

PREPARING FOR THE WORKING WORLD: WOMEN AT QUEEN'S DURING THE 1920s¹

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World War I brought changes that many hoped would radically improve women's status and role in society. Women had extended their fields of action in the working world and they were encroaching on professional male preserves. By 1918, most women had finally obtained the right to vote at most levels of government. And yet the following decade did not live up to feminist expectations. As Veronica Strong-Boag has pointed out, "Predictions of major, even revolutionary change for feminists and anti-feminists turned out far wide of the mark."²

Instead of building on or even consolidating these advances, the post-war period was one in which women seemed to have lost ground. Historians have noted that after the Great War, women generally ended up following the dictates of domesticity, essentially orienting their goals towards marriage and raising children. As the authors of the most recent textbook on Canadian women's history have written, "Given the loss of 60,000 Canadian lives during the war, motherhood acquired an enhanced practical and symbolical importance." Furthermore, "the tremendous social and economic dislocation the nation experienced at war's end reinforced the belief that women should not compete for men's jobs."³ Even their newly acquired voting power was neutralized by the fact that most wives voted as their husbands did.

But can we assume that women's fight for equality was at a standstill in the 1920s or even that the clock had been turned back? Recent studies reveal that although the women's movement of the early twentieth century appeared to have "lost its way,"⁴ significant changes in women's lives were nonetheless taking place, changes which helped to enhance female autonomy. A closer look at the 1920s thus seems in order. This post-war decade may not have brought about the dramatic progress hoped for by the suffragettes and other feminists of the earlier generation, yet this must not preclude the study of other types of important transformations.

Certainly changes in higher education support the claim that the 1920s saw improvements in the status of women. Very little has been written on the experience of Canadian female university students of that decade, but some significant changes were taking place.⁵ It was a time when more women were going to university than ever before. Total registration rose over the decade and more significantly, in relative terms, the proportion of female students rose from 16.3% of total enrolment in 1919/20 to 23.5% in 1929/30.⁶ These statistics suggest that something was happening.

Could this increased enrolment be linked to the adoption of feminist principles? Were female students turning to higher education for better-paying jobs?

Was this an attempt to extend their sphere of activity into male territory? More specifically, one needs to ask why women went to university in the 1920s. What did they, or their parents, expect to gain from these additional years of higher education?

The experience of female students who attended Queen's University in the 1920s suggests some answers to these questions. The Queen's records provide information on most of the students' place of origin, religious denomination, father's occupation, intended profession, and course selection. Of these files, 847 document the women who registered at Queen's during the decade. The small number in any one year makes it difficult to create valid annual samples for the whole decade. This study therefore concentrates on the records of the first-year students of 1925. The data covers 62 of the 76 female students starting university that year as well as 61 of their male colleagues, one-third of the total male enrolment.⁷ The men were included to see whether the social and economic backgrounds of students varied according to gender. The *Queen's Journal*, the student newspaper, was the major source of information on student interests, attitudes, and activities. The archival record was supplemented by interviews with 23 women and eight men living in the Kingston and Ottawa areas who were graduates in the 1920s.⁸

By the 1920s the presence of female students in the universities was no longer a novelty. Earlier generations had convinced an increasing segment of the population that university education for women was an acceptable expense. Some even upheld it as a necessary prelude to a financially productive female life. By the 1920s, paid work even for women of the middle class was no longer seen as an aberration. At least in the brief interlude between the end of education and marriage, "maturity was increasingly associated with paid work. Like their brothers, women came to expect to spend at least some of their adult life in the labour force."⁹ Fathers and brothers were progressively being relieved of the financial responsibility of supporting single female family members who were old enough to work. Mary Vipond makes the point that the popular magazines of the period even publicized the notion that paid employment would make women better homemakers.¹⁰ It was clearly understood that this prescribed working period in a woman's life was meant to be temporary, an interregnum before she began her true vocation, that of wife and mother.¹¹ In the case of women who might "unfortunately" never marry, there may have been the reluctant awareness that this temporary working period might become permanent. The spinster would then be in a position to avoid her traditionally dependent status and become financially self-sufficient.

When a period of paid employment is taken for granted, higher education might well be seen as a passport to the more suitable occupations. This, of course, would be mostly true for women of the middle class. If women were expected to work even for a brief period in their lives and if education was to be, at least in part, a preparation for this experience, then higher education for women would increasingly be recognized as a preparation for the working world. In other

words, the purpose of university education for women would resemble more and more that of the men's. This would not necessarily eliminate the fact that career expectations for men and women were still very different. Women would still not be welcome in the more prestigious liberal professions. But they would gain admission to potentially more rewarding occupations. This could still be consistent with and might even be seen as training for an eventual career as mother and housekeeper.¹² There would not be a revolution. A university education which would prepare women for the work world would still "not fundamentally threaten the primacy of the family headed by the male breadwinner."¹³ But, if there was no revolution, attitudes were changing.

