the pen-name “Scarlett Pimpernel,” suggested as much when he asked readers of the *Prim Rose* column: “What qualification does the average girl consider most essential in a prospective husband?,” or “Does every girl have her own private ideal, each one differing as do their hats?”³ The second question may have been closer to the truth. That being said, Canada’s bachelorettes were clear about a few things.

“WILLING TO WORK ...”

At the top of their wish list – and for the same practical reasons bachelors wanted a “domesticated” woman above all – was a man’s ability to be a “good provider.” At a time when wives were expected to stay at home and allow their husbands to be the breadwinners, it’s no wonder a man’s financial assets or earning potential were important considerations in many a single woman’s romantic calculations. After all, a *miscalculation* in this regard could mean a lifetime of financial hardship. This didn’t mean a man had to be *wealthy* – and many women made a point of emphasizing this – but it did mean he should be able to provide at least a basic level of subsistence. This requirement was implicit in their frequent use of words like “industrious,” “hard-working,” “frugal,” and “ambitious” to describe their ideal man, but sometimes they stated it more directly: “No man should ask a woman to join her life to his,” wrote “Marquita,” “until he is at least half prepared to take care of her, that is, not supply her with luxuries, but necessities.”⁴ Alberta’s “Petunia” went even further. Like many women, she wanted a man who could provide her with a “comfortable home,” not unlike that in which she had been raised. “How can a man expect to bring a woman into a home that has only the bare necessities of life,” she asked, “and expect her to remain there without getting lonely when he is away all day working on the land? ... I do not think that a man should ask a woman to do it, whether she is willing or not.”⁵

Evidently many bachelors agreed, for they were forever telling other bachelors not to marry before they could afford to do so. “I think it is anything but manly,” wrote one, “for a man to ask a girl to marry him before he has a fit place for her to live in.”⁶ “Instead of sitting by the fireside

reading novels and smoking cigars with his father's hard-earned money," wrote another, "the modern young man has got to get out and 'rustle' for his modern young lady until he has a home for her as good as her father's."⁷ As such, many wife-seekers also made a habit of listing their real assets. Here is a typical "ad" from the "Condensed Letters" section of the *Prim Rose* column:

W.R.R., Sask., landed in the West eight years ago with \$250. He has now a half-section of land, all the farming machinery necessary, eleven fine horses and buildings that have cost upwards of \$4000.... His habits are strictly temperate and he would like to correspond with 'a pleasant young lady of Ontario,' a Protestant.⁸

To a good many bachelors, in other words, size mattered – the size of their land, their homes, and their bank accounts.

Most women, however, were not as demanding (or blunt) as Marquita and Petunia, and not nearly as materialistic as some men thought. Most women, in fact, condemned greed and materialism as the source of many evils; they also said that money could not buy happiness.⁹ Yes, they wanted to marry a good provider and move into a comfortable home, but most were willing to live a fairly modest lifestyle, provided there was love in the relationship and provided their husbands measured up in other respects. "My ideal man is one who is kind-hearted and willing to work," wrote a farmer's daughter. "If he has money, well and good; if he has not, I would think just as much of him, and would do all in my power to help along."¹⁰ Ontario's "Happy-Go-Lucky" felt the same. Responding to a bachelor's accusation that women were only interested in a man's money and living a life of luxury, she set the record straight: "Ask the average girl her opinion, and if she tells the truth she will tell of a small cottage, a man who loves her and whom she loves, and after a time babies. This is a girl's dream of bliss."¹¹ Many women also emphasized their willingness to help "build up" a farm or a home with their prospective husbands, believing this could only strengthen their marriage.¹² Few women agreed with "Violette" from Ontario that "money doesn't matter at all," but at the same time, most did not exaggerate the importance of a man's wealth.¹³ "I shan't marry for a home" was a common saying.

There were, of course, exceptions. Most daughters of upper-class families did not want (and were not allowed) to marry a man of modest means or limited prospects, even in the unlikely event they knew such a man; generally speaking, men and women of different social classes did not intermingle or inter-marry.¹⁴ It seems, too, that older *widows* cared more about a man's financial assets, because they had children who needed supporting, or because they were too old to "start from scratch," building a home or farm, or because they had become accustomed to a higher standard of living.¹⁵ But for the most part, women wanted men who could simply provide them with a suitable home and a decent standard of living.

To this requirement many added the stipulation that their future husbands be sufficiently "tough" or hardy. Wanting a "good provider" in a country still largely rural and agricultural perhaps implied as much, but some women made a point of stating it nonetheless. They wanted "strong and healthy" men, able to withstand the rigours of farming, lumbering, fishing, and other forms of outdoor work. This was particularly important to women raised in rural areas and intent on marrying a rural man. "What we want," wrote one such woman, "are educated, enthusiastic, energetic, good men and true, who are not afraid of hardened hands, nor 'face like the tan,' and when my 'alter ego' discovers me – as I expect he shall some day – I hope he may be one of such."¹⁶

Many women also equated toughness with courage. They wanted men unafraid of hard labour and hardship, men willing to take on the challenges of opening up new land, for example. Writing from Saskatchewan, one nineteen-year-old lamented the disappearance of such men:

The young men now-a-days seem to be afraid of homesteading in a back place far from a railroad. But this I think is nonsense. Why can they not go out and endure the hardships as their fathers did before them? Far too often we see the modern young man sitting by the fireside reading novels and smoking cigars which his father's hard-earned money has provided.... I am just a young girl but I am beginning to fear that our young men of today are rather inclined to be chicken-hearted.¹⁷

Her fears would have not been allayed by the outpouring of grief from "Puir-Wee-Laddie," a young man from Manitoba, who in a fit of self-pity made the mistake of sharing his romantic woes and other hardships with

image not available

This Saskatchewan farmer epitomized the courage and physical prowess women so admired in men before the war. *Courtesy of Glenbow Archives, NA-2870-32.*

Prim Rose readers. For this, he received a sharp reprimand from a B.C. war veteran: “I want to offer you a few words of advice,” wrote the veteran,

Get a set of boxing gloves or dumb-bells and go in for some violent form of exercise. Your mind as well as body will become healthier. Don't think about girls. You will have lots of time to fall in love five years hence. Don't go round thinking this is a hard world. A boy of 21 has no right to think such things. Above all, don't weep. It's not manly, my boy. If the world gives you a knock, take it and smile. The place for people who cry is the cradle.¹⁸

Other bachelors, mostly out West, complained about the trials of homesteading, including long work days and intense loneliness. And although they elicited a measure of sympathy from the maidens of the east, they also drew scorn, for in some readers' eyes such whining demonstrated a lack of courage or manliness.¹⁹ To many women, being a good provider required both physical *and* mental toughness.

“THE SCUM OF ENGLAND”

At least one kind of man stood little chance with single women in these years: the infamous “Remittance Man” of the Canadian West. Remittance men were typically of the British upper middle-class, who, for one reason or another, had proved an embarrassment to their families and had been sent to Canada to make something of themselves, farming or ranching; for this their parents gave them a regular allowance or “remittance.”²⁰ These men quickly gained a bad reputation. Canadians considered them arrogant, pretentious, humourless, lazy, and, above all, useless. In his study of the remittance men, Mark Zuehlke observes that “they worked seldom, usually only when the latest installment from home had been too quickly squandered. Leisure was their strong suit.”²¹ Men writing to the personal columns were equally unforgiving. “There is a class of young Englishmen out here,” asserted a B.C. rancher, “who are the most indolent, shiftless, dissipated and withal conceited to be found in any country.”²² Another called them “the scum of England” who “drift from one place to another making a bad name, and leaving a bad impression of their countrymen.”²³ No less damning a picture was presented by a “Shantyman,” who had the opportunity to observe them at close hand. These “English green-horns,” he wrote,

... receive a quarterly allowance from their father which they nearly always spend in beer. They have always had servants to wait on them. They say they can do anything, and are not afraid of hard work. As a matter of fact, they have never done a day's work in their lives, and don't know what work is. They won't work and they cannot work if they would because they don't know how, and they don't want to learn.²⁴

Some correspondents defended these besieged bachelors, but not enough to change the general picture.

