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Embracing the Modern: Edna Cress Staebler at the University of Toronto, 1926–1929*

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ABSTRACT:
Edna Cress Staebler was a fairly typical young woman when she arrived at the University of Toronto in 1926. While attending the University, she explored the new ideas and norms of the inter-war era. This article examines Staebler's experiences within the context of modernity, the university, and the creation of a Canadian nation. Staebler's university years provided the foundations for her later career as a journalist and author, during which she helped to create a modern Canadian national identity.

RÉSUMÉ
Edna Cress Staebler était une jeune femme tout à fait ordinaire lorsqu'elle arriva à l'Université de Toronto en 1926. Durant ses études à l'université, elle explora les nouvelles idées et normes de l'entre-deux-guerres. Cet article examine les expériences que fit Staebler dans un contexte universitaire, de modernité et de création de la nation canadienne. Les années que passa Staebler à l'université lui fournirent les assises de sa future carrière de journaliste et d'auteure, durant laquelle elle contribua à créer une identité nationale canadienne moderne.

When Edna Cress (later Staebler) arrived in Toronto for her first year at the University of Toronto in 1926, she plunged into activity — dating, dancing, shopping, walking, and reporting for the student newspaper, the *Varsity*. Her first article for the *Varsity* appeared in the fall of 1926 on the front page, "word for word with big headlines."[1] From this point on, there was no slowing her down. Like many other women of her generation, Edna Cress Staebler changed considerably during her time at university. With her bobbed hair and active social life, she was strongly influenced by the shifting norms of the inter-war period. While attending University College and living in residence, she grew into the evolving norms that came with modernity and the exposure to new ideas and people. After graduation, she took these new ideas with her into her subsequent public and private life.

Born in Berlin (Kitchener), Ontario in 1906, Edna Cress graduated from

Kitchener Collegiate in 1926 and enrolled at the University of Toronto to pursue a Bachelor of Arts degree. While her university career was not academically stellar, she engaged in student life with enthusiasm. After graduation, she worked in the collections department of the *Kitchener News Record* before going back to school at the Ontario College of Education in 1931. After a brief stint as a teacher, Cress married her long-time boyfriend, Keith Staebler, in 1933. Although Staebler is now popularly remembered for her *Food that Really Schmecks* cookbooks, first published in 1968, she was a successful freelance journalist long before. Staebler's first magazine article, "Duellists of the Deep," was published in *Maclean's* in 1948. Her career spanned some fifty years. While there has been recent attention paid to Staebler's life as an author and journalist,[2] little mention has been made of her years at university. These years, at the end of the 1920s, were remembered by Staebler as having changed everything. As one's world view changes, so too does one's sense of self.[3]

By the time Staebler arrived, women had been part of the student body at the University of Toronto since the 1880s. Although attendance at university was still a privilege for a minority of youth in the 1920s, especially for women, the number of students enrolled at Canadian universities was on the rise. In 1931, about 3 percent of Canadian young people between the ages of twenty and twenty-four were enrolled in post-secondary schools. The proportion of women students enrolled at Canadian universities rose from 16.3 percent in 1919–20 to 23.5 percent in 1929–30.[4] Women were most likely to enroll in Arts and Science. In 1930, for example, 32 percent of Canadian students enrolled in Arts and Science were women. The students of this era, both male and female, were decidedly middle class and sought to improve the circumstances of their lives. Women students, however, tended to come from families with professional or business backgrounds.[5] Staebler was one of those. Although her family was not wealthy, they were comfortably supported by her father's business, the Waterloo Spring Company which provided springs for the local furniture factories.[6] Staebler also fit in with the bulk of university students in terms of religion. Raised as a Presbyterian, Staebler was among the vast majority of Protestant students. Although adherents of the United Church and the Anglican Church were dominant with 32.9 percent and 21.6 percent respectively at the University of Toronto in the 1930s, Presbyterians were not far behind with 11.4 percent.[7] With regards to family background then, Staebler is fairly typical of most women students enrolled at Canadian universities during the inter-war period.

What can the lives of women such as Edna Staebler tell us about the experience of modernity in the inter-war period? While the concept of modernity is one that is problematic and difficult to define, it is also one that is necessary to consider. Although there was no dramatic or concrete turning point that marked the arrival of a modern society, by the end of the nineteenth century it seemed clear that "Western society was shifting its axis."[8] With this sense of change — and, as Keith Walden points out, the extent of that change was staggering in the late-Victorian world — there was a need for people to rethink their world views.[9] The advance of modernity has been associated with feelings of pessimism, alienation, and anxiety, as well as with the secularization of society.[10] Reactions to these constant changes varied widely. Some dealt

with this new world by turning to anti-modernism — expressed in idealized masculinity, militarism, a return to nature, and so on.[11] Yet, for those on the margins of power like women, there was a sense of newfound empowerment.[12] Gerard Delanty proposes that there is a dual nature to modernity. According to Delanty, autonomy and fragmentation are simultaneous components of modernity. On the one hand, modernity is a cultural project that focuses on the development and experience of autonomy. As a cultural project, modernity "refers to the autonomy of the Subject, the self-assertion of the self, or individual, and the progressive expansion of the discourses of creativity, reflexivity and discursivity to all spheres of life."[13] In this sense, the individual becomes important, and culture — the discourses of art, literature, music, and so on — expands its influence to a larger public less constrained by class-based social norms. On the other hand, modernity as a social project involves the experience of fragmentation. As a social project, there is a sense that modern society destroys its own cultural foundations, its institutions and traditions.[14] In the aftermath of the First World War, there is evidence of a deepening sense of crisis that shaped the inter-war experience of modernity. There was a sense that what was "normal" — the traditions of the church, the government, the family — was breaking down. At the same time though, a promise of coherence in modernity was seen by many people; a promise that there was rationality to the organized institutions of the State and the regulation of power that would eventually overcome that fragmentation. This promise created a sense that the tensions between social reality and cultural ideals could be reconciled,[15] as seen in the growth of the social gospel and social service, for example. The emphasis on the "social" suggested that autonomous individuals could implement change in the social institutions of the traditional society. This duality and its resulting tensions are quite clear in Edna Staebler's diaries at the end of the 1920s as she struggled to find a sense of self and purpose and to reconcile familiar traditions with new ideas about evolution, religion, and nation. Even though she, like most other people,[16] did not consciously decide to "become modern," Staebler embraced many of the modern ideas she encountered while at university.

