

# *The Gentlewomen of Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel*

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A brass plaque outside 2412 Alder Street Vancouver, in the early twentieth century proclaimed to passers-by that the dwelling was Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel for Gentlewomen born in the United Kingdom seeking employment in British Columbia. From the end of 1912 until the 1930s, Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel provided accommodation and training in Canadian household methods for emigrant gentlewomen. It was one of a growing number of women's hostels established across Canada before World War I by women interested in promoting British female immigration. While hostels which operated with the aid of government funds welcomed immigrant domestics, the privately endowed Vancouver Hostel acquired distinctive status by restricting admission exclusively to gentlewomen. The location of the hostel for gentlewomen did not occur by accident; in the early twentieth century British Columbia became a favoured destination for working gentlewomen from the British Isles. A study of Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel shows how belonging to a privileged social class both benefited and restricted one group of gentlewomen who were attracted to British Columbia.<sup>1</sup>

Female emigration recently has begun to receive attention from authors interested in the complex relationship of gender, class, and ethnicity. The connection between feminism and imperialism is an important issue in the study of British female middle class emigration. Victorian ideology confined middle class women to the domestic sphere as "angels-in-the house" but acknowledged that women of the lower social orders might need to work outside the home. Therefore, the sexual imbalance in British society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created a particularly difficult situation for gentlewomen whose marriage prospects were seriously curtailed by the lack of suitable men and whose employment prospects were severely constrained by the need to maintain social status. In the mid-nineteenth

Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro, Eds., *Not Just Pin Money*  
Victoria: Camosun College, 1984

century, emigration began to be promoted as one solution to their needs, a feminist solution if designed to provide greater independence through a wider range of employment opportunities, and an anti-feminist solution if intended to constrain middle class women to the traditional sphere of the home and to prevent reform in Britain through the use of a safety-valve mechanism. Migration within the Empire was strongly encouraged by imperial interests. Since imperialists generally stressed women's central role in developing the homes of the Empire, they seem to be associated with the more conservative forces. Yet imperialism and anti-feminism are not automatically bedfellows; an interest in strengthening the Empire could equally be linked with a commitment to improving opportunities for women.

Two books directly relevant to Canada focus on British emigrant gentlewomen. *Emigrant Gentlewomen*, by James Hammerton, traces the promotion and growth of British female emigration as a solution to the "problem" of distressed gentlewomen from 1830 to 1914. *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty*, edited by Susan Jackel, presents selections from the writings of British gentlewomen who came to the Canadian prairies often for the express purpose of reporting their experiences to a British audience. Both Hammerton and Jackel identify the relation between feminism and imperialism as a major theme. Hammerton portrays the 1860s feminism of the Female Middle Class Emigration Society as quickly being overwhelmed by philanthropic and imperialistic enthusiasm for the feminine civilizing mission of home and family. Jackel rejects a clear dichotomy and views the concentration on gender and marriage as coexisting with an emphasis on training to reduce dependency.<sup>2</sup> Given the divergence of interpretation in the existing studies, the significance of feminism and imperialism, including possible differences in motivation between sponsors and emigrants, becomes a central issue in the examination of Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel.

The study of Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel extends the analysis of gentlewomen's emigration beyond the chronological boundary of World War I where existing literature on female emigration and women's work tends to end. The intriguing question of whether the war constituted a watershed in female middle class immigration cannot be answered without more studies on the place of women in the 1920s on both sides of the Atlantic, but the history of the gentlewomen of Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel provides initial indications of probable changes. Did the war mark the disappearance of the distressed gentlewoman so commonly associated with the Victorian period? Hammerton challenges the nineteenth century stereotype of the helpless, dependent gentlewoman, possessing the accomplishments of a lady but lacking employment skills, by asserting that many of these same gentlewomen had the courage and determination to create new lives for themselves in the colonies. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the qualities of character which he praises increasingly became an inadequate substitute for the formal training required for professional employment in the twentieth century. Lee Holcombe in her book *Victorian Ladies at Work* claims that the idea work degraded ladies was passing away by 1914, but shows that middle class working women were still restricted to certain occupations, especially teaching and nursing, shop and clerical work.<sup>3</sup> A study of Queen Mary's

Coronation Hostel raises questions about the preparation for work received by emigrant gentlewomen, as opposed to the wider spectrum of middle class women, in relation to their expectations and experiences of life in British Columbia.

The Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel records, held at the Vancouver City Archives, provide better information on individual immigrants than is available in the surviving documentation from most Canadian women's hostels of the period. As well as annual reports, the Hostel records for several of the years contain monthly reports which give the names of residents, their period of stay, and the employment they obtained. In addition, there are lists of emigrants for both pre-war and post-war years, a register book for the pre-war period, and official emigration forms for those emigrants who arrived in the years 1930 and later. Nevertheless, there are gaps in the information, especially regarding the background of the immigrants, and variations in the types of record make it difficult to compare the pre-war and post-war period. Correspondence between Hostel authorities and representatives of British societies selecting gentlewomen for the Hostel and between Hostel authorities and emigrant gentlewomen or prospective employers reveals more of the expectations and motivations of both sponsors and emigrants. I have supplemented the Hostel records with interviews with five of the women who came to the Hostel between 1926 and 1931 and who provided information on their own experiences and those of other emigrants whom they knew, and with records held in England of the British societies which cooperated with the Hostel.

Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel owed its existence to the initiative of Mrs. Mary Agnes FitzGibbon, a Toronto journalist who in 1907 moved to British Columbia.<sup>4</sup> In 1911, with the aid of Mary Minto, wife of the former Governor-General of Canada, who acted as intermediary, Mrs. FitzGibbon persuaded Lord Strathcona, Canadian High Commissioner in London, to provide an endowment fund of \$100,000 for the Hostel. Financial advisers, appointed by the trust deed, controlled the major fiscal arrangements for the purchase and maintenance of the Hostel, but FitzGibbon, as head of the Board of Management, was responsible for overseeing the actual operation. After a house on Barclay Street had been leased for nine months, the Hostel acquired permanent quarters with the purchase of an Alder Street house which a prominent Vancouver citizen had built in the late nineteenth century on the highest point on the city outskirts overlooking False Creek. An additional bequest of \$1000 from Lord Strathcona facilitated furnishing the Hostel in style with monogrammed Doulton china, linen, chairs, and St. James rugs shipped from England.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the Hostel resembled an upper middle class home more than an institution. As described by a former resident who appreciated the comfort and view which the Hostel offered:

It was just like a home away from home. It was very nice. It wasn't a hostelly sort of place. It had a big verandah. It was on Alder Street with a lovely view of the city below.<sup>6</sup>

The terms of the trust deed empowered the Hostel to receive various categories of British gentlewomen including students of household work and

service to receive training at the Hostel, a limited number of permanent boarders who would provide practice for the students, and transients seeking temporary accommodation on first arrival in the province or between situations.

Mary Agnes FitzGibbon drew what she described as the "stick-to-it-ness" necessary for founding the Vancouver Hostel from her strong imperialism.<sup>7</sup> Described in Morgan's *Canadian Men and Women of the Time* as "more interested in the problem of imperial unity than in anything else",<sup>8</sup> FitzGibbon undoubtedly absorbed imperial sentiments from her immediate family. She never knew her lawyer father, Richard Bernard, who died before she was born, but when she was eleven her widowed mother married D'Alton McCarthy, a staunch imperialist later to gain prominence as a founder of the Imperial Federation League. In 1881, as a young lady of nineteen, Mary went to England with her aunt, the second wife of John A. Macdonald, and made her debut in the London season. A year later, she married Clare FitzGibbon, a lawyer of titled Irish parentage and lived in Britain for the next fourteen years.<sup>9</sup> For Mary Agnes FitzGibbon, England truly became a second home, and she readily linked her sense of Canadian identity with loyalty to the wider Empire. Even after her return to Canada in 1896, FitzGibbon spent almost as much time in England as she did in the land of her birth. It was during an extended visit to London on the occasion of the coronation of King George and Queen Mary that Mary FitzGibbon arranged for the establishment of Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel.<sup>10</sup>



Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel, Vancouver.

FitzGibbon's interest in fostering women's emigration formed part of a well-established pattern of activity for socially prominent women concerned with the fate of Empire. The women's societies concentrated on female emigration not only because women's affairs unquestionably belonged to women's proper sphere but also because women required the most assistance. Single men of all classes emigrated much more readily than did their sisters, helping to create an imbalance of the sexes in both Britain and Canada. Class interests as well as imperial enthusiasms shaped the work of the emigration promoters. These interests did not always coincide on both sides of the Atlantic. Canadian women, especially in the larger eastern cities, most warmly welcomed trained British domestic servants whom they and their friends could employ while advancing the cause of the Empire, but not educated women who would compete with their daughters for jobs and husbands. British women, who did not wish to lose their domestic servants, directed most of their emigration propaganda to the middle class women who, because of their lack of training and the social restrictions on their employment, seemed to be the most obviously displaced by the sexual imbalance in British society. They argued that women of culture and refinement made especially valuable "Missionaries of Empire," and that Britain must send out her best to ensure the imperial loyalty of the Dominions.<sup>11</sup> The British Women's Emigration Association (BWEA), the largest of the British societies, in its literature consistently maintained a special interest in educated women but in practice worked with all social classes. Because educated women were always a minority of those sponsored by the BWEA, a separate association, the Colonial Intelligence League for Educated Women (CIL), was formed in 1910 to deal exclusively with them. Ella Sykes, a League representative who toured Canada in 1911 to investigate employment opportunities for educated women, explained the imperial motivation of the CIL:

It is an Imperial work to help girls of a high stamp to seek their fortunes beyond the seas - women who will care for our glorious Flag and what it signifies, who will stand for higher ideals than the worship of the "almighty dollar," and who will do their part in the land that their brothers are developing so splendidly.<sup>12</sup>

In establishing Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel, FitzGibbon similarly chose to work exclusively with those whom she called gentlewomen. "Gentlewoman" was a flexible term in British society which defied exact definition. Gentility did not depend solely on birth and station, but also incorporated qualities of character. To be a gentlewoman connoted, more than anything else, good breeding: manners, culture, and refinement which could only be nurtured by those with considerable leisure time. With the growth of the middle classes in nineteenth century Britain, the belief that gentility could be acquired by education and effort challenged the older view that birth determined social status.<sup>13</sup> Since the concept of gentility was amorphous, whom did FitzGibbon accept as gentlewomen qualified for admission to Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel?

