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# The Transformation of the Canadian Domestic Servant, 1871–1931

*This article uses the national sample of the 1901 census of Canada to compare the earnings of live-in domestic servants with the earnings of women in other occupations and to examine the ethnoreligious backgrounds of domestic servants. The hypothesis that domestic service offered relative material advantages, when room and board are taken into account, is rejected. The hypothesis that female domestic servants came from a narrow range of specific ethnoreligious backgrounds is also rejected. The changing backgrounds and expectations of female domestic servants in the early twentieth century exacerbated class tensions in the service sector, helping ensure that domestic service remained an occupation of short duration and high turnover. The conclusion is that domestic service did not simply decline; rather, a work process was transformed. Demographic changes combined with changes in family and individual strategies to limit the supply of labor. When efforts to increase labor supply failed, bourgeois employers attempted to replace labor with new household technology; the wage-paid occupation of the domestic servant declined and was replaced by that of the unpaid housewife.*

"I'd rather pick rags and keep my self-respect!" Such was the reaction of one Canadian woman who faced the prospect of becoming a domestic servant in the early twentieth century (Salverson 1981 [1939]: 319). The Canadian literature on the history of domestic servants could easily lead to the conclusion that Laura Goodman Salverson was speaking for most young women of her generation. Of course, there were real and anticipated benefits from being "in service," particularly for young immigrants, for whom domestic service was an obvious path of entry into Canada and its labor markets. In

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1901, 38 percent of all women with paid labor occupations were servants, and the occupation attracted more women than the entire manufacturing sector. While acknowledging the anticipated benefits, Canadian historians have tended to emphasize the many disadvantages of the occupation from the employee's perspective. Employers wanted to hire "respectable" British women but often failed to find them and were forced to turn to eastern European immigrants, of whom they were highly suspicious (Barber 1980, 1984, 1991; Lindstrom-Best 1988). Whether immigrant or Canadian-born, young women found themselves in an occupation that entailed long hours, lack of freedom, loneliness, and vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Ethnic and religious prejudices exacerbated tensions between bourgeois employers and the working-class stranger in their homes (Lenskyj 1981). Bourgeois conceptions of class encouraged an association of domestic servants with criminality, especially theft and prostitution (McLean and Barber 2004). Despite the ostensible respectability of employment in a bourgeois home, the stigma of inferiority was inescapable (Fahrni 1997). Canadian historians have given us plenty of evidence to show why domestic service was an occupation of short duration and high turnover rates. Here was a job that quickly repelled most who entered it.

Domestic service has a distinct place in the history of work in capitalist societies: an occupation strongly associated with women in nineteenth-century Europe and North America, it was one of the few female-dominated occupations that declined in the twentieth century. On the question of long-term decline, the Canadian and international literatures rarely engage each other. For Canadian researchers, long-term decline is not a primary focus, perhaps because the causes are obvious. Only those who had no choice entered domestic service; those who had a choice, according to Marilyn Barber (1991: 8), preferred work in factories, offices, or shops, even though wages in service were comparable. In the first half of the twentieth century, a changing economic structure meant that more young women, including immigrant women, could act on their preferences. The demand for workers remained strong; the occupation declined, therefore, because of a failure of labor supply.

American and British researchers focus more extensively on the long-term decline than Canadian historians and are more explicit about the relative importance of wages and noneconomic factors in causing that decline. Research on the United States suggests that servants' earnings compared

favorably with the earnings of other unskilled or semiskilled workers in the late nineteenth century, especially since room and board were provided; that any discontent among servants was not related to wage levels; and that even when servants' earnings were higher than earnings in other occupations, women shunned domestic service for noneconomic reasons (Katzman 1978: 303–14; Sutherland 1981: 109–10; Lasser 1987). For England, Teresa M. McBride (1976: 64) concludes that domestic service had a distinct monetary advantage over other occupations for women in the nineteenth century; that servants were doing comparatively well even in the early twentieth century; and that despite relatively good earnings, the long-term decline began after the peak in employment in 1891 (see also Schwarz 1999). These conclusions imply something very important about the collective choices of large numbers of women: noneconomic factors, including calculations related to status, independence, and the nature of employer-employee relations, took priority over material self-interest.

Is it so clear, however, that women who shunned domestic service were sacrificing material advantage? Estimating the real earnings of domestic servants is extremely difficult, and even where evidence is abundant, historians acknowledge problems of data quality and representativeness (Katzman 1978: 298–302; Sutherland 1981: 108). Fortunately, recently released Canadian sources allow us to revisit the history of domestic service and to offer new evidence on the earnings and backgrounds of domestic servants. The decennial census was the only systematic attempt to identify and record all domestic servants in the country and to locate them in the context of their households. We no longer need to rely on the aggregated information in published census tables, although those tables remain useful in plotting long-term trends. Census microdata—the individual-level information collected by enumerators—are available in computerized national samples for 1871 and 1901 (Darroch and Ornstein 2000; Canadian Families Project 2002). Also available in machine-readable format from the North Atlantic Population Project and Minnesota Population Center (2004) is the entire population of Canada as enumerated in 1881, thanks to the work of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Canadian microdata are potentially powerful sources: Canadian enumerators, unlike their U.S. counterparts, asked a question about religious affiliation; beginning in 1901, the data include annual earnings for employees as well as other employment information (Baskerville and Sager 1998; Baskerville 2000; Sager 2000). This article makes particular

use of the national sample of the 1901 census and limited use of the 1871 and 1881 censuses.[1]

The analysis begins with two questions. First, when the movement of women away from domestic service began, how did earnings in service compare with earnings in other occupations? Second, did domestic servants come from specific immigrant and ethnoreligious backgrounds, as the contemporary image of the ubiquitous Irish "Bridget" suggests? Answers to these empirical questions lead to a wider concluding emphasis on the choices and strategies of both workers and employers in a specific configuration of class, gender, demographic change, and technological transformation of household work. Domestic service did not simply decline; rather, a work process was transformed.

Selecting domestic servants from census microdata requires that choices be made and specified, since the word *servant* was applied to many kinds of workers in the nineteenth century and selection criteria vary among historians. Should the focus be on servants who were lodged and fed by their employers and performed indoor household work (McBride 1976: 11), or does one also include nonresident servants and even chambermaids who worked in hotels (Sutherland 1981: xii)? To exclude farm servants on the grounds that they were agricultural workers risks excluding many who performed both household tasks and outdoor labor. In Canada the historian must be sensitive to varying contemporary usages in both French and English sources (Lacelle 1987: 15–17). The focus in this article is on urban domestic servants, whether resident or nonresident, who were paid for labor relating to the personal needs of household members and the maintenance of the household. Thus hotel workers, ship stewards, and farm servants are excluded; about 48 distinct occupational titles in the 1901 census are included, although the most frequent titles are domestic, servant, or domestic servant.