Today, we accept the period of young adulthood as one during which individuals "find themselves," but in the 1920s this idea was just forming — and the idea of spending this transitional period from the teen years to adulthood in the university was even newer. At university, students were bombarded with new ideas — scientific theories and discoveries, theological controversies, and evolving expectations about the role of the individual in society. If, as Delanty argues, the modern nation is consolidated by "the imperial quest, the drive towards industrialism, the emergence of the national welfare states, the international commitment to national self-determination, urbanization, and mass education,"[17] then the university, with its research ideals, its promotion of social service in its courses and extra-curricular activities, and its expansion of education to more young women and men, played a significant role in the formulation of a modern Canadian nation. The young women and men who attended university in the 1920s and 1930s left with a new sense of nation, culture, and self, and propagated these ideas through their private and public activities.[18]

Within a month of her arrival at the university, Staebler began writing for the

Varsity. Many university women embraced writing for the student newspapers. The excitement of seeing one's name in print and being published in the student newspapers was for many the first step in a career in journalism. Take Helen Allen. She met the managing editor of the *Varsity* as a freshman at the University of Toronto in the 1920s and was asked to cover a tea given for the freshmen. Her story appeared on the front page and she was hooked. When she graduated in 1929, she was hired by the *Telegram*. She eventually became famous for her column "Today's Child" which spotlighted children with special needs who required a family.[19] Edna Staebler's experience in the same period was similar. After her first story appeared on the front page, Staebler wrote in her diary: "Oh boy I feel wonderful."[20] Staebler and Allen both continued to write for the *Varsity* throughout their time at university. Although Staebler did not work as a professional journalist until well after graduation, she regularly wrote in her diaries and for her own personal enjoyment.

The printed word is a central component of modernism. One of the decisive moments in the development of communication in the modern sense was the appearance of a literate public. The printed word allowed for the separation of the Subject from discourse.[21] In one sense, this separation furthered the fragmentation of society — controversial ideas were disseminated more widely without the "speaker" being present. In another sense, the means for rapidly spreading such controversial ideas liberated the Subject from class- and gender-based restrictions on public speaking and created communities based on the new conceptions of society and the Subject. Participation in the spread of new ideas through various forms of the written word, in this case journalism, provided women with the opportunity to play a key role in the creation of a modern Canadian society.

Founded in 1880, the *Varsity* constituted a stable component of student life at the University of Toronto. While other student newspapers, like the *Goblin* and the *Rebel*, came and went, the *Varsity* continues to exist today. Because of the prominent role played by the *Varsity*, it has helped to constitute the discursive world of generations of University of Toronto students. Those who wrote for the paper helped to create the experience of many students at the university.[22] Although not all articles had bylines, the structure of the *Varsity* was gendered. From the masthead it is clear that both male and female students from all parts of the university wrote for the newspaper. The chief editor was always male — except during the war years — and there was a women's news editor and a women's editor. The women's news editor was similar to the deputy or assistant editor of other newspapers. The women's editor was responsible for looking after the columns and pages targeted at women students. This sort of structure was common in all newspapers and magazines of the period. Mainstream newspapers adopted this model once they became dependent on advertising revenue. Newspapers needed to be attractive to women readers, so women journalists were hired "to create a specifically feminine form of news that would popularize a gender identity for women readers within the existing newspaper or magazine."[23] Nonetheless, it was at the *Varsity* that many young women and men got their feet wet in journalism, from future prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King in the 1890s, to Edna Staebler in the 1920s, Peter Gzowski in the 1950s, and more recently, Naomi Klein in the 1990s.

Despite the changes in the newspapers, working as a newspaper reporter was still not quite acceptable for women in the early twentieth century. Even though "writing" was by then seen as appropriate even for married women with children — it was something that could be done in women's "spare" time — news reporting had a different connotation. Most women who were successful in this field at the turn of the century worked as columnists for the women's pages and used pseudonyms. These columns were usually "the 'soft news features' rather than the fast-breaking stories of the streets."[24] In addition, newspaper offices were places where reporters and editors took great pleasure in flouting conventions. In a period when smoking around women was still shocking to many, male reporters resisted the advance of women into the newsrooms where the men would also have to "watch their language." Women were generally encouraged to avoid the reporting duties of newspapers and to focus instead on "the column or feature written in decorous safety."[25] These sentiments clearly influenced Staebler. Although she enjoyed writing for the *Varsity*, after a summer job working at the *Daily Record* in her hometown in 1928, Staebler recorded:

> quite definitely decided I'm not to be a newspaper reporter at any rate & that is the most interesting part of newspaper work but it makes a girl too hard. You have to be so damn impersonal that you lose yourself. … You lose sentiment & feeling — you have to lose it to be any good & I don't want to[.] I love it.[26]

Even as late as 1942, journalist Kay Rex was told by the managing editor of the *London Free Press* (London, Ontario), "I'd never let a daughter of mine become a reporter."[27] For most of this period, women students were kept from the top position of editor of the student papers,[28] but over time they became quite active in writing the regular stories and columns.

The tension between conformity and subversion that is apparent in Staebler's comments about news reporting was also inherent in the lives of women university students generally. With the new ideas and norms modernity brought to the university campus, all students grappled with, modified, and adapted to the ongoing changes. Although attendance at university was becoming more acceptable by the 1920s, there continued to be an underlying sense that women students could not (or should not) "rock the boat" for fear that their position as university students would be undermined and even revoked. Nonetheless, traditions and expectations were changing. As Nicole Neatby points out about women students at Queen's University, "traditional attitudes towards paid employment and higher education for women were being eroded in the 1920s."[29] Staebler's diaries suggest that this tension was particularly strong for her while she was at university.