FitzGibbon's interpretation of "gentlewoman" appears to have been

more rigid than that of her British associates who selected applicants for the Hostel. The terms of the trust deed contain no definition of "gentlewoman", but correspondence indicates that FitzGibbon believed that gentlewomen derived their status by birth; that is, they were the daughters of gentlemen farmers or of professional men, such as lawyers, doctors, clergymen, and military officers. By contrast, FitzGibbon's British associates placed more emphasis on education than on birth. The head of the Scottish committee, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, made education the only criterion of selection and rejected the term "gentlewoman" as an English concept inapplicable to Scotland. She informed FitzGibbon:

I think that we in Scotland have rather a different type of individual from what is meant in England by the term "gentlewoman" - an expression which one never hears in Scotland - but I expect that you would include in such a term women who had had a thoroughly good secondary education, and those who came from the teacher class, many of which class we have already placed in Canada as Home helps. I think myself that such young women would probably be more valuable in Canada than those that in England are termed "gentlewomen," but it is difficult for anyone not acquainted with the Scotch quite to appreciate these National distinctions.<sup>14</sup>

The English associates also pressed the claims of education as a basis of selection. Mrs. Caroline Grosvenor, President of the Colonial Intelligence League, wrote to FitzGibbon: "It is impossible to draw a hard and fast line. The daughters of men in business are often absolute ladies, while the daughters of some professional men are nothing of the kind."<sup>15</sup> The League agreed that "all students of household work and service who desire to obtain posts through the medium of the Hostel shall belong to class (a), i.e. GENTLEWOMEN BY BIRTH" but refused to eliminate entirely those referred to as "the Class B girl" because:

We are doing our very utmost in the C.I.L. to keep up the standard of efficiency, character, physical health etc. If a woman of education comes up to our standard in all these ways, we cannot possibly refuse her because we do not consider her to be socially Class A....From what I have seen of Canadians, I am quite sure that they will quite rightly value efficiency far more than they will value birth and breeding.<sup>16</sup>

In her surviving correspondence, FitzGibbon unfortunately never explicitly indicates why she chose to concentrate her emigration work on a narrowly defined group of gentlewomen. Mary FitzGibbon possessed the requisite social graces for moving in the best circles of British society, and, according to observers, she fully enjoyed the experience.<sup>17</sup> Undoubtedly she shared the belief that women of culture and refinement made superior missionaries of Empire. In addition, more than most society women, FitzGibbon could empathize with the problems of working gentlewomen for she knew from personal experience the difficulties of having to earn money.

In 1896, Mrs. FitzGibbon's husband was confined to a mental institution, and two years later her step-father, D'Alton McCarthy, with whom she was living in Toronto, was killed in a carriage accident. Thereafter, Mary Agnes FitzGibbon became the sole support of herself and her daughter Frances. She turned to journalism, writing the Driftwood column in the *Toronto Globe* under the name of Lally Bernard, because she had to earn her living by her pen.<sup>18</sup> It was gentlewomen like herself, possessing the accomplishments of a lady but forced by circumstances to seek employment, whom FitzGibbon wished to assist.

FitzGibbon's imperialism was quite compatible with an interest in improving employment opportunities for gentlewomen. Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel received gentlewomen seeking any type of employment in British Columbia, and one resident recalled how she was castigated by FitzGibbon for wasting her capabilities because she seemed to have secretarial training which she was not using to obtain steady employment.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the Hostel catered particularly to those in search of work as home helps. For these women, the Hostel not only provided a training course but also operated an employment service, appointing representatives in various part of the province to find suitable positions and placing the beneficiaries without fee, several times if required. FitzGibbon promoted the occupation of home help, not because she wanted to confine women to the home sphere, but because she believed domestic work to be the most practical solution to the employment problems of untrained gentlewomen. She explained her view of the "superfluous woman in Britain" in her column in the *Globe*:

She is the non-professional woman, usually the daughter of a professional man, and she is generally in every sense a "gentlewoman"... She has been brought up by her parents in a sort of haphazard way. The possibility of matrimony is a sort of mirage on the horizon. She is really fitted only to fill a niche in some household, and the question is how to find the proper niche for her to fill and then to transport her possibly many thousands of miles to the vocation which may await her.<sup>20</sup>

FitzGibbon regarded household work as suitable employment for gentlewomen partly because she shared the ideas of the domestic science advocates. In her writings in the *Globe*, she supported the idea that household work could be placed on a footing with the sciences of medicine and nursing through the development of certificated, trained domestic help.<sup>21</sup> Her insistence that British women must either take the training course at the Hostel or, if already trained in Britain, pass a test in Canadian household methods before being recommended for positions formed part of the effort to improve and guarantee standards of domestic work. The apparent inconsistency between advocating domestic work as the most practical employment for those without training and insisting that training was essential for domestic work may be resolved when the lack of prior formal education required and the limited period of time proposed for domestic



training is taken into account. No educational certificate was necessary for admission to the training course at the Hostel which generally lasted six to eight weeks.

In spite of her hope that domestic science might raise the status of domestic service, FitzGibbon definitely did not regard all household work in the unreformed society of British Columbia as suitable for gentlewomen. Gentlewomen maintained their social standing by taking positions as home helps, not as servants. As the Lady-in-Charge at the Hostel informed a prospective employer, "we never supply servants and only receive and find positions for ladies."<sup>22</sup> A home help - or companion help or lady help - was distinguished from a domestic servant by her status in the household more than by the work which she performed. As implied by the term 'help', she expected to be treated as a member of the family, to assist with the family work, to eat meals with the family, and to share in the social life of the community. Such employment could usually be found in rural rather than urban areas, but one important qualification separated home helps from the majority of rural hired helps. A home help must be placed with a family of her own class where she would not suffer loss of status by associating with either employers or servants who were less cultured than herself. Hence, in seeking positions for emigrant gentlewomen, Hostel authorities tried to combine the dual criteria of rural life and family of proper social rank. The provisional rules of the Hostel stated that a suitable post would be found for emigrants "if possible in a rural district as the Hostel authorities consider that the position of Domestic help is far better in the country than in the town, and will endeavour to place the graduate from the hostel with people of her own rank of life."<sup>23</sup> British Columbia, more than other Canadian provinces, seemed to present the possibility of fulfilling these aims.

