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Review Article

The Significance of Gender Among Emigrant Gentlefolk

Patrick A. Dunae, *Gentlemen Emigrants, From the British Public Schools to the Canadian Frontier*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1981. Pp. 276. \$18.95.

Susan Jackel, *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty, British Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West, 1880-1914*. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1982. Pp. 229. \$21.95.

Victorian England was saturated by gentility, overburdened with gentle bearing, over-populated by gentle folk. The signs of the malaise were many, girls so protected from flesh meat, fresh air and physical exercise that they literally wasted away; ladies covered in clothing crafted with such elegance and artifice that it made them ill, the work of eighteenth century master furniture makers shrouded in cloths lest its shape by anthropomorphic allusion give offense. It was a century of awkward and earnest excess, excess in ornamentation, in moral rectitude, in extraterritorial adventurism and in gentle blood. Most societies possess a surplus of people claiming right to positions of leisure and power, but in Victorian England this glut was acute.

The supernumerary gentlemen of the time were in large measure the creations of the public schools. Although changes in British agriculture may have eroded gentry incomes, the predicament of the sons of minor landed families seems to have emerged more from cultural predilection than economic necessity. As purchased commissions in the army were abolished, a competitive system for entry into the civil service begun, and the qualifying examinations for medicine and law made more rigorous, the public schools of England continued to prepare their students in classics and athletics and to minimise the importance of science, applied mathematics and history. They trained up students who sought a competence rather than excellence, well comported on the playing field, good all round fellows but young men who could contribute little to technology or commerce, whom the

rising meritocracy appraised and rejected. Nineteenth century Britain could accommodate only a limited number of classically-trained gentlemen wishing to linger in an eighteenth century world. Whither then, these muscular young Christians with their anti-modern minds? Implausibly their parents, the Headmasters' Conference, even some status-struck officials in the Dominions pressed these callow, largely ornamental athletes forward as leaders of a new order overseas, as empire-builders, even though building was patently an applied science, perhaps even a craft.

The overabundance of gentlewomen had a demographic foundation. Girls were more likely than boys to survive childhood. Young men were more inclined than young women to emigrate, by a ratio of three to two in the last half of the nineteenth century. These factors combined so that by 1911 there were 1.3 million more females than males among the 45 million inhabitants of the United Kingdom. This situation placed middle-class single women in a definitional conundrum which in their society incorporated all the makings of a subsistence crisis. Ladies were dependent creatures who did not work for wages. The preferred status as dependent, wife, was less attainable. The possible positions as dependent, governess, tutor, companion, live-in poor relation, offered means so narrow that they brought their incumbents close to destitution. The option of independence through waged employment was neither offered in the labour market nor easily contemplated by the culture.

Along the range of life's afflictions, status-strain is one of the less mortal, but as librettists of comic opera have long known, and two books in Canadian history lately affirm, the contemplation of precipitous displacement can be interesting entertainment. *Gentlemen Emigrants*, by Patrick Dunae of the Public Archives of British Columbia, and *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty*, by Susan Jackel of the University of Alberta, deal respectively with British gentlemen and gentlewomen during their first blush phase as emigrants, principally to the Canadian west in the period 1880 to 1914. The supernumerary Victorians and Edwardians of whom they write were literate and, if variously perspicaciously observant and flamboyantly hapless, rarely dull. Each author has written a consciously gender-specific history and although neither appears to have read the other's account in manuscript, their subjects invite comparison. By and large it would seem that the women fared better than the men, paradoxically because the emigration of their type had almost no history and very little to recommend it.

Gentlemen emigrants were no new breed. Lieutenant-governor John Graves Simcoe, himself a classically-trained gentleman, foresaw

a place for just this sort of settler when he planned Upper Canada as a Roman military colony under eighteenth century British constitutional and social structures in the Constitutional Act of 1791. Edward Gibbon Wakefield, contemplating the art of colonisation from behind the bars of Newgate prison, had in mind a similar hierarchical arcadia in which transplanted aristocrats would serve as arbiters of the balanced parts. James Douglas, governor of the Hudson's Bay colony of Victoria, was informed from London at mid-century that

the object of every sound system of colonisation should be, not to reorganise Society on a new basis, which is simply absurd, but to transfer to the new country whatever is most valuable and most approved in the institutions of the old, so that Society may, as far as possible consist of the same classes, united together by the same ties, and having the same relative duties to perform....