Women, specifically, had little to say about the remittance men, but, given the strong prevailing views and the fact that men and women agreed on most things in the columns, they probably felt the same. Young farm women, listening to their fathers and brothers disparage the remittance man around the dinner table and exposed to the many books and entertainments that satirized his lifestyle and personality, would not have placed him high



image not available

The Alberta remittance man in the middle of this unholy trinity of smoky gamblers personified the poor image accorded this particular brand of western bachelor. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA-5609-9.*

on their list of desirable men, not least because such men were said to lack drive and ability. One woman, from B.C.'s Okanagan Valley, remembered well the remittance men in her area. "They would work sometimes for men who owned land," she recalled. "I knew some of them. You didn't take them seriously as you knew they couldn't buy bacon and beans without the little income they got from Britain."²⁵ They could not be good providers, in other words.

“NOT ... MERELY A HOUSEHOLD DRUDGE”

The only thing the remittance men had going for them, romantically, was their belief that farmers' wives should not do outside work – that they had enough work to do *inside* their homes. This appealed to Canadian woman

at the time because many worried about becoming “drudges” or “slaves” to husbands of limited means and high expectations. In other words, their ideal man was also not too demanding. “Every good woman should fall into line with her husband’s station in life and try to make the home as happy as her ability will permit,” wrote a Toronto stenographer, “but I think that a wife should be more of a companion to her husband, ... and not be merely a household drudge to work from morning till night, with no leisure moments to herself for reading or music.”²⁶ For this reason, women were especially anxious about marrying a farmer. They worried about the physical demands their farmer husbands might make of them, in terms of building a home, labouring in the fields, and caring for gardens and livestock, in addition to their usual household chores. “I believe in helping your husband as much as possible,” said one Alberta woman, “but it seems to me a man should want to have a home to take his wife to, and if I were he, I would be ashamed to see my wife ploughing in the fields.”²⁷ Even Prim Rose weighed in on this issue, agreeing with one Saskatchewan contributor who she felt was absolutely “right in demanding some time for rest and recreation,” for “a man who is a man would be ashamed to have it said that his wife’s drudgery is never done from morning till night.” Like most Canadian women, she felt that a “real man” did not treat his wife like a slave.²⁸

Because bachelors were already saying that they valued a woman’s companionship almost as much as her domestic skills or work ethic, single women should have perhaps been less fearful on this score. Nevertheless, men tried to reassure them, especially western men hoping to lure single women from points eastward. “I have had enough respect for the other sex,” wrote one, “to see that I would be doing a great injury to any woman if I should be base enough to persuade her to marry me only to become a domestic drudge. I am sorry ... that such marriages are frequently contracted, but let me assure you that they are not characteristic of any true or honest man.”²⁹ Another bachelor, from Saskatchewan, assured eastern women that, contrary to popular belief, western men were not looking for work machines as wives. “When we need an ‘automatic’ dish-washer we will engage a Chinaman, but when we desire a wife we will be prepared to give her the true love of a Canadian son, and the home comforts worthy of a Canadian daughter.”³⁰ Some were even more to the point. “When I am lucky enough to get a wife,” wrote “Union Jack” from the Northwest Territories, “I’ll see that she does as little heavy work as possible.”³¹

“HE MUST BE A THOROUGH GENTLEMAN”

The ideal man of this era was also the *moral* man. The moral man – or “gentleman,” as he was more commonly known – had a number of qualities women considered admirable. Chief among them was his ability to abstain from certain vices, especially alcohol. The consumption of alcohol, apart from being considered immoral and unchristian, had consequences that bore directly on women as wives and mothers. Money spent on booze meant less money for the family. It also meant husbands who, while under the influence or suffering its after-effects, were less productive at work, more likely to swear, fight, gamble, and succumb to prostitutes, and more prone to abuse their wives and children.³² Nor were these far-fetched scenarios, as drinking was a serious problem in Canada at the time. By the early 1900s, every Canadian was drinking almost a gallon (or 4 litres) of hard alcohol a year. This was actually an improvement – Canadians consumed twice that amount in the 1870s – but now the consumption of *beer* was rising fast: from 2 gallons a year in 1870, Canadians were annually downing more than 7 gallons of their favourite brew by 1914.³³ The rough life was usually to blame. Faced with terrible working and living conditions, many factory workers, dockworkers, sailors, and general labourers found easy solace in the many taverns and saloons of Canada’s expanding urban areas. So, too, did Canada’s many itinerant labourers, most of them homesick single men who worked long hours, under difficult conditions, in the forests, fields, and mines of Canada’s rugged frontier regions. For these men, drinking was often the only form of recreation.³⁴

The phenomenon was especially noticeable in the West, where single men were more numerous and working conditions more difficult. Recreation and escapism aside, “bellying up to the bar” on pay day and being able to drink one’s colleagues “under the table” were also marks of masculinity, ones that contributed to the rising rates of public drunkenness and crime along the raucous “whisky strips” of Winnipeg, Regina, Calgary, and the region’s other fast-growing cities.³⁵ Shortly after arriving in Saskatchewan from Ontario in 1907, a nineteen-year-old woman informed readers that “many of the young men and women [of the province] are well-trained, sociable beings, and we have a good number of them too. But I must say that a great number in our vicinity have intemperate habits.”³⁶ A few months later a bachelor-farmer in Manitoba, having made

similar observations, issued a stern warning to the “young ladies thinking of [coming to] the West. Be very certain,” he told them, “that your bachelor is not a slave to strong drink. That is the greatest curse in our beautiful West.... Of all the dirty habits and vices a man ‘batching’ acquires, ... that is the hardest to cure, and it leads to the direst results.”³⁷

Partly as a result of such warnings, women made it clear that they didn’t want a man who drank. Like the young woman from Leeds county, Ontario, they stipulated that their ideal man “should not use drink,” and in their requests for male correspondents they often stipulated men “of temperate habits” or “total abstainers” only.³⁸ Another Ontario maiden, “Ella May,” was especially insistent. Her ideal man, she said, was, “an honourable man, one who respects himself.... A man who ... would not be found in a stupor for over indulgence in alcohol, or be heard using profane language.” And by way of poetry, she told her fellow maidens to make male abstinence a pre-condition of romance:

Don’t marry a man to reform him,
To repent it alas! when too late,
The mission of wives least successful,
Is the making of crooked lives straight,
Make virtue the price of your favour,
place wrong-doing under a ban,
And let him who would win you and wed you,
Prove himself in full measure, a man!³⁹

Many women of this generation believed in their power to reform men – to set them on the path of righteousness. Ella May was clearly not one of them.

Many women also considered *smoking* a vice, or, at least, a bad habit. Referring to a male correspondent called “Happy Jack,” an Ontario woman spoke for many when she stated that “Happy Jack ... has certainly formed a good habit when he can leave tobacco alone” and that “there is nothing more disagreeable than to be in the company of a man who uses it.”⁴⁰ “Rae,” also from Ontario, agreed. “I cannot see how any girl can favour tobacco,” she said. “I do not despise a man for using it; he might have worse habits such as drinking, profanity, etc., but I cannot help admiring a man more who is fresh and clean, free from the odour of the weed.”⁴¹ Many women found smoking a disgusting habit.

But Rae's comments also suggest some ambivalence. And, in fact, women were far more tolerant of smoking than other male vices, as long as it was done in moderation. This was especially true of Western women, who came to realize, through regular observation, that not only was smoking widespread among the bachelors of their region but that it provided them with some comfort after a long day's work in the field or bush or in their moments of loneliness and homesickness. "The bachelors around here are numerous," wrote a farmer's daughter, "and as a rule they are good, honest, and brave men, worthy of any girl... Most of them like their pipe, but don't be too hard, girls. If there is any comfort in it, let the poor fellows have it."⁴² Many women also tolerated moderate tobacco use because they knew that they, themselves, had certain "bad" habits – like chewing gum or gossiping – and did not want to appear hypocritical.⁴³ Some women even *preferred* men who smoked (in moderation) to those who did not smoke at all, believing the former to be more amiable and easy-going.⁴⁴ "Besides," added "A Girl from the Golden West," tongue-in-cheek, "if they did not [smoke] they would talk all the more, and we [women] should not be able to get a word in corner-wise."⁴⁵ For most women, however, the ideal man did not smoke, even in moderation.