The published census tables are a blunt instrument, but they help us determine when the absolute and relative decline in domestic service began. Total employment in the "domestic and personal service sector," including men and women, grew until 1911 and then stabilized (figure 1). After 1891 growth occurred mainly in the "other" category, most of whom were unlikely to be live-in domestic servants, such as hairdressers, hotel and restaurant workers, janitors, and launderers. Between 1881 and 1921 the Canadian labor force grew by a factor of 2.3, whereas the number of male and female servants grew by a factor of 1.8; the decline in domestic service, therefore, was

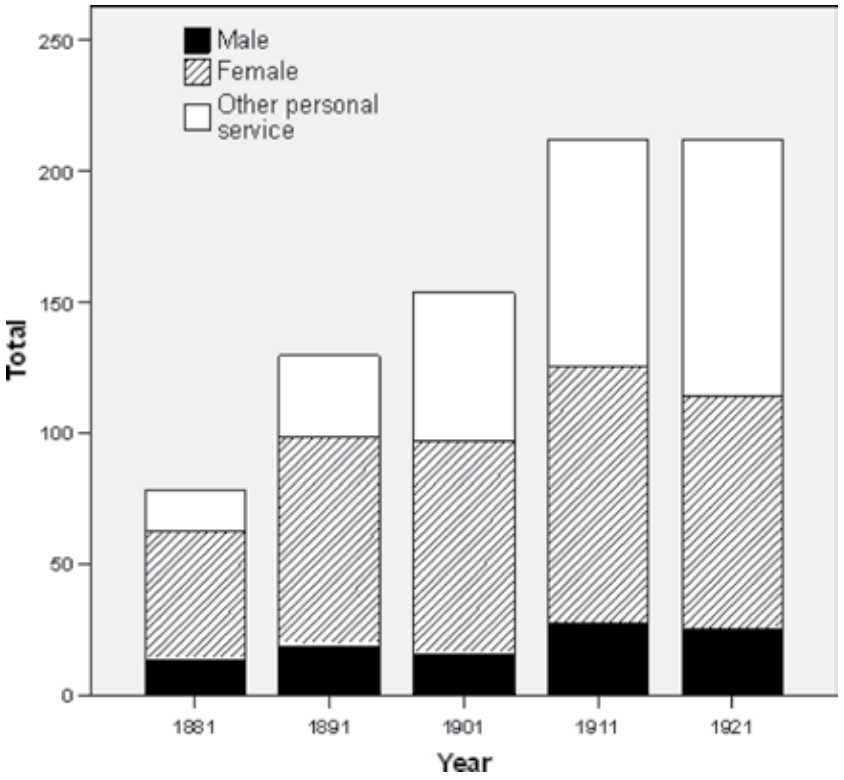


**Figure 1** Total male and female servants and total domestic and personal service workers (thousands), 1881–1921
Source: Dominion Bureau of Statistics 1924, 4: table 1.

relative. As a proportion of all paid labor, the decline in domestic service began in the 1890s: servants were 6.1 percent of the labor force in 1891, 5.5 percent in 1901, and 3.6 percent in 1921.[2] Female domestic servants were 41 percent of all women with occupations in 1891; this proportion fell to 34 percent in 1901 and to 18 percent in 1921 (Leslie 1974: 72).

The two decades before and after 1901 appear to be a turning point in the history of domestic service in Canada. What were servants earning at this time? The earnings information in the 1901 census allows comparisons among occupations at national and local levels and for subcategories of the broad "personal service" occupations. The earnings information has the enormous advantage that it records annual earnings, thereby adjusting for periods of unemployment during the year. The *Census and Statistics Bulle-*

*tin I: Wage Earners by Occupation* (Census Office 1907), which reports numbers of workers and average annual earnings for all employees in the country in 1901, suggests a national average of $272 for men in the "domestic and personal class" and $137 for women. The subcategory "servant" is more likely to reflect the earnings of domestic servants: the average was $182 for 11,767 male servants and $120 for 70,541 female servants.[3] These averages are below the national average for all wage earners in all occupations: $387 for men and $182 for women. Average earnings for the male servant, therefore, were around $200 below the national average for men; women domestics earned on average some $60 less than the national average for women.

Unlike other workers, domestic servants received room and board. The quality of food and accommodation must have varied considerably, but it is reasonable to ask what other workers were required to pay for room and board, for this cost was what the domestic servant faced when comparing the real value of wages in alternative occupations. Estimates of the weekly cost of board and lodging for "workingmen" were given by the federal Department of Labour in 1900 (*Labour Gazette* 1900). These estimates indicate an annual cost of $156 in Halifax, between $169 and $234 in Montreal, between $156 and $221 in Toronto, between $130 and $182 in Hamilton, and $260 in Vancouver. A lower annual cost was possible if one shared a small rented house and survived on a very modest diet: a worker might then live on between $80 and $100 a year in Halifax, Montreal, and Toronto and around $120 in Vancouver. Most workers also had to buy coal or wood for cooking and heating, and so we should add annual fuel costs ranging from $17 to $50, depending on the city.[4] To the extent that such broad averages tell us anything, they suggest that in real terms the earnings of the female domestic servant compared very well with the earnings of other women workers, although the same point cannot be made for men. Adding the costs of room, board, and fuel to the earnings of the female servant brings the real earnings well above the national average of $182 for all women employees. The earnings advantage of domestic servants was not simply that their employment included room and board; constancy of employment—10.95 months in the year, on average—was another material advantage.

Census microdata allow us to move beyond these aggregated national-level estimates, which may conceal wide variations among regions. The microdata also make it possible to identify the live-in servant. In 1891 and in subsequent censuses Canadian enumerators asked about the relationship

of each person to the head of his or her household. Often the words *domestic* or *servant* appear in the "relation to head" column, as well as other terms indicating a type of domestic service occupation. The census questions about occupation and relation to household head allow us to distinguish between live-in domestic servants and nonresident servants at the national and local levels. We can also focus on urban domestic servants, either by selecting urban locations or by excluding the servant whose household head was a farmer.