Apart from settlers there was the increasingly evocative Victorian model of gentleman sojourner, the military commander, the colonial company official, the up and coming aide-de-camp struggling in some steamy dependency to maintain the right ways, the old ways, to serve as proper example to local inhabitants for as long as he could manage before the strain took its toll.

This world, in which gentlemen might properly be gentlemen, must necessarily be so if the colony were to function according to plan, existed for a time in British North America. Samuel Strickland lived out the role with considerable staying power along the Otonabee in the 1830s, as did Walter Colquhoun Grant, although with less resilience, at Sooke on Vancouver Island in the 1840s. But as Dunae points out, these aspiring landed gentlemen had some acquaintance with the land. They came from a predominantly rural England and had at least a cursory knowledge of country life. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, when the pretenders to the position became most numerous, rebellion, responsible government and the granting of Dominion status had left the plans of Simcoe and Wakefield in considerable disarray and British public school men, despite their experience with fresh air on the cricket pitch, were essentially urban folk. For all this, the rank of gentleman retained a certain plausibility. Each young man who found his route to this station blocked in Britain had an elder brother who would achieve the position through inheritance, and perhaps several more quick-witted siblings who would pass through trials by merit into gentlemanly callings at home. Thus when men such as Captain Edward Mitchell Pierce, squire of Cannington Manor N.W.T., claimed, as he did in the Allan Steamship Lines handbook for 1887, that a financially embarrassed gentleman "with a few hundred a

year" could "lead and enjoy an English squire's existence of a century ago" in the Canadian northwest, families felt obliged to allow their surplus cadets to have a go, and young men embarked for the Dominion with confident expectations of continuity abroad.

By contrast the lady emigrants of Victorian England were drawn from among the ranks of those who had rather given up on continuity. At mid-century a group had begun to agitate for a change in the law concerning married women's property. Under the sobriquet, the Ladies of Langham Place, they began to publish the *English Woman's Journal* in whose pages appeared columns and columns of musings upon what a gentlewoman was to do with her time and her talent and in order to keep bread on the table now that fewer would marry, and at a later age and to bear fewer children. They perceived their society growing more visibly divided and were more likely as individuals to be under the sway of an evangelical religion which counselled women and men alike to be of some earthly use. One faction of this constituency organised the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women to train up female copyists, law clerks and printers. Another began to work for woman suffrage and a third devoted its energies to the Female Middle-Class Emigration Society, an association which in the sixties guided parties of English women to the antipodes and by the turn of the century, renamed the British Women's Emigration Association, was focussing its attentions principally on Canada. Although the emigration-minded were the least radical of the group, they too had acknowledged that the "lady" as a "person of leisure and privilege [was] part of a mounting social problem," a creature who had to be remodelled to suit the changing times. Certainly travelling overseas alone in an unmarried state to a place far from the shelter and reflected status of male kin would undermine the older sense of self, so much did it challenge the foundations of that identification. In a sense, however, change was easier for emigrant gentlewomen than for gentlemen. The British class position of women, because it offered them less, constrained them less. Ladies were pressed to a reformulation of their acknowledged social station which gentlemen might evade, and to a habit of mind open to new country influences which their male peers spurned for continuity, to remain "forever emigrants."

Patrick Dunae allows his gentlemen to put their best feet forward, arguing that they brought needed capital into the west, that their culture added "a gentler tone and softer hue to many backwoods and prairie communities." Naive is the strongest characterisation he can summon for young men who remained inordinately devoted to games and other leisure activities although they had farms and ranches to neglect. Yet his own narrative tells another story.

Farm schools and agricultural colonies, the preferred Canadian destinations of public school men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were described by their proponents and proprietors as transition places in which gentry emigrants might live among equals under the supervision of experienced gentlemen of their own class while gradually accustoming themselves to the hard life of settlers. More commonly emigrant gentlemen appear to have lived in these enclaves in the accustomed ways of propertied England, pursuing regressive rather than adaptive strategies, remaining aloof from Canadians, retaining their old world prejudices, retreating to England when their money ran out. These communities tended to function upon a two-class system with waged Canadian labourers doing the tasks publicity pamphlets associated with the hard life of the settler and young gentlemen pursuing their sport. In Cannington Manor, the hired help were called "drones," a usage Dunae unreflectively adopts as his own.