Does the experience of female students who went to Queen's in the 1920s bear witness to such an evolution? The women graduates of Queen's who were interviewed clearly did not consider themselves as pioneers. When asked whether they had expected to go to university when they were in high school, 18 of the 23 women graduates answered in the affirmative. Without any hesitation, the majority claimed that they took university education for granted: "It came as a natural progression."¹⁴ Only two respondents remembered any opposition from relatives or friends to the pursuit of higher education. Attending university did not make these women feel different or unusual; it seemed a normal thing to do. University had become an acceptable environment for women. What had once been an act of defiance was now an appropriate option.

In some ways, however, they were still exceptional. They were still part of a definite minority. In 1920, only 1% of all women in Canada between the ages of 20 and 24 were attending university.¹⁵ At Queen's University there was an average of 300 female students per year in an average student population of 1816 during the 1920s.¹⁶ These statistics seem to contradict the belief among the women interviewed that higher education was a "natural progression." However, the statistics for the Faculty of Arts paint a different picture. Female students were about 40% of the Arts students.¹⁷ In this area, therefore, women were comparatively well represented. Understandably in these circumstances, they may not have felt out of place.

Yet these figures do not tell us which women came to university. In the 1920s, according to Frederick Gibson, Queen's had the reputation of being a poor man's college, "performing a vital service in eastern Ontario, as well as for the province," in "helping the backward and unfortunate" to get a university education.¹⁸ Students "were on the whole people of modest means and uncertain prospects."¹⁹ Nonetheless, at Queen's as elsewhere, the middle class was overrepresented.²⁰ For an earlier period, from 1895 to 1905, Lynne Marks and Chad Gaffield have pointed out that "Queen's students tended to have fathers in higher status occupations but...they were not from a homogeneous wealthy elite."²¹ In the 1920s, according to Gibson, "the sons and daughters of professional parents [were] the largest single group of Queen's students"²² and the proportion increased during the decade, from 30% of the total freshman class in 1920/21 to 39% in 1928/29.²³

Within this student body, however, the social origins of the women differed from those of the men. The most direct way of establishing the social origins of Queen's students is to look at their fathers' occupations.²⁴ The student records show that one-quarter of the women came from professional backgrounds and more than half were born into business families.²⁵ Thus the great majority of these women (three-quarters) had fathers in these two occupational categories. Male students, on the other hand, only had half as many fathers in professional and business categories, representing slightly more than one-third of the total occupations listed. Apparently male students were more likely to come from families with less "prestigious" occupations.

The interview samples reflected the same pattern. Of the 23 women questioned, half came from professional backgrounds and one-third from business families, while six of the eight men interviewed belonged to skilled artisan or primary producer families. Unfortunately, as Lynne Marks and Chad Gaffield pointed out for an earlier period, "the records contain no information about the father's actual income or wealth, a consideration especially important in the case of farmers."²⁶ Nonetheless the findings make clear that the Queen's women had fathers with higher status jobs and probably with higher incomes than the fathers of Queen's men.²⁷

This conclusion is strengthened by the evidence that the women's education was largely financed by their parents. Among the female graduates interviewed, only two financed their own education; another five contributed, whereas three-quarters of those interviewed (16) said that their fathers paid for everything. On the other hand, the evidence suggests that sons were, more often than not, expected to finance their university education themselves. Six out of the eight male graduates said that they paid their own way through college and claimed that this was usual for male students.

The summer activities of these students underline the difference between the two groups. The interviews suggest that for female students the summer months were almost holidays. The great majority (17) did not work to earn money. They either "just had fun"²⁸ or helped around the house, some of them taking care of younger siblings. In fact, a few claimed that applying for a summer job "wasn't the thing to do."²⁹ In some cases, it was the parents of the graduates who objected to the idea. They wanted to keep their daughters at home, perhaps to look after younger brothers or sisters, or work around the house.³⁰ Earning money in the summer apparently was not considered an appropriate female activity. By contrast, each of the male graduates questioned worked for wages in the summer. Again, for them it was the "normal thing to do."³¹ One of them explained that they "all worked: it was a poor man's university";³² another said that "everyone was struggling to get through."³³ Even during the school year most of them held part-time jobs. None of them remembered any female students who had worked in the summer time. The men and women may have gone to classes together but when summer came their paths diverged.