Representatives of British societies who toured Canada investigating opportunities for educated women concluded that only British Columbia offered satisfactory employment for home helps. In other parts of Canada, home help was too often simply another word for a maid-of-all-work, but on Vancouver Island, in the Okanagan and Kootenay Valleys, and even in the northern Cariboo region, emigrant gentlewomen could be placed with British settlers of their own status. In 1919, a British committee investigating openings for women in Canada described the British character of part of Vancouver Island:

The districts of Duncan, Shawnigan and Cowichan, Vancouver Island, comprise several settlements of retired Army, Navy and professional men and other British residents of moderate means, who in many cases do some farming on their holdings, but in others live upon their incomes. The settlement is thus largely English in character and bears little resemblance to the usual Canadian farming community.<sup>24</sup>

Such communities were believed to offer ideal opportunities for British home helps. As Ella Sykes reported for the CIL:

Vancouver Island presents advantages from the point of view of the "lady-help" which are not to be



surpassed in any other part of the Dominion. Climate, environment, and many other blessings make this an ideal locality for the woman of gentle birth who seeks employment in a private household, for there are scores of country homes.... To work with and for the people who regulate their daily life with much the same method and charm as one finds in English country homes, without losing what may be described as "Social caste," should be a simple and congenial occupation.<sup>25</sup>

Accepting employment with these British families, emigrant gentlewomen should have the right environment and sufficient leisure time to maintain their culture and accomplishments. Although not mentioned explicitly by the investigators, the frequent employment of Chinese servants in British Columbia may also have increased the attractiveness of BC positions. The Chinese servants lived in separate quarters, not interfering with the living arrangements of a home help, and removed much of the heavy work, often including the cooking, from the realm of the home help.

In spite of its favourable location, the Hostel never assisted as many gentlewomen as was originally intended. In part, limited accommodation facilities restricted admission to the Hostel. The city of Vancouver blocked plans for building an addition to the Alder Street house which would have expanded the capacity of the Hostel to twenty-seven residents in addition to the staff.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, although Hostel reports do not state precisely the number of women who could be accommodated at one time, nine, or ten at the most, obviously filled all available space. Expansion problems might have been overcome but a more serious obstacle intervened. The Hostel had been in operation in its Alder Street quarters for only a year when the Great War disrupted immigration from Britain.

Little information is available on the background and motivations of the gentlewomen who came to Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel during its first period of operation. According to Hostel reports, seventy-five beneficiaries passed through the Hostel by 1915: one in 1912, thirty-eight in 1913, thirty-one in 1914, and five in 1915. Of those listed in the Hostel register book, most came from England, primarily southern England, with a few from Scotland, Ireland, and Wales.<sup>27</sup> Seldom was any other background information recorded in spite of the insistence that beneficiaries must be gentlewomen. British women obtained admission to the Hostel only through personal introduction - from Mrs. FitzGibbon herself, from a representative of the CIL, or from another beneficiary or person known to the Hostel authorities. The introduction guaranteed suitability and the name of the person providing the recommendation was the information entered in the register book.

The Hostel began its work at a difficult time; emigrant gentlewomen found their chances for securing suitable employment and adjusting happily to life in British Columbia severely constricted by the 1913-14 recession and the advent of war. Gentlewomen who arrived at the Hostel seeking secretarial or teaching employment outnumbered those who wanted household work, but regardless of initial preference, most obtained positions as home helps.

Canadian competition made clerical posts difficult to obtain, especially if the applicant lacked shorthand and typing skills. Hence, of the fifty gentlewomen whose employment can be ascertained from the registration book, thirty-two were engaged in homes, while thirteen obtained clerical positions, four were teachers and one a waitress. The 1914 Hostel Annual Report confirms that almost all suitable applications received by the Hostel were for household workers; of forty-two posts filled in 1914, thirty-eight were for household helps, housekeepers, or governesses in homes.<sup>28</sup>

Employment as a home help, the only type of work which the Hostel could guarantee, did not always suit the abilities or meet the expectations of the pre-war emigrant gentlewomen. Inevitably, success and satisfaction varied greatly, depending both on the nature of the position offered and the qualities of the gentlewoman taking the employment. Miss Kinlock, age thirty-two, a member of a "very good Scotch family," and described as "thoroughly capable, a nice inmate of a household, and good tennis player and musician," took the course of training at the Hostel and obtained a well-paid position in desirable surroundings with Colonel and Mrs. Eardley-Wilmot at Shawnigan Lake.<sup>29</sup> Not all were so fortunate. Wages were usually modest and with the outbreak of war sometimes non-existent. The Lady-in-Charge at the Hostel advised beneficiaries to work for board and lodging if necessary rather than be out of a place.<sup>30</sup> Not surprisingly, those gentlewomen who encountered problems occupied much of the time of Hostel authorities. Certain beneficiaries were not physically or emotionally strong enough to fill regular home help positions, and Hostel authorities repeatedly sought light work for them. The first annual report of the Hostel painted a very bleak picture of the fate of working gentlewomen in British Columbia:

The first part of the year was largely taken up in looking after those who entered the Hostel in bad health, and they received from the Management all the care and attention usually found in a convalescent home. It is necessary to point out that this side of the work is of great importance in British Columbia; so many of the gentlewomen workers from the United Kingdom break down during their first year in the Province from overwork, or strain, consequent upon the uncertainty, loneliness and their general inability to cope with circumstances of a novel character.<sup>31</sup>