Both her academic and social life at the University of Toronto exposed Edna Staebler to new ideas and social consciousness, challenging familiar traditions and institutions. For her, university changed everything.[30] Religion was one important area where her preconceptions were challenged. While she was at university, she regularly attended the Presbyterian Church, but her Religious Knowledge classes with Dr. Taylor revealed to her the diversity of religions beyond Christianity and Judaism. Her

very first university lecture was in Religious Knowledge: "All excited about first lecture this morning — R.K. sounds terribly deep."[31] The following year she noted: "Dr. Taylor is wonderful. He has given us so many things to think of — in our Religious Knowledge lectures. He's so sincere — he just makes things straighten out in your mind & you only think of the most essential things & throw all the others aside."[32]

But it was not only in her lectures that she encountered new ideas. In December 1927, Staebler recorded "a big discussion in Frank's room about Companionate marriages." In the 1920s, there was a wave of information describing "the new 'companionate' marriage, one based on friendship and sexual satisfaction,"[33] as opposed to marriage as a social institution. One participant in the discussion was "Rabbi Ussuman[?]" who felt that "if the rich have [companionate marriages] the poor should be able to too." Staebler disagreed, arguing

> [i]f they'd make marriage so darned binding that people couldn't possibly get out of it, they'd do a lot more considering before they'd go into it I think. Why have we built up traditions only to have them shattered because people are silly & make mistakes & aren't strong enough to suffer for them? Trial marriage would be only legalized prostitution & institutions would have to be created for the poor unfortunates. I think it would be awful.[34]

Her resistance to the total destruction of tradition is apparent, but she is far from being narrow-minded, as her comments regarding her friends suggest. She felt they were "so darn intolerant. I hate that. People seem to be all right until you hit on one of their prejudices & then their brain simply stops & you can't budge them." On another occasion, the rabbi spoke on the relationship between modern Christianity and liberal Judaism, arguing that the two were similar; each had their own traditions, but their fundamental beliefs were the same. Staebler found his point of view appealing, noting that he did not "believe in forcing your religion on anyone else — Jew, Christian, Mohammedan, Bhuddist [sic] etc. He said a lovely thing too — that all the religions of the world were like the colours of the rainbow & when in harmony the refracted ray became one prime white ray which led to God."[35] Even though Staebler maintained a conservative stance towards marriage, and would continue to do so throughout her university years, she was open to the discussion of more radical ideas and criticisms of her religion. A significant feature of modernity is "the emancipation of humans from the prejudices of tradition."[36] It is clear that Staebler was working to reconcile her modernist impulses with the traditions with which she was familiar.

Staebler's religious beliefs were further tested when she attended a convention in Detroit at the end of December 1927 as a representative of her home church.[37] Before the Christmas break, Staebler met some of the convention delegates, including some foreign students, at a tea. Here she heard "[o]ne little Indian girl speaking of the stumbling block [who] said 'I think [it is this way] — my people do not object to the Christ but they object to become Christian because they like not the way of the Christian.'" Staebler comments in her diary: "Darn it anyway, it's too true."[38] At the conference, she was exposed to a wide range of positions about Christianity and

other religions, as well as social activism. On the day she arrived, the twenty-eighth of December, she heard Francis Mei and Dr. Hodgkins speak about China and the urge to become a missionary. After her first full day, when she heard speakers from Africa, India, China, and South America, Staebler commented: "[t]heir ideas are much advanced & they are most philosophical & they must be handled very diplomatically."[39] Over the course of the convention, she heard African-American social worker Max Yergin speak several times about the "inhumanity of treatment of [the] Negro race [sic]."[40] She felt that he was the "best man at the convention."[41] She also heard a Muslim man from Syria and a Korean woman. These speakers made her rethink her preconceptions of other cultures. For instance, after hearing a young African man, Akintende Dipealu, Staebler commented that his speech

> made me most ashamed that people from another country — one that we think is impossible & savage — should come here and speak in a way that makes our command of language just shudder because it's so darn weak & poor. Our sociological & scientific knowledge should only help us in a fuller Christian life. Until we practice, we will only be apologizing for Christ's teachings. Africa has a culture, they are a happy people, but they have a great faculty for religion. They can envision things much more quickly than we, they have so much to give us. A man is as his God.[42]

It is apparent from these comments, and others, that Staebler tends to idealize the Other even when she echoes many of the eugenic and racist viewpoints of the period.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Herbert Spencer's Social Darwinist interpretation of society was very influential. Many people, including prominent Canadians, saw social divisions based on race as part of the natural order believing "that to attain their highest levels, societies had to separate into clear and distinct groups of superior and inferior people with their own identities and cultures."[43] The political leaders of the day, such as Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Mackenzie King, and Tommy Douglas, believed in eugenics-based programs that continued until at least 1945. Such programs were intended to weed out undesirable genes and to protect society from perceived perils of the 'mixing' of the races.[44] Even women's groups campaigned throughout the twenties for the legal sterilization of the 'feeble-minded'.[45]

In her efforts to make sense of and to find coherence in her social milieu, Staebler questions the racial norms of Canadian society. That is not to say Staebler was able to shed her racial preconceptions at this stage of her life, but she quite clearly is seeking to understand and balance ideas about racial difference. Staebler's notes about the conclusion of the convention further elaborate her position:

> Having heard all we have could we go as we had before regardless of everything we had learned. Could we disrespect the Chinaman & the African who is so much finer & more intelligent than we? Can't we practice what we have learned — or at least try? To treat them in a friendly courteous way. They are

> not any more anxious to marry us than we are to marry them & interracial friendliness wouldn't lead to racial intermarriage. I don't think I [approve] of it. As long as we regard people like that as a 'problem' they will feel like 'a problem' & consequently rather bitter & resentful & unwilling to cooperate. I don't blame them.[46]

That Staebler views the idea of "intermarriage" between people of difference races as a negative one is not surprising. As Constance Backhouse points out, race is a "concept with roots extending as far back as the Enlightenment."[47] Europeans originally used the idea of race as justification for their right to rule over "uncivilized" peoples, but by the early twentieth century, scientists had taken up racial categorization on a much more methodical basis. During the first twenty years of the twentieth century, scientists, anthropologists, and others measured, quantified, and described the physical differences between the races in an effort to come up with unified data and conclusions that further justified social inequities.[48]