The 1901 microdata confirm the general conclusion drawn from the national-level data, although with some important qualifications.[5] If we exclude farm servants and compare live-in domestics with nonresident domestics, we find a surprising result. The mean earnings for women are almost identical: \$129 ($N = 1{,}789$) for live-in domestics, compared to \$130 ($N = 966$) for nonresident domestics. Live-in domestics had much higher real earnings, after we adjust for the food and accommodation costs of the nonresidents. This was a time when more domestic service workers were living outside the homes of their employers (Barber 1980: 151); to the extent that this trend was occurring in Canada, workers were forsaking the material advantage of "living in." The same point cannot be made for the minority of domestic service workers who were men: at \$355 a year ($N = 779$), the mean earnings of nonresident service workers were far higher than those of live-in male servants (\$251, $N = 313$).

If we want to understand the choices available to workers, the best comparisons are those between wages of workers in the same locations, thereby controlling for significant differences in wage levels across the country. We know that workers' earnings tended to increase with age, at least until they were in their forties (Sager 2007), and so we should also control for age. The following analysis focuses on Ontario towns having a population of 10,000 or more and selects only workers aged 16 to 28, since almost two-thirds of live-in domestics in those Ontario towns were in this age range. Annual earnings in domestic service were lower than in almost all other occupational sectors; the only exception is men in general laboring (table 1).

Nevertheless, this apparent earnings gap largely disappears, except possibly for men in sales and women in typing/clerical, when we factor in the domestic workers' savings in room and board. When a single worker in a southern Ontario city paid \$130 in board and lodging a year—or even \$80 a year, assuming shared accommodation—domestic service clearly had an

**Table 1** Mean annual earnings of workers aged 16–28 in seven Ontario towns of population at least 10,000, 1901

| | Earnings | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Occupation | Men | *N* | Women | *N* |
| Live-in domestics | $321 | 34 | $131 | 381 |
| Nonresident domestics | $315 | 75 | $129 | 110 |
| Sales | $418 | 108 | $201 | 57 |
| Typing/clerical | $354 | 454 | $252 | 222 |
| Manufacturing | $347 | 875 | $206 | 565 |
| General laboring | $290 | 175 | $151 | 2 |
| All occupations | $362 | 2,474 | $193 | 1,525 |

Source: Canadian Families Project 2002.

earnings advantage. And by contrast with the national-level averages, in these Ontario towns the earnings advantage of domestics applies to both women and men. Census microdata tend to confirm the contemporary impression that live-in servants "are really better off than girls working in factories or shops so far as wages and comfort are concerned" (Scott 1892: 19).

There is more than one way to compare earnings among occupations, however. Workers in 1901 were quite capable of making comparisons by more than one measure. There are three important qualifications to the tentative conclusion that servants had earnings advantages over other workers. Taken together, these qualifications suggest that we cannot accept the hypothesis that women shunned domestic service regardless of material self-interest.

First, live-in domestic servants appear to have earned a relatively small wage premium for age and experience. This was an occupation for young people in their teens and twenties; the majority left the occupation in their twenties or thirties either for another occupation or at the point of marriage. Young domestic servants who were aware of the earnings of their older colleagues would have concluded that significant wage increases were unlikely. In Ontario towns the mean earnings of women domestics in their late twenties were actually less than the mean earnings of women domestics in their late teens (figure 2). To increase one's chances of a wage increase, one had to be among the minority of women who remained in domestic service into one's thirties. Wage increases between the early and late twenties were much more likely to be won by young women in manufacturing or in clerical and sales work. If a woman stayed in the labor force into her late twenties, it made

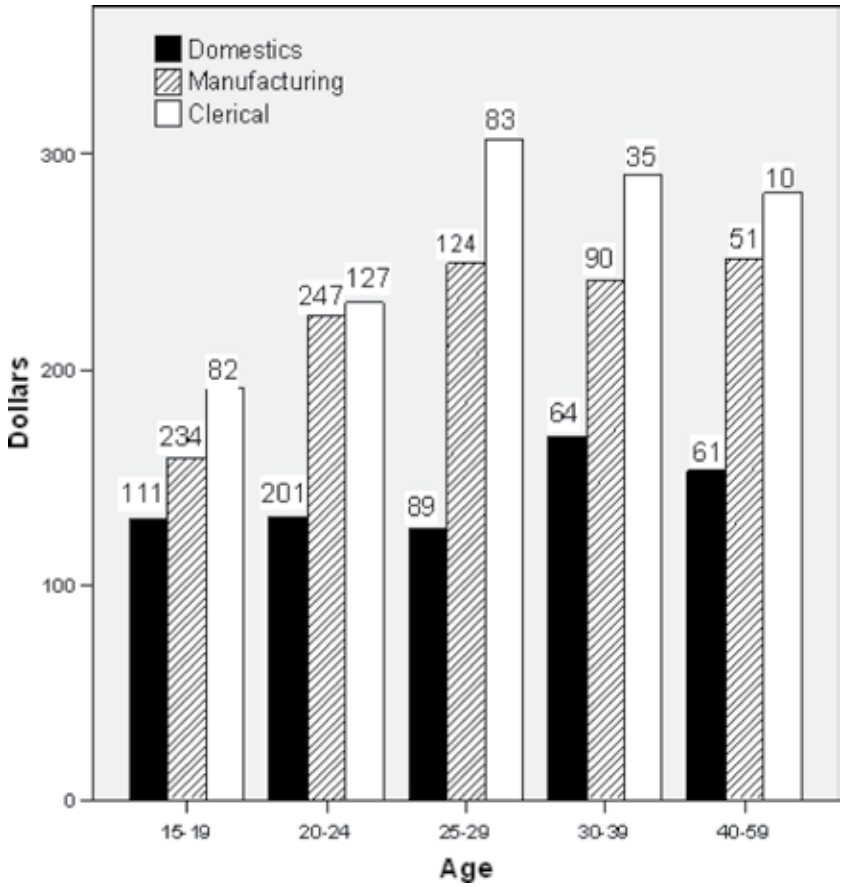


**Figure 2** Annual earnings of female live-in domestics, female employees in manufacturing, and female employees in clerical or sales occupations, Ontario towns of population at least 5,000, 1901
Source: Canadian Families Project 2002.
Note: Number of cases given in chart.

good economic sense to move out of domestic service and into clerical work or even into certain factory occupations, where the range in wage levels and the premium for experience were particularly large. An even better alternative, if one had the modest education requirements, was to become a schoolteacher at an average annual salary of $299. Even allowing for the costs of room and board, most women in the clerical, sales, and education sectors were earning more in real terms than domestic servants.