There is some evidence to suggest that at Queen's the pattern was changing. Attempts were made to find summer jobs for women. Ideally this would make female students less dependent on financial assistance from parents and would facilitate access to university for the less fortunate. Charlotte Whitton played an active role in such endeavours, along with other Queen's alumnae, by forming a Committee on Employment of Women after World War I. They also proposed that "an employment bureau be established for men and women of the University."³⁴ A few years later, an article in the *Queen's Journal* commended the work done by the Employment Service of the University "in bringing placement to many graduates and undergraduates who are anxious to secure the necessary funds to keep the home fires burning."³⁵ And there certainly are sources to suggest that some female students were working in the summer out of economic necessity. Thus, when in 1920, Dean O.K. Skelton addressed the Alma Mater Society, he commented that

Queen's students as a rule come from homes where boys and girls are accustomed to look after themselves and many even pay part of their college expenses by working in the summer....³⁶

Among the six former graduates who held a summer job, one recalled how she and her friends all worked out of need despite the fact that "of course, there were always wealthy ones who went to their summer cottages in the summer."³⁷ Finally, it is noteworthy that these six women did not think of their experience in retrospect as being out of the ordinary.

These signs of evolution however cannot conceal the fact that above all, Queen's continued to cater to female students who came from financially secure backgrounds. The Employment Service had only a limited impact. The bitter complaints voiced by Charlotte Whitton in 1928 leave no doubt that women attending Queen's were not driven by the same pressures as men to find additional sources of income.

Women students desiring summer employment have evinced their interest and given their names in reference to various lines of work, but when openings have been obtained after considerable effort, it has been found that many of those applying therefor [*sic*] have changed their minds and those who have reserved positions for them have consequently been disappointed.³⁸

It is also important to keep in mind that even if female students did obtain a summer job, women's wages were such that female students could not earn as much as male students to finance their university attendance. Thus the financial context of the 1920s still made it difficult for the less fortunate women to enter Queen's.

But why did the women who could afford to go to Queen's want a higher education? Parental hopes seem to have had some influence in pushing the women graduates towards a higher education. This is not surprising when we take into account the dependence of many women on their fathers' financial support to enter university. In this situation, a daughter's decision to pursue a higher education could not have been a completely autonomous one. The great majority of female graduates questioned (21 out of 23) clearly remember that their parents wanted them to have a university education. This strong desire to see their daughters college-educated is particularly striking considering the fact that most of the parents had never attended university. Seven of the fathers had a public school education, six of them had finished high school, and nine attended university. The mothers had even less education. Three of them had had public school education, sixteen had a high school education, one attended Normal School, and three went on to university for two years or less. In spite of this, mothers were often singled out as the dominant force in pushing for the higher education of their daughters. Indeed six women graduates pointed to their mother as the parent with the most desire to see them go on to university. Only three mentioned their fathers. Clearly this distinction cannot be attributed to a more advanced education on the part of the mothers. Is it possible that they had been influenced by the notions of women's rights and status promoted during the pre-war era? These women could have been looking back on their own limited education as a disadvantage and possibly did not want to see their daughters frustrated or deprived in the same way as they had been. The evidence is not conclusive but one thing is certain: both fathers and mothers felt that higher education was a benefit which they wanted their daughters to acquire.

The nature of this anticipated benefit is not clear. The interviews leave no doubt that parents eventually hoped to see their daughters marry. One can wonder if they felt the university offered young women opportunities to meet eligible and "suitable" male companions? It seems highly likely that parents would be well aware of the favourable social context provided by the campus. Indeed registering at Queen's certainly could enhance their daughter's chances of making an "interesting" match. Yet nothing in the responses of the former female graduates suggests that parents openly expressed such hopes.

One thing seems certain from the interviews: for some parents the advantages of a university education were undoubtedly economic. One female graduate recalled how her father used to say, "Go on to school and get an education so that you don't have to work as hard as I did all my life."³⁹ Implicit in the attitude of many of the parents was the expectation that their daughters would at one point enter the working world and earn a living. When one considers that the mothers of 20 of the 23 female graduates had not worked for wages before their marriage, it is obvious that parental attitudes towards single women's employment had changed. In fact, some women graduates remembered that their parents had been quite outspoken on this issue. One mentioned that her mother was

determined that we would be able to earn our living. If we married O.K. but you might need it anyway. She was determined that there would be a vocation other than just a degree.⁴⁰

These parents clearly wanted to guarantee their daughters' economic independence. It no longer seemed acceptable for single women to be without income. More than this, investing in university education could be seen as a way of ensuring their child's lifelong financial security—every woman after all was a potential spinster. As one graduate explained, her parents felt that

a woman should have some means of self-support—not just be left to sit. You mightn't marry and you should be able to support yourself and not be dependent on relatives.⁴¹