In addition to confronting the question of race, Staebler was also forced to consider her sense of nationalism. Her pride in the British Empire was upset by one event in particular at the Detroit convention. She wrote:

> The British luncheon was a disgrace. … They wouldn't let us sing 'God Save the King' & several speeches were made against England. It was terrible & in the presence of Indians who are most radical and hate Britain and are waiting for a chance to free themselves & ruin themselves. They talk of nationalism — that there should be more, that we should all be one, yet they say we should retain our own culture — how could one in a melting pot? I don't know what to think — should we keep to ourselves, have our own laws, art, customs, culture and be only one in the fellowship of Christ — or is that impossible, must we throw open our country to the Orient & everyone, take them in on a basis of equality, mix up all the world, and have no race distinction, no race at all? It's too gigantic — and why did we evolve differently? I can't see?[49]

There is a clear sense of the tension between wanting to accept all people without differentiation based on race and the racist sentiments of the period. Delanty argues that the modern period was characterized by empire-building and by the inseparability of the social from the nation-state.[50] Staebler was clearly aware of and affected by the tensions in India and the growing anti-colonialism. There was an assumption on her part that separation from England would prove to be the downfall of India. Note also her acceptance of the Social Darwinist concept of evolution. In her sense of the world, people are different because they have evolved differently. Her comments indicate that she is trying to make sense of the social inequities of the world, to find a way to overcome the fragmentation that marked the modern era. These views were likely influenced by her studies in the newly-formed department of psychology. Prior to 1926, psychology was part of the philosophy department. Until then, George Brett, author of *History of Psychology*, was head of the Philosophy Department. His

view of psychology as a process was strongly influenced by the ideas and assumptions of British social evolutionists like Herbert Spencer.[51] The new psychology department was headed by Brett's former student, E.A. Bott, an experimental psychologist and "American-style behaviourist."[52] Staebler's comments in her diaries seem to have the flavour of both Brett and Bott at different times. Brett's approach to psychology was more traditional in that it assumed the existence of the soul and believed in the essential unity of philosophy and psychology. Bott, on the other hand, was an advocate of behaviourial measurement by psychologists. Bott's appointment as head of the new psychology department "marked the triumph of measurement and a general dismissal of metaphysics from the domain of the psychological."[53] These ideas and Staebler's experiences at the Detroit convention are evident in her conversations with her friends about religion and evolution.

Toward the end of January 1928, she and her future husband, Keith Staebler, discussed religion and evolution. Keith was a Christian Scientist and Edna was Presbyterian. Keith believed that "God made us as we are in his image, that everything is perfect & if we admit the reality of pain & evil we limit the power of the Almighty." Edna, on the other hand, believed

> we evolved. I don't think it limits God's power at all but magnifies it, the foresight, the growth from a tiny atom to creations in God's image with the fine conceptions we have of Him. All must have evolved because we have not evidence of an early conception that was as great as ours, but then it might have been greater. Who knows? But we have evolved from a tiny atom, [illegible] & grow & become as we are now with a mind & in the [end] then could all humans not have evolved the same way? It seems the most natural thing. Else why haven't the Chinese & Africans & everybody our conception of God[?] There is so much to think of.[54]

By the time Staebler graduated, she was questioning the relevance of Christianity. In the early years of her marriage, she and Keith attended her Presbyterian church one Sunday and his Christian Science church the next. Eventually, she stopped going to church altogether; she believed that "she could think for herself and that the 'rigidity and paganism' of institutional Christianity had ruined Christ's message."[55] In spite of her rejection of the institution of religion, Staebler retained a sense of spirituality throughout her life.[56] In rejecting formal religion, Staebler was caught up in the on-going fragmentation of society's institutions and accepted the idea that the individual was autonomous. Staebler's comments seem to illustrate Brett's theory that "the course of [human] thought was one of insight and error, a process in which knowledge was continually made and remade."[57] Brett took a historical approach in order to demonstrate "the flux of human thought in a manner as non-judgmental as possible."[58] Brett's theories were not intended to be prescriptive; he felt that the readers of his work could think for themselves.

The social gospel also influenced Staebler as she toyed with the idea of becoming a missionary. The intellectual foundations of the social gospel movement were

formulated between 1890 and 1914. Protestants in particular worked to establish a society that was more godly through the creation of and membership in voluntary organizations that were intended to improve the nation.[59] In Canada, the social gospel movement attracted a diverse group of members, with its leaders drawn from the Methodist and Presbyterian churches.[60] Staebler was brought up in the Presbyterian Church and may have been exposed to the movement at an early age. Once at university, she made periodic visits to the University Settlement where she met women and children from backgrounds very different from her own. On one occasion, she arrived at the Settlement when a Jewish girls' club was in progress.

> [I]t was the most interesting thing. They were nearly all big and dark — with big noses and awful painted lips and lots of powder — their sox rolled to their knees — hard as hard — like window tappers — but they were just darling — so friendly & keen to learn things. We discussed problems in their factory — they're cheated — they don't get half enough money.[61]

In addition to Settlement activities, Staebler also took part in the Student Christian Movement. Her comments reflect the spiritual appeal of the social gospel, but also her sense of inadequacy with respect to "doing good." At one SCM conference, she came to the conclusion that:

> The best thing to do is to have a purpose & to work for it — to illuminate everything that would hinder one's reaching it & too we talked of our duties to our parents & still I don't know if one is justified in going off on one's own doing the things that we want most or if we should do as they want because we are it all to them & would be very selfish if we didn't. To-nite I heard Dr. Taylor speak of the Christian life. It is so beautiful and I feel so pure & holy when I think of it that I am almost afraid of myself — afraid I shall lose contact with all the people I know & love.[62]

Is it selfish to pursue one's own interests, even if they are laudable? Staebler's comments highlight the confusion many women felt regarding personal interests, parental wishes, and marital duties. Staebler seems inclined to take the middle ground on most issues like this. On the second day of the SCM conference, they discussed,