This bothered many bachelors, particularly out West. Stigmatized by the opposite sex as the country's most immoral bachelors, western men were quick to defend their vices and criticize the hypocrisy of their female accusers. The most spirited rebuke came from the aptly named "Weary Willie" of B.C. "I also indulge [in tobacco] now and then," he wrote

but I know when to stop. I also know, or used to know, a number of very respectable (?) young ladies in my old home town down in Ontario, who wouldn't hesitate to smoke a cigarette or take a drink (soft?) if they thought no one was looking; and yet some of those same girls have the nerve to come out in the open and run down every unfortunate man that has to do with these wicked (?) things to forget the rest of his troubles.... I hope that your lady readers will get over their aversion to our bad habits and not judge us as 'no good' until they become better acquainted.... Because Westerners use tobacco and drink in moderation, they are not to be [considered] renegades from society.⁴⁶

Some western men even argued that men who smoked and drank, albeit in moderation, were actually *more* desirable than those who abstained altogether. Such men, as one writer argued boldly, were more honest, open-minded, generous, chivalrous, and just plain “manly” than the self-righteous “Sissies” of the towns and cities.⁴⁷

Most men, however, agreed with the women. Drinking, swearing, gambling, and even smoking were evils that true gentlemen did not indulge in. Not a single man, for example, defended the use of profanity in mixed company. Instead, they sided with Saskatchewan’s “Sim,” who stated that “most men, if they are worthy of the name at all, . . . will keep their mouths clean when in the company of women. They consider it a disgrace to swear in the presence of women.”⁴⁸ Nor were bachelors much more tolerant of “King Alcohol” and “My Lady Nicotine” than the women they were trying to woo; when soliciting female correspondents, they often proclaimed that, above all, they were “total abstainers” from both.⁴⁹ Now whether such men were being entirely honest is debatable. Some probably claimed to be abstemious in order to appear more appealing to the opposite sex. “A number of your male correspondents seem to think,” an Alberta bachelor told Prim Rose, “that it’s a certain road to the good graces of the lady readers by stating that they are tea-totallers and non-smokers.”⁵⁰ For the same reason, men sometimes encouraged other men to change their ways. Worried that western men were gaining an unsavory reputation among eastern women, one British Columbian told his fellow bachelors to clean up their act:

It appears to me that ‘Wrathy Spinster’ [who recently criticized the habits of western bachelors] has visited a few untidy shacks and it is possible that she has seen some empty bottles under the bunk and too many evidences of tobacco on the floor to feel at home. Brothers, this is a great obstacle in the way of the girls. Get it removed. Brush up, wash up more. Practice self-denial, and have common sense.⁵¹

Whatever else most bachelors believed in their hearts about such “vices” as drinking and smoking, most knew full well that in the competitive marriage market the intemperate man stood little chance.

They knew, too, that moral-minded women also wanted *honest* men because, in their lists of desirable male qualities, many maidens included “truthfulness” and “sincerity.” “The right sort of man from my point of

view,” wrote “Sis” from B.C., “is one who does not use tobacco in any form, or alcohol in any form, one who is honorable in all things, and who’s word is as good as his oath.” And young “Viva” from Ontario said she admired “the man who is a real, true man under all circumstances, who will act the honest, true part at all times, and stand for the right through thick and thin.”⁵² One woman considered male honesty so important she was willing to endure the disapproval and curious stares of her class- and ethnic-conscious peers to be with such a man. Despite her wealth and upper-class English background, she had married a Russian immigrant labourer, with whom she proudly strolled the streets of Winnipeg in 1909, arm-in-arm. When asked by a close friend why she had married someone so far beneath her station in life, she was unequivocal:

He is my lover, and dearest to me than anything in the world....
and I am proud of him, too, for he is honest and truthful, not
only to me but to everybody, and I would rather die than to
lose him.... I do not care what nationality a man is, as long as
he is honest and truthful.⁵³

Exactly *why* such women valued male honesty so much is unclear. Perhaps it was a reflection of the general idealism of the age, which seemed to infect more women than men; dishonest, self-serving behaviour rarely advanced the general good, after all. More likely, it reflected a belief that honest behaviour was in decline in an age of increasing competitiveness and greed.⁵⁴ “The true gentleman is today on the decrease,” wrote one woman. “Scrupulous honesty, truthfulness in all things, and pureness of living are lamentably neglected.”⁵⁵ “Viva” also noted that “it is hard in this world for a man who is striving for a livelihood not to take advantage of his neighbour or to use a little deceit to further his own interests.” And another woman, convinced that “insincerity ... [was] one of the evils of the present age,” told readers to “be true to our friends and ourselves.”⁵⁶ Whatever the reason, for many women the moral man was also the honest man.

“A ... WELL-GROOMED, WELL-DRESSED PERSON”

In addition to the quality of his mind, women were concerned about a man's appearance. His actual *physical* appearance mattered little, or why else would many men have been so flippantly self-deprecating about their looks? “I am young and strong,” wrote “A Happy Bachelor” from Edmonton, “and although not ugly, would not be noticed in a crowd for my good looks.” Saskatchewan's “Spring Heels Jack” was even blunter. “And for looks,” he warned, “I have never stopped a Chinese funeral going down hill.” Many others said their face would not stop a train or clock, and that they could “pass in a crowd, if the crowd is a large one.”⁵⁷ There was the odd female request for men who are “handsome,” “tall” or “broad-shouldered,” but women who cared about a man's appearance were far more interested in his clothing and grooming. His clothes had to be neat and clean, his hair combed, his face shaven, and his whiskers trimmed. The ideal man was not slovenly. “A handsome, well-groomed, well-dressed person is one of the prettiest things that has been created,” wrote a New Brunswick teacher. “Everyone cannot have the gift of the gods, but all can be clean and neat and have their dress made in the fashion of the day.”⁵⁸

Unfortunately, many men fell short of such standards. The bachelor-homesteaders and itinerant labourers of the West were particularly deficient. Their rugged and dirty work was partly to blame, but so were their living conditions. Most were isolated from “civilized” society, and their infrequent contact with people unlike themselves – women especially – made them indifferent to their appearance. Nor did many have the time or skill to repair or make their own clothing, or the money to purchase the latest fashions. The result was a sometimes ragged-looking individual, unpopular with the ladies. “I know of one bachelor,” reported a farmer's wife from the West, “because his hair gets rather long once in a while (remember he lives twenty miles from a barber), his clothes baggy and his collar old-fashioned, the girls laugh at him.”⁵⁹ Making a connection between slovenly appearance and immoral behaviour – as many did – another woman found the bachelors of her province equally wanting: “Many of your readers have commented on the careless habits which Western bachelors acquire,” she wrote, “and really B.C. with all its aristocratic tone, is not an exception in this respect. Young men whom I have known in their eastern homes to

be ... models of tidiness and neatness, I have seen here and on the prairie, week in, week out, unwashed and unshaven, forever in their overalls loafing around corners or in saloons.”⁶⁰ Men were just as quick to note the western bachelor’s shortcomings. “This spring a number of families came into this settlement with 3, 5, and even 7 daughters,” he told readers,

but how can anyone with any heart introduce our rough bachelors to these nice girls? I pity the men with my whole heart, but after living alone so long, they care very little indeed about their personal appearance, and wear the oldest clothes they have got, Sundays and weekdays.... Some, I know, have gone to college, yet they go about unshaven, looking very ragged and uncared for.⁶¹

Some women managed to see beyond all this to a man’s character – “Looks are not the most important. It is character that counts in life” was a common remark – but many did not. A few even refused to receive sloppy-looking male callers in their homes.⁶²

The female concern with male appearance provoked some criticism. Readers often accused women of being shallow, of not being able to distinguish a man’s looks from his character. “I have been quite a close observer of people,” wrote “Clover Bar” of Alberta, “and it seems to me that nowadays most of the girls are looking for a man that dresses well and is a smooth talker. Looks seem to be the only thing.”⁶³ Similarly, an “Old Maid” from New Brunswick felt that “if a man works in an office and dresses well, that seems to be all that a girl requires in her husband nowadays.”⁶⁴ This apparent preference for the dapper-looking man was just as disconcerting to bachelors. “Would someone tell me why so many women throw over good men and marry tramps?,” asked a gentleman from Quebec:

There are several middle-aged women of my acquaintance who have thrown over men of good character, now worth from twenty to forty thousand dollars, and married inferior specimens.... The young girls ... are doing the same; one threw over a young civil engineer and married a fancy vest, a high collar and a smile that would not come off. One of my chums, a man of high character and college education was thrown over in this way.⁶⁵

Another bachelor, from Ontario, sympathized. "Girls are often carried away by appearances and fine manners," he wrote, "overlooking, for these, the real worth of admirers who would be fond and faithful husbands."⁶⁶

But were Canadian women really this superficial? Many probably were, especially in the towns and cities, where appearances tended to count for more, particularly in the work place. A number of observers commented on this at the time. Vice investigators in Toronto often criticized working-class girls for the money they spent on clothing; so did the girls' parents.⁶⁷ Members of the personal columns denounced the greater vanity of city folk, as well. One New Brunswick farm girl called the farmers of the West true men, "free, free, with a chance to be what God meant them to be, men, while their brothers in the city ... are slaves to fashion and society."⁶⁸ In another instance, an Alberta farm girl reprimanded a male writer for suggesting that all young women were fashion-crazy. This wasn't true of *rural* women, she said, "and that is one great blessing these days, [for] it would be a hopeless failure trying to milk a cow with a hobble skirt on."⁶⁹ Meanwhile, an Ontario teacher complained that working-class girls refused to associate with her because she didn't dress as fashionably as they.⁷⁰ If these people were right and city-dwellers were, in fact, more concerned than their country cousins with appearances, then it follows that they were also more likely to judge *others* by such criteria. So city women probably *did* care less than women elsewhere about a man's personality than about his hair cut or the cut of his suit.⁷¹

But it is also possible that many women equated appearance with character. If they believed that "cleanliness is next to Godliness," as many North Americans did at the time and as several correspondents stated, then most women would have considered the unclean, unkempt man to be very *un-Godly* or immoral.⁷² Some women, in other words, judged a man's character by his appearance. They would have assumed that a man who was tidy and clean was also living a "clean" life, a *Christian* life. Granted, no women articulated this assumption to the *Family Herald* or *Western Home Monthly's* readers, but it was often implicit in their comments, and even more so in the constant coupling of "temperate" behaviour and "clean" appearance in their descriptions of the ideal man.⁷³

There was a fine line, however, between looking good and vanity. Women (no less than men) had little tolerance for the latter and, therefore, for the so-called "dandy" obsessed with his looks. "How often I have laughed at the gallant youths who described in such glowing terms their

personal charms,” smirked British Columbia’s “Yorkshire Maid.” “I always imagine them sitting before a mirror and glancing at it from time to time as they make the inventory.”⁷⁴ Their intolerance of male vanity was especially strong when women defended themselves against similar charges. “‘Kid’ accuses us of a too profuse use of talcum [powder],” wrote Ontario’s “Notta Kid,” but

Is he guiltless? Does he not pride himself on his own head of hair? He mentions ‘rats,’ but says nothing of wigs and toupees.... Blindly the average man follows the mode, parts his hair in the center, wears it long or short as the other do, and oh! the beard! Walk down the streets of your city, the first lord of creation that you meet has a bunch of whiskers on his chin, the next wears whiskers in front of his ears. He is accompanied by one with a Kruger-like fringe around his chin, closely resembling the icicle hanging from the eaves.... The hard shirt bosom, the stiff collar, the swallow-tailed coats, the silk hat, etc. Are they not as ridiculous as some articles of feminine apparel?⁷⁵

These qualifications aside, it’s clear that how a man dressed and groomed himself mattered to Canadian women. And men *knew* this, which is why in their “ads” for partners many made sure to mention their clean and neat appearance, and why they often exhorted their fellow bachelors to “clean themselves up ... to look neat and tidy.”⁷⁶

“ABOVE ALL KIND-HEARTED”

Not only did women shun men “rough” in appearance, but also rough in *manners*. This was another requirement. They expected their future husbands to be kind and considerate, both to them and to others – to be “gentlemen” in the literal sense. “Juliet” of P.E.I. told readers that her ideal man “is an intelligent, kind-hearted man, above all kind-hearted.”⁷⁷ Prim Rose agreed. “Is there anything more beautiful, more comforting and uplifting than gentleness?,” she asked her readers. “Personally I never can forget a kind look, voice, or manner.”⁷⁸ Few women placed this quality at the top of their list, like Juliet, but many made some mention of it in their

letters; words like “kind-hearted,” “considerate,” “thoughtful,” and “tender” appeared often.⁷⁹

Again, we can only speculate why this was so. Most women considered themselves “the weaker sex,” physically and emotionally, so perhaps they wanted a man who would treat them gently, who would not abuse them physically or verbally, for example, and who would protect them from hardship, including strenuous or excessive labour. Historians also remind us that sexual harassment and assault were not uncommon in these years – especially against domestic servants – and that most of it originated from a woman’s male acquaintances. Women were undoubtedly aware of this possibility, not least because men were widely assumed to be animals when it came to their libidos – that is, naturally lustful and lacking in sexual self-control – but also because the newspapers of the day gave ample and sensationalist coverage to male sexual crimes.⁸⁰ Because the husband was also the “head” of the family, legally and otherwise, it also made sense to marry a man who, as one woman put it, would be “a kind master in his home,” especially as divorce was not a viable option.⁸¹ And again, perhaps the idealism of the era played a role. A 1911 letter from an Albertan captured the *zeitgeist* of the age well: “It is one of the hopeful signs of our time,” he wrote,

that so many, both among the high and the lowly, the wealthy and those in humble circumstances, are giving so much of their time and talents to the service of their fellows. Overt against the materialism, the extravagance, the follies and sins of our age, is the brighter picture of men and women, of every rank and calling, giving themselves freely to the cause of humanity.⁸²

His views were echoed by “Madeleine,” a farmer’s daughter from Ontario, who told readers that “Life is what we make it,” so “why not make it a brave journey filled with love, and kind thoughts and deeds, and not be too solicitous for the success of our business? If each of us were more unselfish, how beautiful life would be.”⁸³ Perhaps these and other calls to “do unto others” made women – the era’s leading social activists – value that much more the caring, compassionate man.⁸⁴

THE GREAT DEBATE

Much of what Canadian women found appealing in a man in these years, and much of what they disliked, was revealed in the great debate members of the Prim Rose column launched over the merits and demerits of the so-called “Western Man.” No other issue in the column’s long history, not even the suffragette issue, was as hotly debated as this one. And with good reason, for there was much at stake. The question was “would the Western bachelor make a suitable husband?,” and the verdict had the potential to affect the romantic prospects of all Canadian bachelors.

THE PITCH

The debate began innocently enough. In 1904, when the column first appeared, men from the West, along with men elsewhere, began writing in search of female correspondents who might one day become their wives. Most of these men were farmers, ranchers, miners, and railway and lumber camp workers, whose jobs and location prevented them from mingling with the opposite sex, who were in short supply as it was; in fact, many western men considered the shortage of single women their greatest hardship.⁸⁵ For these men, the column was a godsend – one of the few ways they had to “meet” single women. In it they could advertise themselves, hoping to catch the eye of some fair maiden, who, after obtaining the man’s address from Prim Rose, might begin a formal correspondence with one or more of them. Or perhaps a man might be intrigued by a particular woman’s letter to the column and *he* would initiate a letter exchange.