**Table 2** Mean annual earnings of women domestic workers (resident and nonresident) in urban Ontario, 1901

| Occupation | Mean | Standard deviation | *N* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cook | 156 | 91.2 | 58 |
| Housekeeper | 152 | 86.6 | 45 |
| Maid/housemaid | 147 | 81.1 | 45 |
| General servant | 137 | 131.8 | 399 |
| Waitress | 131 | 49.5 | 28 |
| Charwoman | 130 | 59.6 | 12 |
| Domestic servant | 125 | 72.3 | 345 |

Source: Canadian Families Project 2002.

Second, although there existed a hierarchy among servants, it was not complex in a country where the single-servant household was the norm. Opportunities for upward mobility in domestic service scarcely existed. In England and the United States the housekeeper in a large household was an administrator, the female manager of the household staff (Horn 1975: 53–57; Sutherland 1981: 88–89). Such housekeepers existed in Canada but were rare: only about 3,000 in the entire country, according to the *Census Bulletin*, and only a minority of these were employed in multiservant households. The traditional English butler, master of the large English household, appears to have been rare in Canada. Table 2 shows how narrow the earnings hierarchy was in the female domestic service workforce in Ontario towns of 1,000 people or more. There may have been rewards for experience and loyalty in these servant categories—some of the standard deviations are high—but the number of job categories was small, and there seems to have been little advantage to movement between jobs. In domestic service the opportunity for promotion was rare, and gains were meager.

Third and most important, it appears that the earnings advantage of domestic servants in 1901 was not maintained in the early decades of the twentieth century. We might expect wages to rise as the gap between supply and demand became more apparent. In 1892 Jean Thomson Scott (1892: 19) believed that "the supply of domestics is rather short of the demand; and, as a consequence, their wages have risen considerably." Whatever the case in 1892, in the first decades of the twentieth century the law of supply and demand seems to have been suspended. Despite their complaints about a

**Table 3** Women's annual earnings

| Year | All occupations (current $) | 1900 $ | Personal service (current $) | 1900 $ | Personal service/ all occupations x 100 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1901 | 182 | 182 | 137 | 137 | 75.3 |
| 1921 | 573 | 254 | 326 | 144 | 56.9 |
| 1931 | 559 | 319 | 296 | 169 | 53.0 |

Sources: For 1921 and 1931, Dominion Bureau of Statistics 1933: tables 15–16; for 1901, Census Office 1907.

Note: The adjustment to constant dollars uses the price index in Altman 1992: 458–59.

shortage of servants, employers were not willing to attract workers into the occupation by the most obvious means available—the offer of competitive wages. Our evidence on this point is necessarily tentative, since we must rely on the published census tables; nevertheless, the tentative conclusion is a strong one, since all the evidence points in one direction.

Average annual earnings for all women with occupations increased before falling with the onset of the depression of the 1930s. But the earnings of women in domestic and personal service did not keep pace. Looking first at the broad category of domestic and personal service, we see the earnings of service workers at 75 percent of the national average for women in 1901; by 1921 service workers earned, on average, only 57 percent of the average for all women (table 3). In constant dollars, the gain in real earnings by service workers was negligible or nonexistent between 1901 and 1921. We must await the release of post-1901 census microdata from the Canadian Century Research Infrastructure Project before we can focus on live-in domestic servants. Nevertheless, the 1931 census volume on earnings gives national- and provincial-level information on the category "domestic servant" for both 1921 and 1931; live-in domestic servants fall in this category, and it would require a highly improbable distribution of earnings in the category for the trend not to apply to live-in domestics. The census estimates of average annual earnings for domestic servants suggest that by 1921 domestic servants earned only 49 percent of the national average for women; in 1901 they had earned 66 percent of the national average. For domestic servants, there had been little if any increase in real earnings, adjusting for inflation, since 1901. The earnings of women servants had increased by 236 percent, and the cost

**Table 4** Average weekly and annual earnings of women in selected occupations, 1921

| Occupation | Weekly earnings | Annual earnings |
|---|---|---|
| Domestic servants | 5.82 | 284 |
| Charwoman | 7.95 | 374 |
| Cooks | 9.43 | 460 |
| Hairdressers, manicurists | 14.58 | 688 |
| Matrons, housekeepers | 6.99 | 350 |
| Waitresses | 9.18 | 426 |
| Saleswomen | 11.91 | 575 |
| Teachers | 16.41 | 827 |
| Telegraph operators | 18.46 | 899 |
| Telephone operators | 13.47 | 660 |
| Operatives: boots, shoes | 10.64 | 468 |
| Knitters | 10.83 | 498 |
| Weavers | 11.91 | 538 |
| Spinners | 10.30 | 468 |
| Milliners | 12.83 | 583 |

Source: Dominion Bureau of Statistics 1933: tables 20, 22.
Note: Annual earnings are calculated by multiplying average weekly earnings by average weeks worked.

of living had risen by an estimated 226 percent (Altman 1992); by contrast, the mean earnings of all women workers had increased by 315 percent. An unprecedented earnings gap had opened up between domestic servants and other workers, including even women in other service occupations (table 4). In 1921 it was much less likely that the room and board of live-in domestics could compensate for the disparity with the earnings of other workers, since the real earnings of domestic servants had not increased over the previous 20 years.

Young women workers now had both material and other reasons to seek work outside domestic service. In explaining the decline of this occupation, we cannot reduce the choices of women workers to simple calculations of relative material advantage, important as these may have been. There is always an interaction between earnings and other conditions of work in the class relations between workers and employers. The status of the domestic servant was already low; the growing wage gap with other occupations would have reinforced the status gap. And what do we know about the young people who had to choose among occupations in this period? Any change in the backgrounds and identities of employees would interact with the status

of the occupation and with workers' estimation of its advantages and disadvantages. Census microdata reveal that there were important changes in the profile of domestic servants in the last decades of the nineteenth century: the servants of 1901 were not the same as the servants of 1871 and 1881.

There is plenty of evidence in the secondary literature to suggest that domestic servants were vulnerable to exploitation: they were young and predominantly female, and many were recent immigrants, struggling to find a place in new and unfamiliar labor markets. At first glance, census data confirm the demographic profile. In 1901, 85 percent of live-in domestic servants, excluding farm servants, were women, and almost two-thirds of these women were aged 25 or less. The regional exception was British Columbia: in Victoria, for instance, 60 percent of live-in domestics were men, many of them Asian immigrants.[6] Nonresident servants differed from their live-in contemporaries: they were almost as likely to be male as female, and they were older workers, not callow youngsters—the majority of both men and women were aged over 25. We may infer that the employer's relationships with the nonresident servant and the live-in domestic were very different. The older service worker with a separate residence was less vulnerable to the oppressive paternalism and lack of freedom endured by the live-in domestic.