> whether a woman should follow a vocation after marriage. Opinions varied. It all depends on the sort of vocation she has I think. I think a woman right [sic] to have other interests besides her family but not major interests. … there are a lot of things to think of tho' I got terribly excited when they all sort of jump down on me. I want to think of all of them at once. I think interest is glorious — everything is so damn interesting.[63]

Like other women of her period, she was caught up in the debate between the traditional role(s) of women — to put the family first — and a more modern sentiment

that acknowledged women's ability and need to have interests outside the home. Staebler's expectation that women would and could work before marriage reflects Neatby's finding that women students at Queen's University in the 1920s expected to work, at least for awhile, after graduation.[64]

Staebler was also caught up in the development of the new field of sociology. Although she never formally studied sociology or political economy, she was clearly influenced by the sociological ideals that were pervasive at the University of Toronto in the inter-war period. Evolving out of the social action movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, academic sociologists examined the process of social conflict and accommodation within society.[65] Toronto's University Settlement had been established in 1910 and was patterned after London's Toynbee Hall. The Department of Social Service was created in 1914 and attracted many of the women who were involved in the Women's Undergraduate Association at University College and the YWCA. When the University Settlement and Department of Social Service were first established, they were efforts to "institutionalize the Victorian ideal of service within the expanding structure of the twentieth-century university." Both were initially designed as uniquely "masculine obligations" even though university women greatly outnumbered men as volunteers in the Settlement and students in the Department of Social Service.[66] By the time Staebler arrived at university, service to one's community and society as a whole was well established as a proper activity for young women students and sociologist R.M. MacIver had been at the university for a decade. MacIver's conception of sociology included both social action and social conduct; in other words, "action regulated by ethics."[67] The idea of social service also had an impact on the religious traditions of the established churches in the development of the social gospel. Staebler's involvement in the Settlement and the SCM indicates that she was inclined to reject the dogma of the church in favour of "relevancy." For the church to be relevant in the aftermath of World War I, it had to be involved in rectifying the social ills of the period. In a peripheral way, Staebler was part of the modern 'reconstruction' of the church that was so vibrant on the university campus through the social gospel. But when she returned to Kitchener, back to the more traditional and dogmatic form of Presbyterianism, she rejected formal religion.

Although interested in social service, Staebler pursued an Arts degree rather than enrolling in the Social Service Department. In addition to Religious Knowledge, Staebler's studies included English, French, psychology, zoology and physical training. She maintained a C average for the most part, with the occasional A and B sprinkled throughout her transcripts. The relatively new field of psychology, finally separated from philosophy into its own department in 1926, fascinated her from the start, noting in her diary "I'm going to like Psychology I'm sure."[68] Seventy-eight years later, she would still remember it as one of her favourite subjects.[69] The blending of writing with psychology was also of interest to Staebler. In 1928, Staebler commented: "Press Club Meeting—Mary Laurier Ross spoke about short stories. I feel greatly encouraged. The modern trend is toward psychological sketches rather than narratives. She's the most interesting & charming person & so alive & enthused. I feel wonderful."[70] Staebler's later writing seems to be of this nature, including not

simply the facts, but the richness of daily life in socially or physically isolated communities like the Mennonites and Cape Breton Island.

In her last two years of university, Staebler also studied ethics. On one final exam, she wrote on the topics of patriarchy, the animal qualities of "man," Spencer's view of human choice and conduct, and on "egoism." Although her answers are brief (particularly the one on Spencer), they give some insight into her perspective on these issues—and into what she was learning. According to her exam answers, Staebler believed that the patriarchal system had evolved as a result of the male's physical strength. With the advancement of civilization, as she puts it, the individual gained more "recognition" and "the father lost some of his power." One significant factor, she argued, was the emancipation of women. Although it was clear there were still some leftover remnants of patriarchal power, Staebler wrote, "modern changes of living have modified the status and functions of the family so that it is difficult to say just how much of the old system still remains, there being so many individual differences in families and communities."[71] There is a clear sense that modern society was better for women; that patriarchy was being challenged by modern society and modern women. The sense of progress is further emphasized in her answer to the second question. In it, she states: "Man is an animal and so has many innate qualities which he can control but not exterminate." She goes on to argue that one's ethical development becomes higher as people become better at controlling those innate qualities; at the same time, as "morals and higher civilization" develop, "man" can control them more easily. Again, there is an acceptance of the idea that the individual, the Subject, is autonomous; that an individual is able and "free to think things out for himself [sic] and act as he [sic] thinks best."[72] The autonomous individual is again emphasized in the third answer which cites Spencer as saying "conduct is an adjustment of acts to ends … it is a consciously purposive activity." It is in the conduct of a person that one's character is expressed. For the final question, Staebler discusses egoism versus altruism. She argues that altruism is better than egoism, but that egoism is necessary, too. A person needs to be able to take care of oneself before he or she can adequately care for others. What is interesting in her argument is that she feels one can place value on individual life.

> I think first of all a person must develop a proper sense of values. This would involve the question of whether a person who was doing an infinite amount of good in the world to a great many people should sacrifice his life for some poor worthless creature. In this case, I think the most valuable person should live, it wouldn't be selfish for him to let the creature suffer because he'd probably never forget it all his life and so be making more of a personal sacrifice by living and helping other people.[73]

The language she uses is suggestive of the eugenics movement that was prevalent in the period. She highlights the value of the individual in terms of the greater good. It seems as if she is working through some of the new ideas that she is encountering, but is not looking at the issue in terms of power—who will make the determination of individual value?

Staebler's interests were broad during her university years and she read widely throughout university and her life. In May of 1929, for example, Staebler read Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*. In *Orlando*, Woolf explores gender and sexuality, as well as the meanings of masculinity and sexuality. Staebler comments that she liked the work, calling it "a queer clever book."[74] O'Neill's play also explores controversial sexual themes and includes a strong dose of Freud's theories.[75] Staebler's comments reveal less enthusiasm for it: "Clever—a bit neurotic."[76] She also read Hugh Walpole's semi-autobiographical *Jeremy* to her younger sister, Ruby, calling it "darling & clever."[77] In addition, Staebler developed a love of and pride in Canadian artists and authors.