In their letters to the *Family Herald*, western men, like all male writers, emphasized their best qualities – naturally. They either insisted or implied, for example, that they would make good providers, insofar as they were obviously not afraid of the hard work necessary to make a living in their region and, in the case of ranchers and farmers, because they owned productive assets like land and livestock. In typical fashion, one Alberta bachelor-farmer informed female readers that he had a large house, on a large piece of land, with lots of lumber and water. “I think that ought to please most young ladies.”⁸⁶ And when another writer suggested that western bachelors might not be good providers, she was quickly corrected. “Why cannot the Western bachelor build up a home just as good as, if not

better than your Eastern clerks or merchants?," asked a Saskatchewan bachelor, who further advised her to "take a trip out West and see some of the fine homes the Westerners are able to build out of the proceeds of herding cows."⁸⁷ Another bachelor, from Alberta, confirmed the Western Man's wherewithal: "these western bachelors are O.K., as far as I can see," he said, "and eastern girls need not hesitate to write to them. Being possessors of fine homesteads, ... they would be a better choice than a sweet smiling eastern dude, who has only his day's labour before him."⁸⁸ Yet another westerner assured readers that he and his fellow bachelors would give their last crumb of food to provide for a woman.⁸⁹

Western men also boasted of their superior housekeeping abilities. Being bachelors in the truest sense of the word – living on their own or with other single men – they had been forced to learn how to do many things for themselves, including cooking, cleaning, and sewing. As a result, they had acquired the skills necessary to help their potential wives with housework. As Saskatchewan's "Bulyea Bull Baster" put it, in a less-than-subtle pitch,

I really think a fellow who has driven oxen for a few season, at the same time doing all the housework and cooking, even the baking, should make a most patient and useful husband. How nice for the wife after a hard day's washing to let hubby potter around the kitchen, set bread, and pound the steak for breakfast, etc. What do you think girls?⁹⁰

Others were satisfied with simply listing their domestic abilities. "On wet days I will polish the stove, scrub floors and wash clothes, and all the dishes that I do not use through the week," boasted a "B.C. Bachelor." "I can mend my clothes, too."⁹¹

What's more, western men claimed to be more sympathetic to the burdens of the average housewife. They knew better than men from the cities or the eastern provinces, for example, about what it was like to be a housewife because they were going through it themselves. "Will a man who has had several years' experience of doing a woman's work," asked "Curly" from Alberta, "not better understand that a woman's work is not so easy, as men mostly think?"⁹² The Western Man, as a result, was sure to be less demanding than the average husband. In fact, he *had* to be less demanding, argued another, given that women were in such short supply out West. In

image not available

These two Alberta bachelors, one washing clothes, the other churning butter and making bread, seem to be advertising their domestic abilities, perhaps hoping to lure eastern maidens with the promise of a less burdensome existence as the wife of a western man. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA-1789-4.*

such a “seller’s market,” men could not ask too much of women, who could easily find someone else if they did.⁹³ Given the Western Man’s experience of having to carry the double burden of inside and outside work, often in lonely isolation, he would also *appreciate* his wife more. He wouldn’t complain very much about his wife’s cooking or cleaning abilities, for example, but would simply be grateful for not having to do as much of this as before and for having a companion with whom to share his once-lonely life.⁹⁴ For the many women concerned about being made “slaves” to their potential husbands, such arguments must have been particularly reassuring.

On top of all this, western men claimed to be men of the highest character. In particular, they said they had the courage and determination

necessary to leave behind the comforts and relationships of their family homes and start anew on the unforgiving western frontier. “Most of the bachelors out here now,” wrote “A Yukon Prospector,” “are the very best quality from eastern homes, as it takes plenty of ambition and self-denial to leave dear friends and the pleasure of the society of the pretty girls.”⁹⁵ Yes, these men sometimes smoked and drank, and, yes, they often looked ragged. But beneath their sometimes rough exteriors, wrote another westerner, lay other admirable qualities, qualities less apparent in “their more fortunate and cultured [eastern] brothers”: “honesty, brotherly love, . . . real interest in each other, and less selfishness and greed.”⁹⁶ This, too, made the Western Man a prize.

Lastly, western men also considered themselves more virile or “manly” than other men. Granted, the term “manliness” was loosely defined in those days – it was also used to describe men of “temperate” habits, for example – but in part it meant toughness in the face of adversity. And western homesteaders, ranchers, lumberjacks, miners, and hired hands were no strangers to adversity. Many endured dangerous, back-breaking labour amidst often extreme weather conditions and harsh employers. The result was a region of men marked, to a greater degree than elsewhere, by physical strength, stamina, and fearlessness. One Alberta man stated flat out that in all his worldly travels “the average Western bachelor is the manliest man that I have come in contact with.”⁹⁷ Another agreed, and at the same time expressed the Western Man’s contempt for the effeminate men of the East. Western men, he asserted, were hardier and tougher: “the average chap who comes West wants to stay, if he is capable of taking care of himself; as for the other class, we don’t want them here.... I wish to thank ‘Prairie King’ for his remarks. He knows what it is ‘to be a man,’ one who is not likely to freeze in harvest time.”⁹⁸ An even more eloquent affirmation of western manliness was delivered by “Raisull,” a young man from Weyburn, Saskatchewan, who had observed closely the bachelors in his area:

I confidently predict that from this class of men, laboring under the many and diffuse difficulties of the pioneer, will arise the strongest element that has yet been known in national life on the American continent.... I believe that any young man coming to this country with a desire to build up a little kingdom of his own has enough of the right stuff in him to succeed anywhere, and the difficulties with which he meets will only

tend to develop and strengthen those manly qualities which are necessary to the building up of a happy home.⁹⁹

As Raisull's letter suggests, manliness also went hand in hand with the ability to be a good provider. Either way, it was yet another point in the Western Man's favour.

And if Canada's "bachelor maids" were still unconvinced, the Western Man was not beneath appealing to their compassion. Hoping some fair maiden would take pity on them (and apparently unaware that playing the "sympathy card" might weaken their manly image), some western bachelors wrote heartfelt letters describing the hardships they faced and, above all, their intense loneliness. "The greatest drawback and hardship," wrote "Long Tom" of Alberta, "has been loneliness... When I was not very busy, and alone in my shack, I have felt lonely – almost unbearably so, until the weather changed or I should get busy enough to forget where I was. Then it was that I would have liked above all things to have had a true wife."¹⁰⁰ A more moving plea came from a "Quatsimo Pioneer" near Vancouver:

Often in my loneliness in the stilly nights I stand in my cabin door and view Nature in her pomp and splendor ... and yet I am alone to enjoy all these things.... The resources are here and the natural advantages are excellent.... This is going to be my home. But it is undeniably lonely in these backwoods of Vancouver. I have no companion and we scarcely ever see the face of a girl in this remote spot of the world.... Oh girls, would none of you care to come into this Western country and take up your abode with an honest, upright, ambitious, young bachelor?¹⁰¹

Some bachelors, like "Rocky Mountain Goat," put their laments to verse:

I wonder if ever my lonely lot,
will change for a better state,
And if some sweet, compassionate maid,
will pity my cheerless fate;
Oh, for a woman's presence!
Oh, for a woman's bread!

Oh, could I sell my potato crop,
And purchase a wife instead!¹⁰²

No doubt many of these men led difficult and genuinely lonely lives. But in a column devoted largely to finding life partners, one suspects that they also played up their situation to elicit the sympathy of single women. This was all the more evident when men of various occupations and locales tried to out-do each other in convincing eastern women that they, and not their peers, should be considered the poorest of the “poor” western bachelors.¹⁰³

Some western bachelors even appealed to women’s patriotism. They believed that in opening the West to settlement and developing its resources they were performing a patriotic duty – to both Canada and the British Empire – and that women should reward them, romantically, for doing so. In a fit of dramatic, rising prose, “Xanthoctrl” from Alberta told readers that all Canadians should be proud of the western pioneer men helping to build up the country. “Give three cheers for them,” he declared, “and may they echo not only through the hills, but also through the ages, for it is these men that are raising cities in the West. May each one find a jewel like his own heart! Will you not give us a hand girls?”¹⁰⁴ Another westerner was equally chauvinistic. “Our ambition,” he told eastern women, “is to own a landed home, a piece of the country over which floats the flag we love. To stand upon such a spot and realize that it is ours ... puts into one’s being such feeling of true independence, true manhood, and true Canadianism as no other possession does.”¹⁰⁵

And when the Western Man defined his patriotism in *imperialistic* terms, as many did, he sometimes tried to attract female correspondents with similarly Anglophilic sentiments. Yet another wife-seeking Alberta bachelor, after noting his recent service in the Boer War, told readers that “I have hung up the sword, ... and have gone to the soil, and am now doing my little [bit] towards the building of the Empire.”¹⁰⁶ Some even felt that eastern women had a *duty* to marry western men.¹⁰⁷ Evidently, patriotism was not only the “last refuge of scoundrels,” but of lonely western bachelors as well.