But was the live-in servant a young Irish woman, recently arrived in a strange land? Recent Canadian work on immigration and ethnicity has taught us to be skeptical of inferences based on contemporary stereotyping. Ethnicity was a key marker of identity, but the "vertical mosaic" hypothesis, the idea that there was a strong association between immigrants or ethnicity and occupational structure, has undergone extensive revision (Darroch and Ornstein 1980; Darroch and Soltow 1991; Sager and Morier 2002). By 1901 the domestic servant was seldom an immigrant and seldom Irish. If you employed a live-in domestic servant in 1901, the odds were almost four to one that you employed a Canadian-born worker. Immigrants were only slightly overrepresented among domestic servants, given their share of the labor force. Despite the received image of domestics as immigrants, by 1901 live-in domestic servants were *less* likely to be first-generation immigrants than their employers: only 22 percent of female live-in domestics were first-generation immigrants, but 25 percent of the heads of households with a live-in servant were immigrants. The difference is in part a simple reflection of the younger age profile of servants, who came from a generation that included proportionally fewer immigrants than that of their older employers. Two decades

earlier, according to the 1881 census, the proportion of immigrants among urban domestic servants was slightly higher, at 30 percent, and only 15 percent of servants were Irish-born (North Atlantic Population Project 2004).[7] In 1871, however, employers depended much more on immigrants: 42 percent of urban domestic servants were born outside Canada, according to the national sample of the 1871 census, and in some cities, including Toronto, the proportion of immigrants was even higher (Lacelle 1987: 73, 76).[8]

The census question on "racial or tribal origin" allows us to say something about the ethnicity of individuals. In 1901, although Irish Catholic women were overrepresented, Irish Protestants were underrepresented in this occupation; as a whole, Irish-origin women were not overrepresented: they were 22 percent of all women in the labor force and 22 percent of female live-in domestics. Overrepresented, by comparison to their share of the labor force, were the English, accounting for 29 percent of all female live-in domestics, and Asians, although there were very few of the latter. Apart from Germans and Icelanders, Europeans were underrepresented. If you hired a live-in domestic servant in Canada in 1901, the probability was very high that you were hiring a Canadian-born woman of British, especially English, or French Canadian ethnicity. There had clearly been a change in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In 1871 and 1881 first-generation immigrants were overrepresented among urban domestic servants, and the association of "servant" with "Irish" made some sense: in 1871 almost half of all female domestic servants ($N = 593$) in urban places were Irish by origin (Darroch and Ornstein 2000).[9] At the turn of the twentieth century, when the decline in the occupation of domestic servant began, the ethnic composition of workers was broadening, and the dependence on recent immigrants had declined.

Among the minority who were immigrants in 1901, few were recent immigrants. The 1901 census asked all immigrants to report their year of arrival in Canada: of all female live-in domestics born outside Canada, only 8 percent had arrived within the year prior to the taking of the census, and only 16 percent had arrived between 1898 and 1901. The overwhelming majority of immigrant domestic servants had several years' experience of their new country. The Canadian-born, furthermore, were not always country-born youth with no experience of urban life. Canadians were still a rural people in 1901, and most had been born in a rural community—only about one in five Canadians had been born in an urban place. By comparison with their

contemporaries, however, women domestics were urbanites: a third had been born in an urban place. In Hamilton a majority of live-in female domestics were urban-born.[10]

Whether immigrant or Canadian-born, live-in domestics would have had no difficulty communicating with their employers. The mother tongue of 92 percent was either English or French. Seventy-five percent spoke English but not French, 10 percent spoke French but not English, and a remarkable 14 percent spoke both languages.[11] Fewer than 1 percent spoke neither language. We cannot say much about their educational backgrounds, but we do know that they were literate and that literacy rates among servants were rising more quickly than among the general population. In 1901 the proportion of servants who could read and write was higher than that of the general adult population.[12] Three decades earlier the literacy rate among urban domestic servants was much lower, and it was below the level in the adult population. In 1871, 10 percent of female domestic servants in urban places could not read; 15 percent could not write. By comparison, 7 percent of all adult women in the same urban places could not read; 11 percent could not write.

Most domestic servants in 1901 were literate young women who had been through the compulsory school systems of the late nineteenth century. A primary goal of schooling was the socialization of girls into gender-specific and domestic roles. The goals of school promoters were not always realized, however, and historians of schooling have argued that schooling had ambiguous and even destabilizing effects. Schooling could be conducive to the expectation of a dual wage-earning and familial role for young women (Gomersall 1994). Schooling and literacy may have contributed to the transformation of subjectivities among girls, to the development of *self*-interest and the confidence to assert that interest in reproductive and other realms (Gagnier 1991; Mackinnon 1997: 221; McDermid 2005). On January 27, 1886, a "general servant" wrote to the *Toronto Globe*, "Some of my happiest hours are spent in my kitchen, with my feet in the oven, and one of my favourite books, and in this age of literature and with the wages that a good servant can command no one need be without plenty of reading material" (quoted in Leslie 1974: 84). For this literate generation, domestic service, with its multiple denials of self, was easily equated with servility and was unlikely to fit well with self-realization (Fahrni 1997: 83).

The changing background of the new generation of domestic servants

helps us make sense of the chorus of bourgeois complaint about the inefficiency and undisciplined assertiveness of servants. This generation of women workers, fewer of whom grew up on farms, was more attuned to the rhythms of time-oriented wage-paid labor than to the rhythms and long hours of task-oriented work. They were quite capable of comparing their working hours with those of factory workers and telephone operators. They may have heard about the attempts in Britain to unionize domestic workers in the 1890s and early 1900s and to bargain for shorter hours (Horn 1975: 156–59). Even Finnish immigrant women in the early twentieth century included "the class conscious maid" who read socialist newspapers and created "organizations designed for the specific purpose of promoting maids' interests" (Lindstrom-Best 1988: 99–102). Here was an employee very different from the poor Irish immigrant of a rural background a generation earlier. Those earlier immigrants, according to Diane M. Hotten-Somers (2001: 185), eagerly embraced a job that carried the security of room and board and were apparently unaffected by the social stigma attached to domestic service.