Canadian culture was coming into its own in the inter-war period. The 1920s was an important period in the development of modern Canadian art. While modernism in art was also taking hold in Europe at this time, Canadian artists developed a unique regional quality. The Group of Seven, of course, was important to this movement and Staebler was significantly influenced by some member artists. Staebler regularly visited the Toronto Art Students' League. Her childhood friend, Fay Roberts, was a student at the Ontario College of Art and a member of the League. At the League's meetings, she met A.Y. Jackson—"He's such an old chick. Doesn't look a bit like an artist"[78]—Lawren Harris, and Arthur Lismer, among others. The League was created when, in 1927, students of Arthur Lismer decided to break away from the Ontario College of Art and revive the Toronto Art Students' League, which had originally been founded in 1886.[79] She found the atmosphere of the League stimulating and she readily absorbed the discussions about art: "I love it there. It's so vital, they are all so optimistic, they love living."[80] At one meeting, Max Yergin, whom she had heard at the Detroit convention a few weeks earlier, spoke about his work. A Miss Breithaupt[81] argued that his work paralleled theirs at the League, but Staebler questioned how that was possible:

> … they claim all art and music & religion & literature & everything has a common end, so then how could they run parallel? … An artist's life is entirely devoted to portraying his vision on canvas. He sees the goal when he has depicted it; the musician hears it in his compositions or interpretation; the author tries to tell it, to express his mission in words and some discover great truths of philosophy & see the ultimate end thro' [sic] them. Some have a very clear vision which Jesus has given them and some have a genius of just living for this. We are all creative in something—if not music & art & literature—of the greatest of all things—human life and we can find our own way to the light in carefully molding our creations. But these things do not run parallel; they can't. They are consecutive and those who are farthest away from the light are the farthest away from each other & the closer they are to the center, the more able they will be to appreciate all the other lines and to learn from them. And the very center is a perfect blending of all the arts.[82]

She grew to love the work of the Group of Seven and other Canadian artists: "Read a

book on Canadian Art Movement. I love it. Reading of Canada's north lands always fills me with the most ecstatic feeling. I want to work & talk & fight & do everything for her."[83] A few months later, her passion for Canadian art led her to defend the work of the Group of Seven in a discussion with her boss, the editor of Kitchener's *Daily Record*: "he hates it & told me not to sell myself to the sensational but I'm sure it's good — there's so much more in it than I can see in any other contemporary stuff — it has so much depth & colour & design & rhythm & music almost."[84]

In addition to enjoying literature and art, Staebler loved to attend concerts and films in Toronto. Her future husband, Keith Staebler, was a talented musician and they listened to a variety of styles of music. Staebler attended concerts by jazz artist Paul Whiteman and cellist Hans Kindler, among many others. One Kindler recital sent Staebler into raptures. In her diary she recorded, "The most wonderful thing — I was just crazy after & ran all the way home to talk about him but when I got home I couldn't say anything — sounds just whirled around in my head."[85] Staebler regularly attended films and recorded her thoughts about them in her diary. In September 1928, she recorded:

> Saw 'The Patriot' with Keith. I've never seen such wonderful acting before. He was czar of Russia & [illeg.] as cruel — a perfect beast & you hated him so [entirely] — next minute you'd nearly weep in sympathy with his pathetic childishness. No wonder the Russians are in revolt now — it's merely a reaction against the terrible things they suffered then. We didn't speak a word all through the picture & afterwards at home we just sat in a perfectly beautiful silence.[86]

Many shared her response to the film and *The Patriot* went on to win an Academy Award for Best Writing Achievement. It was the only silent picture to be nominated for Best Picture that year; in fact, it was the last silent film ever to be nominated.[87] In spite of the popular success of such films, many American-produced films were rejected by the Canadian public. There were frequent concerns over the morality portrayed in these films. Canadian officials ranked offences in films, including seduction, infidelity, and "American flag-waving," and sought to prevent certain movies from being released in Canada. Movies came to symbolize the moral battles of modern society and of Canadian values versus American ones.[88]

Access to cultural and popular events added to the excitement of attending university in Toronto. The city was the symbol of progress and modernity. In addition to easy access to lectures, plays, concerts, and films, shopping downtown was a favourite activity. But there was also a dark side. All the benefits of modernity were available, but so too were the dangers, the perceived evils of the city. As historian Allan Levine writes:

> The city, in the United States and Canada, was seen at first as a promoter of culture and the 'cradle of progress,' where modern engineering and marvels like electricity, streetcars, subways, telephones, and skyscrapers would enhance

> the quality of life. In the modern metropolis, it was possible to find the best of everything — schools, churches, newspapers, libraries, bookstores, art galleries and theatres. Then, as had happened in London, Paris, and other European cities, industrialization, immigration, squalor, greed, exploitation, crime, and political corruption … took their toll.[89]

While there is no sense that Staebler was afraid to be in the city, she did encounter the "dark side" on occasion. In her last month of university, she recorded:

> To-nite Helen & I walked down to the Union Station to get my ticket. …. [At] Beverley St. & Dundas — Chinese men slinking in dark door ways, we hurried along — we felt that anything might happen — we expected it — and coming home along University Ave where there were no houses & no people in sight — just board fences — two tough young boys — smoking — [leering] at us — saying 'Look out you're going to be killed' — Helen was scared as we passed them — walking quickly — & a shot was fired — it whizzed by me — we heard the echo two blocks away — a heavy solid sound — we looked back — the boys were slinking away behind the trees — we tore home.[90]

Aside from occasional visits to the University Settlement, Staebler, and other women students like her, rarely had contact with the working classes, recent immigrants, or others outside her social class. Certainly, women students would have been aware of the dangers through newspaper reports, but there was a general sense that they were safe at university. From Staebler's letters and diaries, the city was an exciting place to be, not a dangerous one.