The adaptation of the gentlewomen of Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel, with or without the benefit of convalescent care, was interrupted by the war. The Great War aborted the colonial experience of many Hostelites who "returned to their homes to be near their people during the war,"<sup>32</sup> some from a sense of duty and others probably with a sigh of relief. Since the Hostel stopped its work in the latter war years, the records for those gentlewomen who remained in British Columbia are incomplete. At least nine are recorded as married, and a few as attempting varied independent endeavours such as operating tea rooms in Vancouver in the summer. Whether others who remained in British Columbia were able to use home help work as a stepping-stone to more permanent careers, including marriage, is unknown. The Hostel itself placed its living rooms at the disposal of a large chapter of the

Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire and in 1917 closed entirely, renting the premises for the duration of the war.<sup>33</sup>

When Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel reopened its doors to emigrant gentlewomen in November 1922, FitzGibbon's aims had not changed. For imperialists, the cooperation between Britain and the Dominions in the war effort confirmed the importance of strengthening imperial bonds by redistributing population within the Empire. Encouraging the emigration of single women continued to be a priority because the war, which killed part of a generation of young men, reinforced sexual imbalance in British society. FitzGibbon also adamantly refused to alter the class bias of recruiting for the Hostel only gentlewomen of approved background. The divergence of interest between FitzGibbon and her British associates became even more pronounced in the 1920s. Most gentlewomen were sent to the Hostel either by the Society for Overseas Settlement of British Women (SOSBW), a new society which absorbed both the CIL and BWEA, or by Miss Mabel Durham, head of the CNR's Women's Bureau in London, who as a well-known BC resident and journalist was given special permission by Mrs. FitzGibbon to direct women to the Hostel.<sup>34</sup> The SOSBW wanted FitzGibbon to "take girls of a different category who had attended secondary schools but were not necessarily daughters of professional men."<sup>35</sup> A SOSBW representative stayed at the Hostel which she found "quite delightful" but was unable to impress upon FitzGibbon "the views of the modern educated girl in this country."<sup>36</sup>

The Great War changed the lives of many educated women in Britain. While their experience still requires much more study, undoubtedly educated women frequently acquired from war work an independence and training which otherwise they would not have received. At the same time as the war brought tragedy and death into their lives, it fostered a spirit of self-reliance which did not vanish with the cessation of hostilities. A 1928 emigrant to Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel later explained how the war affected her life and prepared the way for her decision to travel to Canada:

The majority of the young men that I knew where I grew up - I grew up on the east coast of England - just never returned, so we were a lost generation more or less and in fact a good many of my friends in England have never married from that generation because there weren't the men. (Q. Is that one of the reasons why you came to Canada?) I suppose. It wasn't uppermost in my mind because I was full of adventure in those days and I was the oldest in the family and I'd never been allowed to do anything until the war came along and then I joined the Wrens and that was the beginning of the end as far as my people were concerned because girls just didn't do those things then you know.<sup>37</sup>

The image of the emigrant gentlewoman which emerges from the Hostel records of the inter-war period bears little resemblance to the distressed gentlewoman stereotype of pre-war emigration literature. A precise total of arrivals during the decade from 1922 to 1932 cannot be given because Hostel records are incomplete for certain years, but the number can be estimated at

approximately one hundred. The small number of British women coming to the Hostel indicates careful pre-selection which seemed to stress not only social class but also the suitability of the applicant for work as a home help. As one former Hostel resident explained, "It was expected that we should be household helps."<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, detailed background information from emigration forms is available only for the group of twenty-two women who came between 1930 and 1932. These women ranged in age from nineteen to forty-four, but most were between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five.<sup>39</sup> Those who were old enough had been employed in war service ranging from the Women's Forestry Services in France or VAD work with a Paris hostel to clerical work with the Ministry of National Service, industrial work with scientific instrument manufacturers, and farm work in England. Those who held paid employment after the war generally worked in clerical positions, as matrons in institutions, or in a variety of household positions involving either indoor or gardening work. Several who had not been old enough to engage in war service remained at home after they left school. The section for experience on their forms emphasized their volunteer activities in the community or with organizations such as Girl Guides, their participation in sports, especially tennis and swimming, and often their ability to drive a motor car. Whether or not they held paid employment, the emigrants were not destitute or lacking in resources to pay their fare to Canada. Because of the restrictions beginning to be imposed on immigration to Canada during the Depression, they may have possessed more funds than some of the earlier 1920s gentlewomen who received passage loans under the Empire Settlement Act in order to come to Canada. While Hostel correspondence confirms that the inter-war emigrants possessed the requisite qualities of character and strength to cope with life in British Columbia, it is striking that even by 1930 many educated women coming to the Hostel were not trained for professional work.

Interviews provide more information on some of the individual circumstances and interests which motivated gentlewomen to come to Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel. Miss Swan sought better employment opportunities in Canada.<sup>40</sup> Since her parents had died and she had lost most of her inheritance to her step-father, she had to earn her own living. After taking a domestic science course at Gloucester Training College, she obtained a position as Under Matron in the Junior House at Cheltenham Ladies College but she could never become Head Matron because she lacked the necessary nursing qualifications. A Canadian friend whom she met encouraged her to seek improvement in Canada so she emigrated in 1928 at age twenty-six.