However, there was also the assumption that a university degree meant not just a job and financial autonomy but a higher status job. Indeed, since parents wanted their daughters both to attend university and to find a job, it seems probable that they were not ready to see their daughters accept just any form of employment. It must be noted that three-quarters of the women could not recall their mothers or fathers expressing any specific hopes as to what they would become. The choice of their course programme was left up to them. But one female graduate who was thinking of becoming a teacher remembered that her father strongly encouraged her to aim for a "specialist degree" in teaching, which implied some form of university training,⁴² so she could hope for more prestigious employment:

My father instilled that [idea in me]. He said, "if you become a specialist you have a much better career in teaching than if you aren't. You can become a Department Head. You'll have more advancement."⁴³

Nonetheless, whatever the perceived advantages of higher education for women, parents gave a higher priority to their sons' university attendance. When a parent died or if younger siblings needed care, older sisters who were at university were more likely to be called back home to help than their male counterparts.⁴⁴ This was clearly demonstrated during the Depression years, a time when parents' financial resources were reduced. As Hilda Laird, the Dean of Women, noted in 1932-33, "a young man unable to find employment is sent to the university: a young woman is kept at home to help with domestic work."⁴⁵ Indeed female enrolment at Queen's dropped from 404 in 1928/29 to 347 by 1932/33, whereas male enrolment in applied science and medicine rose during that period.⁴⁶ This suggests that parents still did not consider higher education as important for their daughters as for their sons. Yet it remains clear that when circumstances allowed, affluent parents in the post-war decade encouraged their daughters to enter university.

But what of the aspirations of the female students themselves? What were their goals upon entering university? Why did they think a university education was a worthwhile endeavour? For one thing, did they enter university in the hope of meeting a "suitable" husband? Although inconclusive, the available evidence certainly does not allow us to suppose that female students were registering at Queen's to find "Mr. Right." The notion of a "marriage market" at Queen's did inspire some comment in the student newspaper. More precisely, one finds female students responding vehemently to their male colleagues' accusations that the women on campus were attending university to catch a husband. This touched a sensitive chord among some female students, provoking denials from the offended. Although one female journalist was ready to admit that "the desire for finding a husband is always more or less present in a girl's mind, whether consciously or unconsciously expressed," she was not at all prepared to accept the idea that higher education had anything to do with this "latent" desire: "it is absurd and unreasonable to think that the average girl enters an institution of higher learning for four years—where the % of marriages among students is very low—for the primary purpose of husband hunting." She explained that "most of us at Queen's are serious about this business of education and intend on going on into careers. They don't give B.A.'s to dumbbells, nor do they take them in responsible positions."⁴⁷ Some denials were much more categorical. Thus one incensed Queen's woman protested in a letter to the editor that

we are at Queen's because we aim at a career. We would not be here spending our parents' hard-earned pennies if it were a husband and a good time we sought—we would go some place where such things are to be had. As a class the Queen's students are far from the ideal husband.⁴⁸

Another female student analyzed the situation in a more detailed fashion. After asking, "Is Queen's a matrimonial agency, or to put the question in another form, does the average girl come to Queen's to grab a husband", she answered,

Levana, to a woman, howls an emphatic "no". But some man may murmur as he disconnects his telephone, "Methinks the lady protests too much". The fact remains however that a college education is not an asset, but rather a handicap in the matrimonial race. By raising a girl's standards, it narrows her choice of a husband, by increasing her earning power it lessens her need for one.⁴⁹

Judging from the interviews, marriage does not appear to have been a major motivating factor pushing female students to seek a higher education. In fact, out of the 23 female graduates interviewed, seven remained single and only two of those who did get married (16) met their future husbands at Queen's. When asked whether they had hoped to be married or engaged by graduation, most of

the married female graduates (12) answered "no." Some of them could not remember thinking about marriage at that time while others were more definite. For instance, one graduate exclaimed: "Oh! no, no, it wouldn't even occur to me to think of such a thing, because I wanted to earn my living....Marriage wasn't on my mind at all."⁵⁰

One could argue that wanting to earn a living was a far more widespread and pressing goal at this stage in these young women's lives. Indeed the great majority of the female graduates interviewed (20) had expected to work after university. Was higher education seen as a preparation for employment? Female students writing for the *Queen's Journal* certainly lend support to such a supposition. According to one female journalist "somewhere behind the arrival of almost every woman at Queen's is lurking the hope of ultimate independence." More specifically, the Queen's woman was aspiring to

greater knowledge, broader culture, and a more refined sense of the pleasure in things, and that most material advantage, increased earning power.⁵¹