From the agricultural colonies and farm schools the view of the surrounding society was intolerant and insular. Dunae tries to sanitize this hauteur by calling it ethnocentricity. He presents the withering devices with which remittance men attempted to establish class hierarchy within their communities as though they were merely manifestations of a regional folk culture, describing in these terms for example the young woman mocked for calling herself a Canadian by her father's gentleman employer — who likened the designation to calling a man born in a stable a horse. Without doubt this girl understood, from the parallel he drew, that the issue between them was not birthplace or ethnic origin but rank, and that in this the farm owner was claiming no common cause with her. At best these Britons of "moderate means but aristocratic aspirations" must have been unhelpful neighbours, at worst, anti-social blights upon the local community. Dunae writes with clarity, at times with elegance, but it is difficult to understand how he can conclude from tales filled with so much discomforting evidence of violent class prejudice, harsh intolerance of ethnic difference and hostility toward Canadian national aspiration, that the gentleman emigrants were most notable for the gentleness they brought to Canadian Culture.

The women whose writings appear in *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty* "came to Canada prepared to work for a living but also in most cases hoping to make a suitable marriage here." In addition to colonists' letters home the collection includes a number of reports from female adventurers who "went native" for a time in the west and then wrote books, to finance their own lives back in England while encouraging

others to leave the old world for a settler's life abroad. While the difference may be attributable in measure to this strong admixture of publicists' accounts in Jackel's compilation, a stark contrast certainly emerges through these two volumes between male and female reactions to the new world.

The women whom Jackel has selected are with one exception, — a whining rancher's wife—practical, adaptable and cheery, willing to convince themselves that unblackened boots had a certain cachet when there was neither time nor money for blackening, comforted by Canadians' easy tolerance when they no longer had energy or resources for formal housekeeping. Gentlewomen in Canada, if these accounts are representative, seem not to have clung to the fetishism of genes or the belief in the necessary association only with equals which so afflicted their male peers. If anything, their reactions to British gentlemen seem to have been similar to those of Mary Inderwick, a woman from Perth, Ontario, cited by Dunae, who as wife of an English gentleman rancher was often châtelaine to those of his countrymen who passed through the foothills. Inderwick cried out in frustration against Englishmen's "never-ending laudation of England," and with many of the women whose accounts appear in *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty*, took exception to British men's assertions of Canadian uncouthness, insisting that to compare western Canada with England was as absurd as to compare "a young and lusty baby with a learned, polished and very beautiful woman." British women tended to lay the blame for anti-British feeling at the feet of their male compatriots and to cast snobbery to ridicule, for example by querying why a woman riding the tail of a herd should be shocking, when a lady who followed the hounds would be claimed as an honoured acquaintance. The women in Jackel's collection were looking for a release from "the intense economic, psychological and intellectual constraint in England," for latitude to be different, to redefine what was suitable; for a place in which to earn a living for a time and then marry, but not for a place in which to be a gentleman's wife, or lead a gentleman's life.

Although both studies cry for some more sustained attempt to disentangle class from ethnicity, Jackel makes a better beginning, emphasizing Canadians' commitment to an emerging consciousness of class, distinctive from gentry Englishmen's "notions of inherited and fixed positions in the social hierarchy," and integrating gender into the calculus of both ethnicity and class. Regrettably we hear little of Jackel herself, thirty-two pages in all. The bulk of her book consists of fourteen excerpts from printed sources, thirteen of which are reasonably readily available through Canadian university interlibrary loan services, four of which read exceedingly awkwardly in their edited

form, two of which contain unfootnoted factual errors. Her introductory commentaries are well grounded in the existing research and insightful, but for \$21.95 many will wish that the University of British Columbia Press had been able to prevail upon her to offer instead the original scholarly study of female emigration which the Canadian literature still sadly lacks.

At base a severe documentary problem hobbles studies of immigrant adjustment. Many emigrants leave no written traces, and those few educated to the epistolary mode write long, thoughtful and evocative letters home only so long as they feel themselves strangers in need of strong connections with and support from the old country. As they adapt they fall silent. Both the Dunae and Jackel books suffer because the diaries and letters upon which they are based are largely callow first impressions. The quantitative evidence of income and occupational distribution from which adaptation might be measured is, however, merely ephemeral in another way, sufficient to locate but not to illuminate the circumstances of the newcomer turned countryman. General readers will find in these two books a collection of eccentric men and bright stout-hearted women, who are written about or write about themselves in a literate and engaging fashion. Immigration specialists will put the volume down feeling that they have witnessed only the first act, but uncertain how to produce the rest of the play.