Other gentlewomen seemed primarily interested in travel, adventure, and seeing more of the world. Upper middle class women with money had travelled before World War I to extend their education and sometimes to write about their experiences, but the idea of working one's way around the world - or even through part of the Empire - was a more novel one for gentlewomen. In "A Lady-Tramp in Canada," which appeared in *Chamber's Journal* in 1904, Margaret Innes Pollock advocated earning money with domestic work in order to pay for travel expenses.<sup>41</sup> Without having read the

article, some 1920s gentlewomen followed her suggestion.

Miss Chambers and Miss Taylor, both ex-Wrens who engaged in clerical positions after the war, regarded the possibility of working in British Columbia as an "adventure" and a "real challenge and change from London." Influenced by Wren friends who had already emigrated to British Columbia, Chambers came to the Hostel in 1926 at age twenty-six and Taylor in 1928 at age thirty-one. In 1930, Miss Brown at age thirty-five left a good job with a London investment office, which she obtained after war work at the Oxford recruiting barracks and a correspondence college course, because she read a Canadian employment notice at the Overseas League and decided to see the world. In her words:

I thought I might as well see the world and work at the same time so I went to Canada House and BC House. They put me in touch with the SOSBW. They thought I had some ulterior idea of going - that I had fallen out with my family or had an unhappy love affair or something. I assured them, no, I am going to see the world.

Similarly, Miss Johnson, who had remained at home since leaving school, was influenced by an article in a Guide magazine and by friends who had worked their way around the world and found that BC was the best place to find work for those unqualified. She left England in 1931 at age twenty-eight, escaping from an unwelcome boyfriend and promising her mother that she would return in a year.

The gentlewomen of Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel were concerned with their own interests, not with the fate of Empire. While it is very unlikely that they consciously shared any imperial aims to strengthen the Empire through female emigration, their individual actions were shaped by imperial structures. In both emotional and practical terms, movement within the Empire was easier than emigration to a foreign country. Advertising and networks of assistance promoted opportunities in the Dominions. The choice lay between Canada and Australia, New Zealand, or South Africa, and Canada frequently was favoured because it was closer to Britain. Organizations with imperial interests, such as the Guides and the Overseas League, supported the encouragement which the SOSBW gave to migration within the Empire. The Canadian display at the Wembley British Empire Exhibition in 1924 also aroused much interest. Personal contacts frequently were the most important. A number of 1930s emigrants belonged to families who had lived in various parts of the Empire, and the settlement of retired military officers in British Columbia often provided a nucleus of friends, or even relatives, as well as of potential employers.

In the decade from 1922 to 1932 as in the pre-war period, most of the Hostel beneficiaries took positions as home helps or in related types of outdoor work on poultry, dairy, sheep, or seed farms. Home help was the work available, especially for those lacking professional training. Secretarial work, the one main alternative for many gentlewomen, remained difficult to obtain in the 1920s and Hostel literature warned prospective applicants that they should be prepared to begin as home helps. The Hostel provided the

training considered necessary for rural home help work in a six to eight week course which most beneficiaries took. As one emigrant explained:

We took a six weeks' course to familiarize us with Canadian ways of cooking and living. We had to learn more isolated ways of living in Canada as well as urban ways... I'd never done hard housework and I wondered whether I'd do it properly, and the idea of having this course was quite a comfort because we had to do things properly.<sup>42</sup>

Home help positions provided respectable work for gentlewomen who, from necessity or from choice, sought to earn their living in British Columbia, but employment conditions were generally restrictive. Wages continued to be relatively low, about twenty to twenty-five dollars per month according to applications sent to the Hostel.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the work was doubly isolated, being both in rural areas and in the private sphere. For example, Margaret Beadle worked on a goat ranch near Fulford Harbour on Salt Spring Island which her employer described as "about a mile from the road, in the bush, up a very steep hill, so that it is impossible for a girl to get out at night."<sup>44</sup> She wrote to the Lady-in-Charge at the Hostel that:

Col. and Mrs. Bryant are both very nice to work for and they make you feel absolutely at home. I find the work interesting too. I am leaving in about a fortnight time, because I find it a bit lonely and I want to get a job with another girl for the summer.<sup>45</sup>

Employers often called attention to the lack of social life in their applications for help. Laura Forbes of the Overbury Poultry Farm on Thetis Island wrote "as we are very much in the country and there are not a great many young people about, I think perhaps not too young a girl would be the most suitable - say about 25 or so."<sup>46</sup> It was not only positions on the small islands or more remote ranches which seemed so isolated. The Hon. Mrs. Laughton wrote that a home help working for her "would have to be fond of the country as this place is 4 miles from Duncan, the nearest town."<sup>47</sup>

Relations with the family could also create problems. One home help found her first employer's standard of cleanliness quite appalling:

There was no water in the house and a Chinaman had to bring buckets of water in the kitchen, for everything, washing, cooking, etc. The house, [and my employer], were accordingly dirty. Everything was dirty, my bedroom full of dirty paper, the wash basin had a black rim, the bedcloth was dirty - I was horrified, disgusted. I wrote at once to Mrs. McKay, the Lady-in-Charge at the Hostel that I simply could not stay. After a month I left.<sup>48</sup>

More frequently, living conditions were satisfactory, but home helps found difficulty reconciling a position as a paid employee with treatment as a member of the family. Home helps did not always enjoy sharing family social activities. One who worked near Duncan conveyed her feelings of reluctance:

They went in for dinner parties - Duncan was full of colonels and people. They used to insist on me going in

and eating with them which was very difficult for me because I used to look and see whether he could cut the pastry on the pie. I put on a long dress [for dinner] and then afterwards I refused to go in and sit with them in the sitting room. I used to put on my white coat and go in and wash up.<sup>49</sup>