Domestic servants had changed in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and so had their employers. Earlier censuses do not contain the rich information on class, earnings, and employment status that we find in 1901, so comparisons are necessarily limited. Nevertheless, the urban household head who employed a domestic in 1901 was much more likely to be a merchant, manufacturer, professional, or government official than the comparable household head in 1871 (66 percent in 1901, compared to 50 percent in 1871). In 1871 it was possible for artisans, semiskilled or white-collar workers, and even other workers to employ servants; by 1901 a much smaller proportion of servants' employers were in these occupational categories. By 1901 household heads classed as "employees" in the census could still employ servants, but they were an affluent elite among employees: their average family earnings were $1,411, and very few families who employed a servant earned less than $300 a year.

In Canada, where multiservant households were rare, the domestic servant was a solitary stranger in the bourgeois household. Most domestics worked alone: in over 80 percent of urban households with a live-in servant, there was only one servant; 59 percent of live-in servants worked as the only servant in the household.[13] Working in households that were larger than average (6.7 persons, compared to the urban average of 5.0), containing families at mature stages of the family cycle, usually with children still at home,

the young servant interacted with her master and mistress across the boundaries of age and class. One way to ensure greater familiarity was to work for a relative, but it appears that in 1901 a kin relationship between employer and servant was rare: only 2 percent of live-in servants had the same surname as their household heads.[14] Instead, many employers and servants appear to have sought affinity in shared ethnicity or religion. The ethnic profile of employers is remarkably similar to that of the domestics themselves: 30.8 percent of employers were English or Welsh, and 29.2 percent of live-in servants were English or Welsh; 20.7 percent of employers were French Canadian, and 20.9 percent of servants were French Canadian; 20.0 percent of employers and 22.4 percent of servants were Irish. This similarity also exists at the level of the household: by a process of selection that must have worked on both sides, employers sought to hire and employees sought to work for people of the same ethnoreligious identity. Like the boardinghouse keepers and lodgers analyzed by Peter Baskerville (2001), employers sought "familiar strangers" to enter their homes as resident domestics. Despite the campaigns to encourage immigrant domestic servants to come to Canada, Canadian-born household heads preferred to employ the Canadian-born: 78 percent of all female live-in domestics were Canadian-born, but 81 percent of those employed by Canadian household heads were Canadian-born. This apparent preference was often constrained by the local pool of young workers from whom domestics were recruited: in Manitoba and the western territories Canadian-born household heads depended on a proportionally larger pool of immigrants, and so many more of their servants were born outside Canada.

Religion also mattered to employers (Hoffman and Taylor 1996: 114–15). Thus 51 percent of female live-in domestics had the same religion as their employers. Catholic household heads hired Catholic servants. Methodist employers preferred Methodist servants. The pool of Methodist servants available was small—fewer than one in seven of all live-in servants employed in 1901—but 41 percent of the servants employed by Methodists were themselves Methodist. As this example indicates, measuring the pattern of preference or affinity requires that we control for the size of the available pool of employees in each category. One way to do this is to observe the actual number of domestics of a specific religion who worked for a person of the same religion. We can compare this observation to the number of domestics we might expect to find if religion made no difference. Since 14.8 percent of all domestics were Methodist, for instance, we would expect to find the same

**Table 5** Distribution of domestic servants and employers in the same category, 1901

| Category | Observed | Expected | Ratio (Observed/ expected) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Birthplace | | | |
| Canada | 1,571 | 1,469.0 | 1.07 |
| England | 48 | 24.2 | 1.98 |
| Scotland | 4 | 2.0 | 2.00 |
| Ireland | 10 | 6.1 | 1.64 |
| Europe | 21 | 2.8 | 7.50 |
| Religion | | | |
| Church of England | 246 | 124.9 | 1.97 |
| Methodist | 157 | 49.9 | 3.14 |
| Presbyterian | 188 | 79.3 | 2.37 |
| Baptist | 43 | 5.1 | 8.43 |
| Other Protestant | 40 | 4.9 | 8.16 |
| Catholic | 714 | 332.3 | 2.15 |
| Eastern | 15 | 0.8 | 18.75 |
| Ethnoreligious identity | | | |
| English Church of England | 103 | 42.3 | 2.43 |
| English Methodist | 61 | 13.8 | 4.42 |
| English other Protestant | 39 | 11.6 | 3.36 |
| French Catholic | 430 | 113.5 | 3.79 |
| Irish Catholic | 90 | 23.4 | 3.85 |
| Irish Protestant | 82 | 36.0 | 2.28 |
| Scots Presbyterian | 69 | 27.0 | 2.56 |
| Scots other | 46 | 17.6 | 2.61 |
| European Protestant | 15 | 0.6 | 25.00 |
| Chinese Confucian | 13 | 0.6 | 21.67 |

Source: Canadian Families Project 2002.

percentage of Methodists living with Methodist employers if religion made no difference. The ratio of observed to expected is a measure of the extent of the selection process at work in the hiring process (table 5).

We could, of course, compare the characteristics of the servant to those of the "mistress" or wife of the household head, but the results would be very similar, given the strong correlation between characteristics of the household head and those of his wife. Although the number of cases in some cells is small, it appears that cultural preference influenced the selection of employees. Local labor markets constrained this preference, especially in the West. Live-in domestic servants in British Columbia were unlike those anywhere else in Canada: almost two-thirds were male, and a majority was

born in either China or Japan. In Vancouver in 1924 the sensational trial of a Chinese "houseboy" suspected of murder displayed the widespread fear of Asian servants (Starkins 1984). However strong the preference for "familiar strangers" in one's household, the supply and relative cheapness of the Chinese servant and the willingness of Chinese men to perform tasks such as chopping wood were clearly persuasive. And the constraints of local labor markets did not deter British Columbians from hiring live-in servants: relative to population, there were more live-in servants in British Columbia than in other provinces.[15] Even in British Columbia, however, the quest for "familiar strangers"—employees who shared the religion, race, and ethnicity of their employers—persisted, as the campaigns for assisted immigration of young white British women suggest.

Despite the apparent effort to ensure a degree of affinity between servants and the familial household, the evidence does not suggest that employers always succeeded. On the contrary, more often than not the resident servant was a stranger. Almost 50 percent of servants were of a different religion from their employers, and outside Quebec the proportion was much higher. The majority of servants in English Anglican households were neither English nor Anglican. Most servants employed by Methodist families were not Methodist. The obvious exceptions were French Canadian employers: over 90 percent of the servants in their homes were French Canadian Catholics.

Affluent Canadians sought to hire "respectable" and compliant servants who would work long hours for low wages. When their efforts failed, as they often did, they failed to revalorize the occupation at the level of either wages or status. Modest efforts at professionalization were undermined by the contradictions of class. Uniforms did more to accentuate the social distance between employer and employee than to signal professional status or training (Barber 1984: 43). Reformers argued that hours of work and tasks should be defined and standardized, as in other occupations, but employers rejected the advice, thereby emphasizing the difference between domestic service and other occupations (ibid.: 40). Employers lobbied successfully for the introduction of domestic science into the school curriculum and for technical training in housework but declined to raise the status of the occupation in their own households (Barber 1980: 152).