Although Staebler expressed interest in doing more after graduation than simply getting married, her career opportunities were limited, as they were for most women during this time. She expected that her BA would open more doors for her than they did. After receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1929, Staebler worked at various low-level office and sales jobs in Kitchener. Dissatisfied with this type of work, she then took the one-year course at the Ontario College of Education (OCE). In 1932, she worked as a teacher in Ingersoll, Ontario, near her hometown of Kitchener, but her contract was not renewed after her first year — she was told she was too young to be a teacher (she was twenty-six at the time) and that it was not appropriate for her to do back somersaults in front of the children. A year later, she was married and focused on being "a wife." After graduation and throughout her marriage, Staebler continued to read the literature she loved and to have an active social life, attending various types of parties, participating in the University Women's Club's reading group, and helping out at the local library. Her one artistic outlet was the K-W[91] Little Theatre. In 1937, her play *The White Waistcoat* won the group's play-writing competition (judged by B.K. Sandwell, editor of *Saturday Night*, Professor H.W. Auden of the University of Western Ontario, and Graham Llewelleyn of Huron College). The play, a satirical romance about music lovers in Kitchener, was commended by the judges for its characterization and "dexterity".[92]

Staebler's interest in people and their actions persisted throughout her long career as a journalist and writer. Two years after her first article, "Duellists of the Deep," was published in *Maclean's* in 1948, Staebler won the Canadian Women's Press Club Award for Outstanding Literary Journalism.[93] Some of her best pieces captured the nuances of the Mennonite and Cape Breton people. She lived with the families to learn in intimate detail the character of their day-to-day lives. Indeed, she could not imagine trying to write about them without these details. She felt that simply asking questions from a list

> presupposed too much, merely got answers to something already half-known; there was no place for surprises and all those delightful things that happen when you become friends with people, and they are natural in your presence and you learn from them by living their lives with them until you feel you have assimilated enough to write an understanding piece about them.[94]

By immersing herself in the culture of a group like the Mennonites, she was able to capture the subtleties of their lives. Pierre Berton wrote about Staebler's gift for capturing the cadence of language:

> Most writers remain dispassionate; they observe; they absorb; they write. Edna does more; she becomes part of the narrative. She lives the lives of the people she writes about; she listens to their problems and they become her friends — not just for the moment but forever.[95]

Her diaries are filled with observations about her friends and the people she met, as well as her own feelings about them and their activities. That this style of writing appealed to Staebler is evident in her writing throughout her university years, and later when she became a professional writer. In the context of Staebler's efforts to create a coherent sense of Canadian society, her focus on the lives of "Others" can also be interpreted as an effort to reconcile the fragmentation of society that large-scale non-Anglo immigration seemed to bring.

Staebler's university experience helped her to formulate a sense of self and nation. Of course, she was not the only woman to be so influenced by university life. Think of the number of women who became teachers, and thus spread modern ideas across Canada and North America. Think too, of those women who did not work outside the home after graduation. They still had a role to play as volunteers in the various reform movements, and as mothers, encouraging their daughters and sons to look beyond tradition, to create a new society. After graduation, Staebler took her experience of modernity with her and spread many of its ideals, first in her brief time teaching, then in her writing and volunteer activities. By examining the university experience of a fairly typical woman student in the 1920s, it is possible to gain an understanding of how modernity affected such students at an important moment in their lives and how they accepted and modified modern life. While it seems trite to say that the university years are ones of transition, those years are nonetheless a time when young

people move away from the support and influence of their families and are exposed to sometimes controversial ideas. Staebler's experiences illustrate those of women who made up the bulk of the university's female student body — those who did not take on leadership roles in the student government or newspapers, who were not academically excellent, or who were not athletic stars.

Notes

* An early version of this paper was presented at the 2005 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women. Research for this paper was funded in part by the Trent University Professional Development Fund.

1 University of Guelph Archives (UGA), XR1 MS A700017 Box R3-1, Edna Staebler Collection, "Diary from Age 16 to 1936," October 14, 1926. [Hereafter, Diary.]

2 Two recent books provide full details about the life of Edna Staebler. Christl Verduyn has edited Staebler's diaries in *Must Write: Edna Staebler's Diaries* (Kitchener: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005). Veronica Ross has written a biography of Staebler based on interviews, letters, and diaries, *To Experience Wonder: Edna Staebler, A Life* (Toronto: The Dundurn Group, 2003).

3 Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe Since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 52.

4 Nicole Neatby, "Preparing for the Working World: Women at Queen's During the 1920s," in *Gender and Education in Ontario,* ed. Ruby Heap and Alison Prentice, (Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press, 1991), 329.

5 Paul Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class: Student Life in English Canada during the Thirties* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1990), 21-29; Alyson E. King, "The Experience of the Second Generation of Women Students at Ontario Universities, 1900 to 1930" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1999), 1, 19.

6 Verduyn, *Must Write*, 24-25.

7 Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class*, 31.

8 Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 4.

9 Walden, *Becoming Modern* , 4.

10 See, Ann Taylor Allen, "Feminism, Social Science, and the Meanings of Modernity: The Debate on the Origin of the Family in Europe and the United States, 1860-1914," *American Historical Review* (October 1999): 1085; and Catherine Gidney, *A Long Eclipse: The Liberal Protestant Establishment and the Canadian University, 1920-1970.* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2004), xvi.

11 Donald A. Wright, "W.D. Lighthall and David Ross McCord: Antimodernism and English-Canadian Imperialism, 1880s-1918," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1997). See also, Michael Dawson, "'That nice red coat goes to my head like champagne': Gender, antimodernism and the Mountie image, 1880-1960," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1997).

12 Alice Gambrell, *Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference: Transatlantic Culture, 1919-1945* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4.

13 Gerard Delanty, *Social Theory in a Changing World: Conceptions of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 2.