What some home helps particularly missed was the opportunity to pursue their own interests or leisure activities during definite hours off work. Home helps may have possessed a status superior to domestic servants but they shared the common complaint of household workers - not enough free time. One stated emphatically:

We never got away. We never got away. We were supposed to have four days off to come to Victoria but we never got them. Always some excuse.... (Q. Did you do anything socially while you were there?) No, nothing.<sup>50</sup>

Yet at least one home help suggested that those who lacked time off work had themselves to blame for insufficient initiative:

(Q. Did you have definite days off?) Yes, and I always took it even if I just went for a walk because I noticed that the other helps if they didn't have anything special to do, they'd just work which I think was silly. I think it is much better even if you stay in bed reading if it's raining. It's much better to take your day off.... I organized a help's day off once and we hired a boat. We had fun. We went clear over to Salt Spring and had a picnic.<sup>51</sup>

Home help work, even among British settlers in British Columbia, continued to be considered by Hostel authorities as best suited for the young and the strong. Positions where the home help was required to assist with cooking, housework, and children entailed hard labour. Outdoor types who enjoyed animals, gardening, and sports seemed best prepared for many rural openings, but even they sometimes were frustrated. Lois Evans wrote from "Goatlands" on Vancouver Island that

I am fond of all animals and have worked in England with cows, goats, pigs and poultry but I am keenest on goats. I have been with Miss Payne for 6 months.... I did not realize until I arrived that I had all the indoor work including the cooking to do as well as the goats. I have had 5 years with goats and here I do the work that any lad of 14 could do.<sup>52</sup>

Gentlewomen frequently moved from one position to another and combined work in private homes with seasonal employment in fruit picking or in resort hotels. Home help work was the most available employment but it was usually only a temporary solution to the needs of gentlewomen who had to earn their own living. Unfortunately, the Hostel records, which end in the early 1930s do not provide very satisfactory information on the later lives of the inter-war emigrants. At least twelve are known to have married and an equal number to have left the province to return home or go to other



countries. Of the five women whom I interviewed, three married men whom they met in Canada. Taylor met her husband while they were both working at a CPR hotel in the Rockies. Brown also met her husband, a ferry operator, when she was working at a summer resort hotel. Chambers, after employment on a seed and dairy farm on Vancouver Island, bought a shack of her own, did odd jobs, and eventually married the brother of a good friend. Johnson kept her promise to her mother and returned to England, travelling via the Panama Canal and New York, but she soon came back to British Columbia and, encouraged by her former BC employer, trained as a nurse at the Vancouver General Hospital. Swan, after employment as a home help on Vancouver Island, took a business course but was unable to obtain office employment. She worked for thirty-two years as the companion-housekeeper for a Victoria lady who in her will left her a house and two lots.

Mary Agnes FitzGibbon died in 1933 at the same time as the Depression ended the emigration activities of the Hostel which she founded. FitzGibbon hoped to strengthen imperial ties and to give a better chance in life to gentlewomen who had to earn their own living. She saw no inconsistency between these two aims and there is no indication that she viewed the Hostel as a matrimonial bureau in disguise. It was her class interests and assumptions, rather than her imperialism, which circumscribed her work, restricting the group admitted to the Hostel and concentrating the activities of the Hostel on promoting the occupation of home help. The emphasis placed on home help work, while in part a recognition of existing employment opportunities and in part an effort to improve conditions in the home sphere, reinforced rather than challenged the limitations surrounding gentlewomen's employment. The emigrant gentlewomen who came to Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel were motivated primarily by their own private concerns rather than by more general imperial or societal interests, but their choices were shaped by the imperial and class framework which governed their lives. By the very act of emigrating and seeking work in British Columbia, whether because of the need for better employment or the desire to travel, the gentlewomen of Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel asserted their independence and their interest in expanding their horizons. Although their background as well as their character continued to influence their opportunities, life in a new country with more space had attractive features. In the words of a Sussex gentlewoman who found she could not remain in England after having lived in Canada:

I shall never settle in this country again! And I should much prefer to be in B.C. I have to earn my living. I am doing so at the present time. My experience is that wherever I go I have to work hard and I'd rather do it in Canada, a new Country and a beautiful climate where I love the life.<sup>53</sup>