Other strategies further devalued the occupation. A major strategy before and after World War I was to pressure governments to increase the supply of cheap labor through immigration (Leslie 1974; Barber 1980, 1991). To some

extent this strategy worked: published census aggregates indicate that immigrants were overrepresented in the "servant" category in 1911 and 1921. By 1921, 32.2 percent of female servants were first-generation immigrants, and only 26.3 percent of women in the labor force were immigrants (Dominion Bureau of Statistics 1924). The strategy failed to persuade workers themselves to consider domestic service as anything other than a temporary transition. Turnover rates remained high, and the age profile changed little: the proportion who were teenagers actually increased from 28 percent in 1901 to 35 percent in 1921 (ibid.).

For many young women, domestic service remained part of the life-course transition between parental home and establishing one's own household on marriage. The length of the transition from parental home to marriage had a direct effect on labor supply at a time when paid employment among women was largely restricted to the young and single. In Canada, as elsewhere, marriage rates and marriage age were closely related to labor force participation: the census microdata for 1901 yield a very strong positive correlation between the proportion of women aged 18 to 24 in each ethno-religious group who were single and the labor force participation rates of women in those groups. The same applies to domestic service: Irish Catholic women tended to delay marriage or remain single; Irish Catholics were over-represented in domestic service and were more likely than others to remain in the occupation beyond the age of 30. It is perhaps no coincidence that the 1891 peak in employment of domestic servants in Canada coincided with the nineteenth-century peak in average age at first marriage (26) for women and in the proportion of women who never married (Mertens 1976; Gee 1982: 314; Burke 2001: 191). Age at first marriage fell sharply in the first three decades of the twentieth century, and the age of leaving school rose; the effect was to shorten the length of the transition from parental home to one's own household and to constrain the total supply of female labor.

These demographic changes interacted with other changes to reduce the supply of domestic servants. At the same time that the transition to marriage and one's own household was shortening, the comparative advantage of domestic service was declining. Sending a daughter into domestic service was often part of a family strategy for survival as well as an individual strategy designed to win a degree of independence and to increase one's chances of upward social mobility. Central to the parental strategy in the Netherlands (Bras 2003; Bras and Kok 2003) and in the Maritime Provinces of Canada

(Beattie 2000) was the return of a portion of the daughter's earnings to help sustain cash-starved family farms. In Canada the strategy was failing by the 1930s, if not before (ibid.: 122–23). Sending daughters into employment and residence outside the parental home also entailed risks: parental control of daughters' earnings and access to their unpaid domestic labor was much more certain if the daughter remained at home (Takai 2001: 123–24). In the northern Netherlands the advantages of keeping children at home outweighed the short-term benefits of cash returns from children living elsewhere (Paping 2004). In Canada, especially as agriculture expanded in the prairie West in the early twentieth century, parents persuaded their offspring to remain on the farm and provide unpaid labor; the effect was to limit labor supply in the wage economy (Sylvester 2001). As an individual strategy, domestic service may also have yielded the same low returns that Paping reports for the Netherlands. The benefits in terms of skills and social capital from employment in domestic service were likely to have been negligible and certainly less than in teaching or clerical work, the occupations that expanded and continued to become "feminized" as domestic service declined. The "servant problem" of the early twentieth century, therefore, reflected the failure of a targeted immigration strategy to sustain an occupation-specific labor supply squeezed between the pincers of demographic change and changing family and individual strategies.

From these conditions emerged another strategy, a Canadian variation on an international trend. The household was a place of work, a site of both production and consumption. Its work process experienced a form of industrialization and deskilling: gradually and intermittently, labor was replaced by technology, and work was submitted to a type of rational management intended to reduce dependence on the knowledge and skill of workers (Marchand 1988; see also Rutherford 2003: 90–95). Writing mainly about Canada, Tanis Day (1992: 302, 314) argued that capital-labor substitution was propelled in part by the rising cost of female labor; the evidence on wage trends presented here questions this argument, at least insofar as it applies to the first decades of the twentieth century. The more important impetus to the application of new technology was the need to solve the "servant problem"—the twofold problem of a shortage of labor and a shortage of that "class" of respectable and compliant female worker whom bourgeois employers sought to allow into their homes. Although the shift to a servantless kitchen met resistance and mechanization did not always result in a reduction in labor, by

the 1920s the servantless home was in sight (Cowan 1976, 1983; Sutherland 1981; Palmer 1989).

The substitution of new machines for domestic labor occurred more slowly in Canada than in the United States (Dodd 1989; Parr 1999), but its beginnings synchronized closely with the decline in live-in domestic service in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The oil and coal stoves of the 1890s were followed in the early 1900s by a much larger selection of coal and gas ranges, and by 1924, 6 percent of Ontarians had such a range in their homes. According to a 1910 advertisement in Eaton's department store catalog, the suction-pump vacuum cleaner, operated by a child and a uniformed servant, would clean a house "in one-fifth the time and one-tenth the labor that the old way takes" (quoted in Glazebrook et al. 1969: 136; see also Leslie 1974: 78). The electrically powered upright vacuum cleaner was invented in the United States early in the first decade of the 1900s and appeared in Canada in the 1910s; by 1924, 8.6 percent of Ontarians possessed the machine. The wringer washers of the 1890s soon acquired electric power, and by 1924, 7.3 percent of Ontarians had an electric-powered washing machine in their homes (Day 1992: 311). A more affordable "electric servant" was the electric iron (Strasser 1982: 78–82). In advertising their products, retailers were explicit about the substitution of machines for labor. "If you can't solve your servant problem, we will solve it for you with an electric clothes washer"; "No longer need a household be dependent on an undependable washerwoman"; "No laundress to pay" (*Toronto Globe*, August 27, 1920; September 3, 1920; October 1, 1920). In many households the task range of the general servant was reduced as new divisions of labor appeared. Between 1901 and 1921, for instance, more households had their laundry done outside the home, and the number of launderers and laundresses grew by a factor of 2.6 (Dominion Bureau of Statistics 1924). Specifying "no laundry" was one means of making a general-servant job seem more attractive (Barber 1984: 43).