THE RESPONSE

But what effect did this regional wooing have on the single women of Canada? Did they, in fact, come to see western bachelors as desirable husbands? The answer is a qualified “yes.” Most women who participated in the debate sang the praises of the Western Man. Some were no doubt persuaded by the comments of the men themselves. After all, which woman of that era would not have wanted a man claiming to be, among other things, ambitious, hard-working, brave, honest, giving, manly, propertied, domesticated, sympathetic to housewives, and unlikely to take her for granted? Others were influenced by the romantic image of the West and its white male inhabitants reflected in the novels and promotional literature of the period. Women reading *Janey Canuck in the West*, for example – Emily Murphy’s popular 1910 account of her travels out West – would, by page eleven, have come across the first of many ringing endorsements of the Western Man:

The real Westerner is well proportioned. He is tall, deep-chested, and lean in the flank. His body betrays, in every poise and motion, a daily life of activity in the open air. His glances are full of wist and warmth.... Every mother’s son of them is a compendium of worldly wisdom and a marvel of human experience. What more does any country want?¹⁰⁸

Writers described the region, itself, in equally romantic terms. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, an assortment of scientists, explorers, and government officials, hoping to encourage emigration to, and settlement of, the West, had written floridly about its agricultural potential, social equality, fair climate, and stunning beauty. This portrait of the West as a “utopia” was enhanced by the extensive travel literature about the region – such as William Butler’s 1872 classic *The Great Lone Land: A Narrative of Travel and Adventure in the North-West of America* – and by the fiction of popular writers like American Fenimore Cooper and Canada’s own Ralph Connor; the latter’s exciting stories of heroic missionaries and Mounties taming the wild frontier left readers with the impression that the West was a place of great adventure and new beginnings.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, if many women wanted to marry a Western Man, it was because so many of them were mesmerized by the romance of the region, by the promise of prosperity, adventure, beauty, and greatness offered in such (usually exaggerated) accounts. Young “Elizabeth” from Ontario was one of them. Describing herself as a “modest little country dressmaker,” whose life was at times dull, she found it difficult to resist the West’s powerful lure. “The West has cast its spell over me from afar,” she told *Prim Rose* readers in the summer of 1911,

and my eyes are turned towards the setting of the sun. If his bright rays could lead me to the golden land, my pet dream would be realized. The best blood of the country is flowing westward, eager and burning to reach the land so rich in promise – at least to those who are willing to sacrifice something in the present in order to realize something worth while in the future.¹¹⁰

She followed this with a request: “Is there any well read bachelor in the West who could find it in his heart to spend an evening now and then telling this little girl of the land of her dreams?”¹¹¹ A New Brunswick school teacher was also moved by the West’s clarion call, and on one of her daily walks after school, she found herself pondering the region: “From books and visitors to ... [the] Western country I have heard something,” she said, “but I should also like to hear from those who are part of the West. The spirit of that immense land is calling and, someday maybe, I’ll get there.”¹¹²

Eastern women were just as taken with the Western Man. For one thing, they admired his self-reliance and ambition, particularly his strong desire to make something of himself, alone, in a new land. This was a quality Canadians valued highly at the time. They believed that urbanization and industrialization had, among other things, rendered men “soft.” The Western Man, by comparison, harkened back to a more heroic pioneering age of fortitude and sacrifice – of “strenuous adventure” as one historian puts it.¹¹³ “Faithful,” a farmer’s daughter from Ontario, was one of many drawn to such a larger-than-life figure: “When a man has courage and ambition to go out to a lonely homestead, or village, to open up a career for himself,” she wrote, “and is obliged to encounter many difficulties and endure much loneliness, he is worth something. Most of us lack ‘grit’

– Western Bachelor has lots of it. So all honour to the bachelors of the West! I have great admiration for them.”¹¹⁴

But above all, women admired the Western Man’s courage, particularly his willingness to leave behind all that he loved and all that was familiar to move to a strange land, alone, and start from scratch. “A man who goes out and does his homesteading duties alone,” wrote “Pussy” from Ontario, “is a prize any girl might be proud of.”¹¹⁵ “An Irish Girl at Edmonton” agreed. “I prefer the Western bachelor to your Eastern men any day” she told “Eastern Maidens,” for “there is more pluck in a man coming out here to endure the hardships and trials of Western life as compared with Eastern life. Men in the East ... plod along from morning to night like ‘Mike O’Rafferty’s mule.’”¹¹⁶

Some women attributed the supposedly superior quality of the Western Man to the West itself. “It is the greatest character builder in the world,” reported one Nova Scotian, upon returning from her visit to the region,

and I think that in such a country one will find more self-made men and women than in any other corner of the globe, as there is nothing like being ‘up against it’ to bring out the grander and more sterling qualities of character. I certainly saw more of nature’s nobleman during my stay out there than I have ever happened to meet before or since.¹¹⁷

Others believed the Western Man was also more *virtuous* than most men as a result of his close and constant contact with nature – with “God’s handiwork.” “A girl had much better trust herself and future happiness to the man of the prairies,” wrote one, “than to some of the city men, for he has fewer temptations and nobler and grander surroundings, so near the heart of nature.”¹¹⁸ A number of women also applauded the Western Man’s supposedly greater honesty, industriousness, kindness, and toughness, as well as his willingness to endure hardship for the sake of a noble cause, namely the development of the West and, by extension, the glory of the British Empire. Such qualities stood in stark contrast, they noted time and again, to the more vain and self-indulgent bachelors of the East.¹¹⁹

Drawn by the region and its perfect bachelors, Ontario and Maritime maidens swarmed to the West in these years.¹²⁰ Some took up positions as teachers and domestics, hoping to land themselves a husband. Others went as the newly minted brides of the western men they had “met” through

correspondence, or as a result of visits such men had made to their former eastern homes in search of wives. And many more *dreamed* of going West to marry one of these ideal specimens. “Home Bird,” from the shores of Lake Erie, was one of them. She was much impressed by stories of the Western Man’s industriousness, both inside and outside the house, and by what she had heard about the beautiful British Columbia landscape. “If all the B.C. bachelors are like ‘A.G.’ [a recent contributor] in the way of work,” she declared, “I think it would pay me to go to B.C. I think he can do more than any man I have ever heard of. I wonder if he could still find time to send me some picture post-cards?”¹²¹ Eight years later, a young “Nature Lover” from Nova Scotia, moved by more nationalistic concerns, had similar dreams. She, too, longed to see the “Golden West,” “for I admire the independent, strong, masterful people who are building up the country,” and “I should like to hear from ... ‘Ben Roy’ ... who is getting the best out of the western life and seeking what is really worth while.”¹²² In another instance, an entire group of “young Cape Breton girls” offered themselves to any group of western bachelors willing to pay for their passage to the West.¹²³

Not all women, however, embraced the Western Man or his region. Some were skeptical about the glowing accolades and suspected that eastern maidens were not getting the full story. “We hear so much about the Western bachelors,” wrote an Ontario teacher, but “are they really more worthy than our Ontario young men, or is it another case of the hills in the distance looking greener than the pastures at home?”¹²⁴ In particular, many were worried that they would have to do more housework (and farm work) than they were willing or able to do. “Would a westerner’s wife be expected to do all the scrubbing, washing, etc?,” asked a concerned eastern woman.¹²⁵ She further illustrated her concern with a poem in which each stanza ended with the line, “But we Eastern girls will stay here, East, Till we know what we’re going out West for,” as in

Oh ‘B.C.’ bachelor, you may scrub your floor,
And unfasten the latch of your rickety door,
You may listen to the birds and attend your beast,
But we Eastern girls will stay here, East,
Till we know what we’re going out West for.