14 Ibid., 179.

15 Ibid., 179.

16 Walden, *Becoming Modern*, 333.

17 Delanty, *Social Theory*, 28.
18 Many other Canadians drew on similar university experiences during the inter-war period in their later public careers. See for example, Greg Donaghy and Stéphane Roussel, eds. *Escott Reid: Diplomat and Scholar* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2004). Charles Levi has traced the connections between university student leaders at University College (University of Toronto) and their later careers. Charles Morden Levi, "Where the Famous People Were? The Origins, Activities and Future Careers of Student Leaders at University College, Toronto, 1854-1973" (PhD diss., York University, 1998).
19 Kay Rex, *No Daughter of Mine: The Women and History of the Canadian Women's Press Club, 1904-1971* (Toronto: Cedar Cave Books, 1995), 83-86.
20 Diary, Thursday, October 14, 1926.
21 Delanty, *Social Theory*, 37.
22 Alyson E. King, "The Experience of Students in the 'New Era': Discourse and Gender in The Varsity, 1919-1929," *Ontario Journal of Higher Education* (1994): 40-41.
23 Marjory Lang, *Women Who Made the News: Female Journalists in Canada, 1880-1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1999), 8.
24 Ibid., 10.
25 Ibid., 55-56.
26 Diary, Monday, August 27, 1928.
27 Rex, *No Daughter of Mine*, x. See also, Lang, *Women Who Made the News*, 55-56.
28 Alyson E. King, "The Experience of Students in the 'New Era': Discourse and Gender in The Varsity, 1919-1929," *Ontario Journal of Higher Education* (1994): 39-56.
29 Neatby, *Preparing for the Working World*, 346.
30 Personal interview with Edna Staebler, September 22, 2004, Kitchener, Ontario. [Hereafter, Interview.]
31 Diary, Wednesday, September 30, 1926.
32 Diary, Saturday, March 31, 1928.
33 Christina Simmons, "Companionate Marriage and the Lesbian Threat," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 4, no. 3, Lesbian History (Autumn, 1979): 54. See also, Angela Willey, "'Christian nations', 'Polygamic Races' and Women's Rights: Toward a Genealogy of Non/Monogamy and Whiteness," *Sexualities* 9 no. 5: 530-46.
34 Diary, Sunday, December 11, 1927.
35 Diary, Tuesday, October 30, 1928.
36 Delanty, *Social Theory*, 3.
37 Staebler does not identify the convention by name in her diaries and did not remember which one it was at the time of my interview with her. Catherine Gidney notes that during the 1920s and 1930s, Canadian students regularly attended meetings of the Student Volunteer Movement in the United States. Gidney, *A Long Eclipse: The Liberal Protestant Establishment and the Canadian University, 1920-1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2004), 55.
38 Diary, Sunday, December 18, 1927.
39 Diary, Thursday, December 29, 1927.
40 Diary, Thursday, December 29, 1927.
41 Diary, Saturday, December 31, 1927.
42 Diary, Sunday, January 1, 1928.
43 Cecil Foster, *Where Race Does Not Matter: The New Spirit of Modernity* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2005), 14. See also, Allan Levine, *The Devil in Babylon: Fear of Progress and the Birth of Modern Life* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2005), 103-49.
44 Foster, *Where Race Does Not Matter*, 41.
45 Levine, *Devil in Babylon*, 135.
46 Diary, Sunday, January 1,1928.

47 Constance Backhouse, *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950* (Toronto: The Osgoode Society, 1999), 5.
48 Ibid., 5-6, 42-43.
49 Diary, Sunday, January 1, 1928.
50 Delanty, *Social Theory*, 28-29. On the relationship between race and the modern Canadian nation, see also Foster, *Where Race Does Not Matter*.
51 A.B. McKillop, *Matters of Mind: The University in Ontario, 1791-1951* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 488-89.
52 Ibid., 492-93.
53 Ibid., 493.
54 Diary, Saturday, January 21, 1928.
55 Ross, *To Experience Wonder*, 62.
56 Interview.
57 McKillop, *Matters of Mind*, 490.
58 Ibid., 490.
59 Gidney, *A Long Eclipse*, xix-xx.
60 McKillop, *Matters of Mind*, 104. See also, Cathy James, "Reforming Reform: Toronto's Settlement House Movement, 1900-1920," *Canadian Historical Review* 82, no. 1 (March 2001): 55-91.
61 Diary, Monday, November 5, 1928.
62 Diary, Saturday, October 6, 1928.
63 Diary, Sunday, October 7, 1928.
64 Neatby, "Preparing for the Working World," 337-39.
65 McKillop, *Matters of Mind*, 494-495.
66 Sara Z. Burke, *Seeking the Highest Good: Social Service and Gender at the University of Toronto, 1888-1937* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 139.
67 McKillop, *Matters of Mind*, 501.
68 Diary, Wednesday, September 30, 1926.
69 Interview.
70 Diary, Thursday, October 11, 1928.
71 UGA, Edna Staebler Collection, XR1 MSA700003, Box C, File C-3, "Ethics Questions," April 18, Pass III.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Diary, Thursday, May 30, 1929.
75 Levine, *Devil in Babylon*, 282.
76 Diary, Friday, May 31, 1929.
77 Diary, Friday, June 28, 1929.
78 Diary, Monday, January 23, 1928.
79 "History," Art Students League of Toronto, http://www.artstudentsleague.com/abotus_b.html (Accessed May 18, 2005).
80 Diary, Monday, January 30, 1928.
81 Miss Breithaupt is not clearly identified in Staebler's diaries, but it is likely that she was Martha Edna Breithaupt (1885-1963). She was from a Kitchener-Waterloo family and had connections with the Art Students' League in Toronto. See the Breithaupt Hewetson Clark Collection at the University of Waterloo.
82 Diary, Sunday, January 29, 1928.
83 Diary, Wednesday, February 15, 1928.
84 Diary, Monday, August 27, 1928.
85 Diary, Tuesday, November 20, 1928.
86 Diary, Tuesday, September 11, 1928.
87 Only fragments of the film remain today. Michael Koller, May 2001, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/01/14/patriot.html (Accessed May 12, 2005).

88 Levine, *Devil in Babylon*, 322-23.
89 Ibid., 11.
90 Diary, Friday, May 3, 1929.
91 K-W is short for Kitchener-Waterloo.
92 Ross, *To Experience Wonder*, 55-59 and 65-66.
93 She won for her article "How to Live without Wars and Wedding Rings" published in Maclean's, April 1, 1950.
94 Edna Staebler, *Places I've Been & People I've Known: Stories from Across Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1983, 1990), 224.
95 Pierre Berton, "Foreword" in Staebler, *Places I've Been & People I've Known*, 7.