The technological transformation began in a small proportion of households, but the households that could afford the new machines were precisely those that employed servants. Even the wealthiest families could be pressured into cost-cutting efficiency and a form of scientific management. Jack Eaton, of the famous Canadian department store family, moved into a one-servant home on marriage in 1901 and learned to manage his own clothes closet (Macpherson 1963: 45). By 1909 the complications of three half-days

off per week for their three servants drove Jack Eaton's wife, Flora Eaton (1956: 146), into "scientific housekeeping" and collaboration with the School of Household Science at the University of Toronto. In the same year her husband began advertising electric vacuum cleaners in his department store catalog.

Technological change facilitated the decline in domestic service, but the decline began in the changing relations between employers and a new generation of servants in the households of the bourgeoisie and middle-class professionals. The agents of change included the workers themselves: young women rejected this occupation for others, and even those who entered it soon quit, treating domestic service as part of the transition to a new country or the transition from the parental household. At least in Canada, rejecting domestic service did not entail the sacrifice of higher earnings; it was a rejection of both low wages and the specific conditions of exploitation of which the live-in wage was part. For young workers at the turn of the century, the advantages of room and board were less likely to compensate for the constraints of live-in service than they had been for an earlier generation of domestic servants. Employers responded to these highly mobile and recalcitrant workers by campaigning for cheap immigrant labor and by trying to assimilate these coresident strangers within familial norms and ethnoreligious compatibility. The strategies were self-defeating: servants were not family members but workers, selling their labor in markets where the range of choice was expanding.

As the occupation "servant" declined, the association of housework with women deepened. The decline of the occupation meant the decline of housework as paid labor; it meant an end to embryonic efforts at professionalization; it meant that the real levels of skill and knowledge embedded in the work went unrecognized; and it meant "more work for mother"—the transfer of labor to an unpaid and unrecognized servant.

The constraints of class and gender yielded unforeseen and unintended consequences; the actions and resistance of workers had ambiguous and contradictory results. As Janice Williams Rutherford (2003: 64) has pointed out, to reduce costs by replacing the human servant with mechanical servants implied that the housewife's time had no value. Efforts to liberate women from domestic drudgery led, in an ironic twist of the class-gender nexus, to the devaluation of household work and new forms of domestic confinement. Workers' search for freedom from domestic subservience, their exercise of

choice in labor markets, and their quest for autonomy of person and household in the emerging liberal order led to new forms of subservience and the widespread denial that household work was a form of production. A final conclusion on the alleged decline of domestic service, therefore, is that there was no decline at all. The paid occupation of live-in servant declined, but the occupation and the work survived, renamed and newly embodied in the housewife of the twentieth century. In advertisements for household appliances in the 1920s, both servant and housewife appear, sometimes together, but the latter soon takes the machinery and tasks away from her former employee. The construction of the modern housewife began in the class relations of the domestic workplace of the early twentieth century.

## Notes

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1 The national sample of the 1901 census contains all individual-level information (Schedule 1) and property information (Schedule 2) for 265,287 individuals in 50,941 dwellings. The sampling point was the dwelling place; a random sample of 5 percent of dwellings for each of 129 microfilm reels was selected (Canadian Families Project 2002; Sager et al. 2002). On the implications of the sampling process, see Ornstein 2000.

2 A convenient summary of trends from 1881 to 1921 is Dominion Bureau of Statistics 1924, 4: table 1.

3 Other subcategories include launderers ($193), housekeepers ($178), and cooks ($185). An unknown proportion of these would have been live-in servants.

4 The *Labour Gazette* (1900) gives rents of four-room houses ranging from $6 per month in Halifax and Montreal to $7 in Toronto and $10 in Vancouver. If a worker paid half of the rental cost, then annual rents were $36 in Halifax and Montreal, $42 in Toronto, and $60 in Vancouver. Elsewhere I estimate costs of a modest adult male diet ranging from 13.2 cents per day in Halifax to 17.2 cents in Vancouver; annual costs would be $48 in Halifax, $50 in Montreal, $52 in Hamilton, and $63 in Vancouver (Baskerville and Sager 1998: 217–21).

5 Estimates from the national sample may not be identical to those reported in the 1907 *Census and Statistics Bulletin*, because the categories may differ. It is reassuring that the average earnings of women domestics reported in the national sample are close to those in the *Bulletin*. The mean annual earnings for domestic servants in the national sample (occupation codes 61415, 61418, 61419, 61425, 61431, 61432, and 61436 through 61443) are $177.76 for men ($N$ = 421) and $116.87 for women ($N$ = 2,645). The *Bulletin* reports $182 per year for male servants and $120 for female servants.

6 Estimated from a database created by the Canadian Families Project containing the total population of Victoria in 1901.

7 Live-in domestic servants cannot be selected in the complete-coverage 1881 census database, since that census did not report relationship to the household head. I have selected specific occupations in that database: housekeeper, steward, butler, cook, servant, house servant, personal servant, nursemaid, companion, chambermaid, and charwoman. To exclude farm servants, I select 11 major urban centers: Halifax, Saint John, Quebec, Trois Rivières, Montreal, Ottawa, Kingston, Toronto, Hamilton, London, and Victoria.

8 From the 1871 national sample (Darroch and Ornstein 2000), I select all women with an urban residence and an occupation in service (codes 7000 through 7999).

9 In 1881, 37 percent of the domestic servants in 11 Canadian cities were Irish by origin. Of the total labor force in those cities, 29 percent were Irish. For 1871 I select urban places with 3,000 or more people and individuals having an "industry" code of 70 (domestic and personal service).

10 Column 11 of the census reports whether the individual was born in a rural or an urban place. In Hamilton 54 percent of female live-in domestics ($N$ = 1,051) were urban-born. This estimate is from a complete-count database of the population of Hamilton in 1901.

11 Column 31 of Schedule 1 recorded whether a person could speak English; column 32 reported the ability to speak French.

12 Of all persons aged 15 through 64, 94 percent for whom an entry is recorded in the "can read" column responded affirmatively; 93 percent of the enumerated adult population reported that they could write. By comparison, 97 percent of live-in domestic women could read, and 96 percent could write.

13 I have removed large institutions by excluding all dwellings with more than 30 persons.

14 Kin relations may have been more frequent in 1881: the complete-coverage database suggests that 20 percent of those with a domestic service occupation had the same surname as their household head. A large proportion of these servants may have been working outside the household where they resided, however.

15 In Victoria in 1901 live-in servants ($N$ = 753) were 3.6 percent of the total city population and 9.7 percent of persons with occupations. In all Canadian towns or cities of 10,000 people or more, live-in domestics were 2.5 percent of the population and 6.0 percent of those with occupations.

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