“Alexandria,” a Toronto stenographer, was wary, too. “I often wonder if they are really as lonely as they try to make us believe they are,” she told the *Prim Rose* readers. “I am inclined to think that some of our Western bachelors at least, are getting just a wee bit selfish in their loneliness, in that a great many of them seem to want a wife solely for the comfort she will be in the way of doing the housework, milking the cows, darning the socks, and in reality acting more in the capacity of a housekeeper than a wife.”¹²⁶ Behind such letters loomed the Canadian maiden’s ever-present fear that she would become a slave or drudge to her husband.

If some women were merely unsure about what marrying a Western Man entailed, others were quite sure. They were sure that the western bachelor was looking only for a servant and that any wife of his would be much put upon.¹²⁷ They were sure they would be living in a tiny wooden shack, in the middle of nowhere, with no neighbours and few of the comforts to which they had become accustomed. And they were sure the Western Man was an incorrigible boor – slovenly in appearance, rough in manner, and ridden with vices.¹²⁸ Such certainties stemmed from novels of the period that sometimes portrayed Western men as hard-drinking, hard-living hunters, trappers, Indian fighters, and wild cowboys.¹²⁹ But they also stemmed from first-hand observation. B.C.’s “Lady Blanc,” for example, warned women not to be fooled by the idealized image of the Western Man. In an eloquent, but brutal indictment she told the column’s readers that,

Girls who have been well cared for, tenderly brought up, highly educated, their surroundings and associates cultured and refined, gentle and kind, come out to this country and marry men whom they looked upon as heroes because of the entrancing and romantic stories of the West. Every Western man who has ‘roughed it’ they look upon in the light of a herd of fiction, with a grand nature, a beautiful and knightly deference to all womankind, gentle and kind, a ‘Douglas, Douglas, tender and true.’ And oh, the bitter heart-breaking awakening of the vast majority of them; their castle of dreams ... is a great, desolate wreck that becomes a walled prison, a tomb from which there is no escape except through the door of the divorce court, from which all good women shrink as from

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To many eastern women in particular, this Alberta bachelor's decrepit shack (ca. 1912) was their worst nightmare. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA-1789-5.*

some hideous monster, and which they will never resort to so long as human patience can endure.¹³⁰

Even the editor was inclined to agree. “The opening up of a new country attracts a type of manhood that is not always of the gentlest,” she said, “and for that reason your warning carries special weight.”¹³¹

THE EASTERN MAN'S COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

Alongside the handful of female detractors, a much larger backlash emerged against the Western Man. *Eastern* bachelors, faced with the exodus of so many eligible bachelorettes, angered by the frequent put-downs of eastern men in the column, and fed up with all the attention and sympathy Canadians were giving the “poor” western bachelor, launched a vigorous counter-offensive. Some told the western bachelors flat out to please confine their attention to the women of their *own* region; one New Brunswicker even warned of a “civil war if the Western bachelors succeed in luring all the best girls away from the older provinces.”¹³² Others simply implored

women to take a closer look at what the eastern bachelor had to offer. “Ladies, why not turn your attention for a while to the province down by the sea?,” asked a neglected “Rufus Dhu” of Nova Scotia:

You will find splendid men among the eastern bachelors who live along the rugged shores of old Cape Breton. You seem to be devoting all your attention to the western country and its ... tillers of the soil.... Cape Breton has furnished premiers, senators, judges, lawyers, clergymen, doctors, novelists, poets, and men of all professions. Ladies, you are making a mistake in overlooking Cape Breton. I expect you imagine we are all fisher folks. If you will only investigate a little you will find that we are as intelligent and up-to-date in every particular as any class of people in any part of Canada.¹³³

Next door, in New Brunswick, a twenty-one-year-old farmer made a similar, if somewhat more exasperated plea. “Now I myself have nothing personally against my brothers across the continent,” he explained,

but I simply want to tell them (and the girls) that the western bachelors are not ‘the only birds in the wildwood,’ nor the best birds either. To hear some of them boasting, who have just been in the west two or three years, one would imagine they were great business fellows.... It’s all very well for the “[Wailing] Willies” to enlarge on the freedom, happiness, etc. of keeping house in a one-room shack for a perfect (oh, yes!) bachelor. But, girls, let me tell you, those fellows are not a bit more loyal, sympathetic or good, all the way [round] than the eastern boys.¹³⁴

The tone of such letters was distinctly defensive and, for the most part, civil.

The greater part of the counter-offensive, however, was not. Driven by a combination of anger and desperation, most bachelors in Ontario and the Maritimes were less interested in singing their own praises than in destroying their adversary. The Western Man, they said, whined too much. He “has chosen that mode of living and gone into it as a business proposition,” wrote Ontario’s “Big Swede,” so “he should accept the disagreeable along with the pleasures, and not cry about being lonely and having to wash the

dishes.”¹³⁵ Like some eastern women, eastern bachelors also accused the Western Man of lying about what he had to offer. Was he really as proficient and ready to assist around the house as he said, for example, or was he really looking for a slave?¹³⁶ And did the Western Man not exaggerate his possessions and glorious lifestyle in order to lure young, naive women from their homes in the east? The well-travelled “Seeing is Believing” from Ontario certainly thought so:

I have found this much-talked of [western] bachelor, uncouth and rough in manner, careless and unkempt in appearance, morose and stupid in mind, in many cases a mental derelict, probably brought about by the great shattering loneliness of the prairie. He has no ‘Arcadia’ ... to offer the eastern maid. Poor, deluded eastern girl, beware! His numerous acres of rich growing land are probably about one-tenth of what he states; his abundance of stock, most likely two sorry looking nags, a couple of forlorn cows, a few straggling chickens, a dog, and a cat. His cosy little home is a rough little shack ... devoid of furniture, except a few broken, dirty dishes, a rickety chair, a wobbly table ... and plenty of dust and cold discomfort to complete the scene.... Eastern girl, do not wreck your future by becoming a western bachelor’s wife or you will find your idol pure mud. Often in his affections the wife comes after his horse or dog.¹³⁷

As if this wasn’t enough, some eastern men also accused the Western bachelor of being immoral. A London, Ontario, gentleman, after complaining that “we Eastern bachelors feel rather thrown in the shade alongside the prominent Western bachelor,” told readers that many western bachelors are “degraded, rough, sinful beings.”¹³⁸ A few months later an “eastern” university student gave an equally generous assessment. He reported that he had known some western husbands to be cruel, unreliable, restless, and, in particular, immoral. “May Heaven help the woman who is deceived into marrying a drunkard, a gambler, or even worse,” he warned.¹³⁹ Essentially, many eastern bachelors accused the Western Man of living in a state of semi-barbarism and of behaving similarly. How, they asked, could such a man ever make a suitable husband for the fair maidens of the East?

Ironically, criticism of the western bachelor sometimes came from western men themselves. Several told readers that the men of the West, with their many ribald jokes and stories, spoke “disrespectfully” of women. “A more widespread fault,” wrote a Manitoba bachelor, “is profanity,” and “then there are the victims of intemperance, and I know of drunkards not a few.”¹⁴⁰ An Alberta cattle-rancher reported a similar lack of respect for women among his bachelor friends – including wife-battering – as well as a disregard for personal hygiene. “Lots of these bachelors are not fit to have a wife,” he stated. “It however pays them to have someone to do their dirty work, also someone whom they can abuse – when they fell out of sorts – without fear of any suitable replies (This class of man usually washes [?] and shaves at the most once a week).”¹⁴¹ Such comments infuriated the average western bachelor. “When I read those lines,” fumed a B.C. farmer, “I felt a tingling shudder of resentment pass through every nerve.... If he is really one of the ‘Western bachelors’ he should be more careful of his words for they reflect upon himself.”¹⁴² Another irate bachelor told Prim Rose that “there are a good many bachelors in his vicinity who would be pleased to meet [a certain critic] ... ‘behind the barn’ with his ‘carpet-beater.’”¹⁴³

Why some western bachelors sold out their brethren in this way is unclear. Perhaps some were of a different social class, and so wished to distance themselves from the “typical” western man in the eyes of eastern women. Or maybe they felt such women were being deceived and felt a moral obligation, based on what they had observed, to warn them. Either way, their criticisms lent credibility and weight to the eastern bachelor’s counter-offensive.