## Footnotes

1. A study of the immigration of gentlewomen as home helps forms part of my research in progress on "The Women Canada Welcomed: Immigrant Domestic for Canadian Homes, 1870-1940". I wish to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the research grant which assisted me in the production of this paper.
2. A. James Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen: Genteel Poverty and Female Emigration, 1830-1914*, London, 1979; Susan Jackel, *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty: British Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West, 1880-1914*, The University of British Columbia, 1982.
3. Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work*, Hamden, Connecticut, 1973.
4. Mrs. Mary Agnes FitzGibbon must not be confused with Miss Mary Agnes FitzGibbon, the granddaughter of Susanna Moodie, who was instrumental in the establishment of the Toronto Women's Welcome Hostel in 1905. For information on the Toronto Hostel, see M. Barber, "The Women Ontario Welcomed: Immigrant Domestic for Ontario Homes, 1870-1930," *Ontario History* Vol. LXXII, No. 3, Sept. 1980, and B. Roberts, "'A Work of Empire': Canadian Reformers and British Female Immigration," in *A Not Unreasonable Claim*, ed. Linda Kealey, Toronto, 1979.
5. Vancouver City Archives [VCA], Queen Mary's Coronation Hostel records [QMCH]. Vol. 1, File 1, Minto to FitzGibbon, 2 Oct. 1911, 25 Jan. 1912; First Annual Report of the Board of Management; Trust Deed; Invoice of Goods, Doulton & Co Ltd., Jas. Shoolbred & Co. Ltd.; *Vancouver Sun*, 8 June 1940, "Mansion of the 80s".
6. Interview with 1931 emigrant, 30 October 1979.
7. PAC, George Parkin Papers, FitzGibbon to Parkin, 15 July 1912.
8. H.J. Morgan, *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time*, Second Edition, Toronto, 1912: 399.
9. *Ibid.*, Clare FitzGibbon was the son of the Hon. Gerald and Lady Louise FitzGibbon of Mt. Shannon, Ireland.
10. Amy Ridley, "The Dual Struggle: Mary Agnes FitzGibbon, Toronto Journalist 1899-1907," M.A. Research Essay, Institute of Canadian Studies, Carleton University, 1983, provides information on the life and journalistic career of Mary Agnes FitzGibbon.
11. *Imperial Colonist*, Nov. 1904: 404.
12. Ella Sykes, *A Home-Help in Canada*, Second Edition, London, 1915: 304.
13. Barbara Frankle, *The Genteel Family: High-Victorian Conceptions of Domesticity and Good Behaviour*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1969; Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1982, Chap. 1.
14. VCA, QMCH, Vol. 1, File 1, Helen Munro Ferguson to Mrs. FitzGibbon, 4 Dec. 1912.
15. VCA, QMCH, Vol. 1 File 1, Grosvenor to Mrs. FitzGibbon, 7 August, 1913.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Amy Ridley, *op. cit.*: 51.
18. Amy Ridley, *op. cit.*
19. Interview with 1926 emigrant, 19 March 1980.
20. *Globe*, Toronto, 25 June 1904.
21. *Ibid.*, 20 June 1903.
22. VCA, QMCH, Vol. 1, File 4, Letterbook, p. 290, Lady-in-Charge to Mrs. Read, Duncan, 26 April 1915.
23. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, File 1, Provisional Rules.
24. *Report to the President of the Oversea Settlement Committee of the Delegates Appointed to Enquire as to Openings in Canada for Women from the United Kingdom*, Parliamentary Paper, Cmd. 403, 1919.

25. *The Imperial Colonist*, Oct. 1910: 163.
26. Municipal authorities refused to grant a permit for a wooden building and stated that if the addition were built in brick the entire existing building would have to be covered with a veneer of the same material. The Board decided that the expense of such an undertaking would exceed the amount allowed by the terms of the Trust. VCA, QMCH, Vol.1, File 2, Second Annual Report of the Board of Management.
27. Of the sixty-four listed, thirty-nine were from England, seven from Scotland, three from Ireland, two from Wales, and thirteen origin not given. VCA, QMCH, Registration Book.
28. VCA, QMCH, Vol. 1, File 2. Of the fifty-five gentlewomen for whom the Registration Book lists the employment sought, twenty-eight sought clerical, teaching, nursing, or journalistic employment while twenty-four sought household work and three wanted horticultural employment.
29. VCA, QMCH, Vol. 1, File 4, Letterbook: 49, 52.
30. *Ibid.*: 129, 132.
31. VCA, QMCH, Vol. 1, File 1, First Annual Report of the Board of Management: 3.
32. VCA, QMCH, Vol. 1, File 2, Second Annual Report of the Board of Management: 2.
33. *Ibid.*, Second and Fifth Annual Reports of the Board of Management.
34. Mabel Theresa Durham, of UEL descent, grew up in the Niagara Peninsula of Ontario, taught school in the "Upper Country" of BC in the early 1900s and worked for the *Vancouver Province* after moving to Vancouver in 1907. *Woman's Life and Work in British Columbia*, Compiled by Local Councils of Women of B.C., 1909, UBC Special Collections.
35. Fawcett Library, London, SOSBW, Canada Committee, Oct. 1928, p. 12.
36. *Ibid.*, Dec. 1928: 20.
37. Interview 1928 emigrant, age 31, Victoria, 26 October 1979.
38. Interview 1926 emigrant, 19 March 1980.
39. There may have been only twenty-one in the group as it is not clear whether one applicant actually came to the Hostel. Of the twenty whose ages are available, half (ten) were between twenty-five and twenty-nine, four between thirty and thirty-four, three between nineteen and twenty-four and three between thirty-five and forty-four. The one age nineteen was regarded as "very young" by the Hostel authorities who made a special effort to place her close to the Hostel. Information compiled from VCA, QMCH, Vol. 2.
40. Names of those interviewed have been altered to preserved confidentiality.
41. *Chambers' Journal*, Vol. VIII, 1904-05: 11-14.
42. Interview 1928 emigrant (Miss Taylor), Victoria, 26 October 1979.
43. In the 1920s, inexperienced female farm help on the prairies were supposed to receive \$15 per month, and experienced cooks or cook-generals in major cities received at least \$40 per month.
44. VCA QMCH, Vol. 1 File 5, Mrs. Bryant to Mrs. Durand, 5 April 1926.
45. *Ibid.*, Margaret Beadle to Mrs. Durand, 5 April 1926.
46. *Ibid.*, March 1926.
47. *Ibid.*, 7 July 1926.
48. Letter to author, 15 October 1979.
49. Interview 1931 emigrant, 30 October 1979.
50. Interview 1928 emigrant, 27 October 1979.
51. Interview 1931 emigrant, 30 October 1979.
52. VCA, QMCH, Lois Evans to Mrs. Durand, 7 March 1926.
53. VCA, QMCH, Vol. 2, File 3, Virginia Barford to Mrs. FitzGibbon, 14 July 1933.