IN DEFENCE OF THE WESTERN MAN

This barrage of criticism put the Western Man on the defensive, to be sure, but he didn’t take it lying down. Too much was at stake. “As everything is fair in love as in war,” wrote “One ’o them” from Saskatchewan, “our Eastern antagonist has a perfect right to use his own way of annihilating us. But we are not easily put out of business.”¹⁴⁴ And so began the grand defence of the Western Man.

Western bachelors reiterated, first of all, that they could (in time, at least) provide their future wives with decent homes, and not just decrepit shacks. “I know young men in this district who started out with nothing

but their head and a pair of willing hands,” wrote a Saskatchewan bachelor-homesteader, “but today are in very comfortable circumstances. These are the men, ‘Prim Rose,’ that often write to you and request the correspondence of some Eastern girl, with a view to matrimony.”¹⁴⁵ Another Saskatchewan bachelor agreed. The Western Man “has every chance to make his way in the world,” he asserted, “providing he isn’t a shirker. Has the eastern young man any better chance of prospering than the man on the prairie? Certainly not!”¹⁴⁶ Nor did such men expect their wives to work day and night, cooking, cleaning, or milking dozens of cows, without any amusement or time for themselves.¹⁴⁷

As for the Western Man’s often ragged appearance and general untidiness, this was true enough, conceded many a writer, but unfair. “That he is slovenly and shiftless, and in a very short time gets to look like a tramp instead of a tiller of the soil is only too true,” wrote one western bachelor. “I do object, though, and very strenuously, to make him an object of ridicule, as he is in a measure a victim of circumstances, and almost entirely at the mercy of his surroundings.”¹⁴⁸ That being said, a number of writers argued that the Western Man was as “refined” as the easterner in many ways. “I have lots of friends scattered over the West,” observed “A Heilan’ Laddie’ from Ontario, “and many of them are men of considerable culture and education.... Barring Doukhobors, etc., the farmers of the West are more refined and better educated than those of the East.”¹⁴⁹ One such farmer, originally from Ontario, now living in Alberta, confirmed this. Speaking for his fellow transplanted Ontarians, he wrote, “I cannot see why any of us should be more stupid than when we left the East. We have just as good a chance of learning the latest news. In this district we have church, Sunday school, literary societies, athletic clubs, farmers’ unions, and everything that will add to our pleasure.” In short, the Western Man was not the sharpest-looking bachelor in Canada, but neither was he “of rough character and stupid mind,” as his critics alleged.¹⁵⁰

Western Men were just as quick to defend their manners and morality. According to Alberta’s “Cowboy II,”

the Cowboys are not what the ten cent novels would lead a person to believe.... I have never met a better bunch of fellows in all my travels.... The majority of them come of good families and are well-educated; and although they are rough and ready on the ranch or ‘round up,’ put them among ladies and I

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Typical of the sort of home the West's bachelor-homesteaders could offer a woman – at least in the early years – was Clarence Rinehart's primitive, but tidy, "homestead shack" in Bottrel, Alberta (ca. 1916), to which his female friend, Nellie Crow, paid a visit that summer. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA-4143-1.*

can safely say that they will behave and be just as polite as the average city man.¹⁵¹

A fellow Albertan, agreed. Yes western bachelors were rough around the edges, he said, and yes they indulged occasionally in alcohol, tobacco, and profanity, but this was understandable given their circumstances. At root, he insisted, they were good men and would make good husbands, for "in these men I have found hearts of gold, true friendship, honour and gentlemanly straight-forwardness."¹⁵² Some westerners even tried using their moral shortcomings to their romantic advantage. They argued that if the Western Man was uncivilized in some ways, was this not all the more reason for women of the East to marry one, in order to bring him up to standard? "He needs ... the ennobling influence of woman to bring out the best that is in him," argued "Wilkins" from the West, who pointed to his friend "Jimmy" as proof. Jimmy always combed his hair and dressed more neatly after receiving a letter from his "girl" in the East.¹⁵³

Women, too, came to the defence of the Western Man, particularly those with husbands, sons, or brothers in the West. These women were offended by the ridicule and aspersions cast upon their loved ones and insisted that the western bachelors, on the whole, were of the finest quality in every respect – as good, if not better than the eastern bachelors. They applauded, above all, the Western Man’s “grit.” “Any one who is spirited and courageous enough to build a home for himself in the Great West, where there are so many difficulties to contend with,” wrote one farmer’s daughter from Ontario, “is surely worthy of a good helpmate, and any Eastern girl should be proud to have such a man for a friend”; such men were “real men.”¹⁵⁴ They commended him, as well, for his gentlemanly qualities and overall refinement. “I have rarely met or seen any who did not respect woman,” wrote Saskatchewan’s “Prairie Rose.” “Some perhaps were rather uncouth and quite uncongenial. Others were gentlemen by nature. I think it is quite as possible to find men of refinement, integrity, and intelligence among the Western bachelor farmers and ranchers as elsewhere.”¹⁵⁵ After all, she added, “many of them come from cultured, refined homes in the Eastern provinces or England.” Only in the cities, with their many saloons and pool rooms – of which the cities of the East had plenty – would one be likely to encounter the animal-like bachelor so maligned by the Eastern Man and others.

It was a long and, at times, emotional debate. But what effect did it have on how Canadian women perceived the Western Man? Did he retain the affection of the average eastern maiden? In the end, it was likely a zero-sum game. That is, for every woman scared off by the eastern bachelor’s assault against his western rival, just as many were probably drawn in by the Western Man’s initial pitch and the subsequent comments of his defenders. More important is what the debate tells us about the Canadian woman’s idea of the perfect husband in these years. It tells us that she wanted a man who was industrious, ambitious, and tough enough to make something of himself; who would not treat her like a slave; who displayed evidence of high moral character; who was clean and neat in appearance; and who showed kindness and compassion to all living things. To many women, the Western Man epitomized such qualities. To others, he did not.

Returning, then, to “Scarlett Pimpernel’s” question of 1909: did “every girl have her own private ideal, each one differing as do their hats?” The answer is “no.” It’s true that women were somewhat less forward than men in describing their ideal. It’s also true that (like single men) their definition



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Perhaps to dispel the myth of the beastly western man, this group of 1907 Alberta bachelors looks particularly spiffy. Their well-groomed appearance certainly would have appealed to the region's relatively rare bachelorettes and to the abundant but more wary maidens farther east. *Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NA-128-10.*

of the ideal spouse depended to some extent on their class and where they lived. Upper-class women and “city girls,” for instance, were more likely to value a man's wealth, appearance, and “refinement,” and to place less importance on his toughness or physical strength; unaccustomed to, and fearful of, the demands of farm life, they also favoured a less demanding, urban-based man.¹⁵⁶ Women of the western provinces, meanwhile, placed less emphasis on a man's morality.

Despite differences, however, many Canadian women – perhaps most – could agree on a single definition of the ideal man. It was, moreover, a definition that historians have so far failed to identify fully. By examining elite sources of gender construction, they have identified only the narrow “official” version of the ideal man: the morally upright, physically fit, race-minded, and socially conscious man. In fact, Canadian women sought this and much more. Above all they sought husbands who would be good providers, possessed sufficient quantities of physical and mental fortitude,

would not treat them as slaves, were honest in their social dealings, demonstrated kindness and consideration, and – last but not least – kept themselves “clean and neat” in appearance.

No one writer captured the essence of this pre-war ideal exactly, but a few came close. In 1905 a young Ontario woman told readers that her ideal man “should be tall, strong, straight, fairly good-looking, healthy and neat in appearance ... brave enough to shield those who would look to him for help and able to bear the cares and trials of life ... tender-hearted ... honest ... filled with ambition to succeed ... [and] he should not use strong drink.”¹⁵⁷ Several years later, a “Cowboy Girl” from Saskatchewan rounded out the picture by telling readers that “if a man refused to serve King Alcohol or My Lady Nicotine, is incapable of a mean or dishonest action, and has too much respect for a woman to permit her to do any hard work, while he sits idly looking at her, he is worthy of a good girl’s love and life-long devotion.”¹⁵⁸ For the average Canadian woman, this was the picture of the perfect man. This was the man of her dreams.