However, further evidence suggests a more complex reality. Students who registered at Queen's were asked to identify their "intended profession." About half of the female students left this blank. Indeed, from the student records, Hilda Laird established the intended profession of the total female population for the years 1925/26, 1926/27, 1927/28 and published her findings in the Principal's Reports. In her first survey of 1925/26, she discovered that out of a total female registration of 293, more than half (162) had no "intended profession" upon entering Queen's.⁵² The following years provided much the same results.⁵³ The interviews also lend support to these findings. Once again, half of the former graduates questioned remembered registering at Queen's without established plans, unsure of their future professional occupations. At first glance, this type of evidence appears to undermine the suggestion that female students were at Queen's to prepare for the working world. How could they be, when so many of them did not have a precise occupation in mind upon arriving at university?

There is no doubt that the Dean of Women's statistics point to widespread professional indecision among the female population at Queen's. Yet indecision does not necessarily mean purposelessness. One can argue that simply by deciding to go to university, female students were actually revealing some kind of vocational ambition. This is all the more likely when one takes into account the prospects the working world held out for women in the 1920s. Employment options were clearly limited. What is more, most of the jobs available to women did not require a higher education and most professions that did require a university degree were closed to them.⁵⁴ All the former women graduates questioned had shared the experience of having to choose a vocation from only a few possibilities. One of them recalled how "in those days there were only 3 choices for girls—you taught, or you became a nurse or you were a secretary."⁵⁵

To register at Queen's was in fact rejecting the possibility of working in some of these fields—namely employment in the lower status occupations of nursing and secretarial work for which a different kind of preparation was required.⁵⁶ One female graduate's recollections certainly lend support to this suggestion:

You see, there weren't an awful lot of interesting things for women in those days and the girls who didn't go to college had gone in and done secretarial work, taken a course at a business college.⁵⁷

Presumably for the women deciding to enter Queen's, these less prestigious occupations had no appeal. Presented in this light, the undeniable pattern of indecision among female students concerning their "intended profession" cannot simply be dismissed as a lack of vocational ambition. These "undecided" women had in fact chosen to reject less prestigious forms of employment open to them. This is a decisive first step in the process of committing oneself to a profession. In all probability, these female students had not yet gone beyond this stage in their search for an appealing vocation. But they were searching. That there should be a delay is not surprising when one considers the limited career options open to university-trained women. It is also interesting that a sampling of the first-year male students of 1925 shows that one-third (28) of the men had no specified "intended profession." Clearly, widespread vocational indecision was not an exclusively female phenomenon. At this stage, even men, on whom society exercised a strong pressure to find a lifelong career, could be undecided about their professional future.

What about those women who registered at Queen's with a specific professional goal in mind? An overwhelming majority opted for teaching. The Dean of Women's study points out that out of the female population in 1925 almost all of those who stated a career option intended to teach (118 out of 131).⁵⁸ She found the same pattern in 1926/27 and again in 1927/28.⁵⁹ In addition, seven out of the eleven "decided" former graduates interviewed also remember opting for teaching at the outset of their university education.

What engendered this constant and overwhelming interest in teaching? For one thing, teaching was one of the rare female occupations for which a university degree was a significant advantage. In Ontario, those who obtained their B.A. and spent a subsequent year at the Ontario College of Education could qualify to teach at the high school level. Teachers at this level were assured of better salaries and more prestige than their non-university trained colleagues in the primary schools. In theory, they could also become eligible for advancement into various high-ranking positions in school administrations. Some female students appreciated these advantages and saw the extra years of training at university as worthwhile. One former graduate remembered thinking that

if I were going to teach it was better to have a specialist standing....It means a better salary and you're more apt to be head of your department.⁶⁰

Deciding to become a teacher, in effect, meant that not only would one enjoy relatively good working conditions compared to those found in other occupations open to women but one would benefit from enviable social prestige. As one female commentator put it,

The rewards of the profession are not money or leisure merely. Teachers have the respect and affection of the community to a degree enjoyed by few other workers.⁶¹

Thus, the large proportion of aspiring teachers at Queen's lends support to the notion that women were seeking a university education in order to prepare themselves for higher status employment.

But these statistics also tell another story. They provide yet another clear illustration of the restricted job opportunities for women in the 1920s. There is some evidence to suggest that the choice of becoming a teacher was often made without much enthusiasm for the profession as such. In some cases the choice seems to have been made out of resignation rather than positive inclination. It was, as one graduate remembered, "guided by what you *could* get."⁶² In her case, she explained that

I wasn't at all sure that I would [like to teach] but I did. It seemed to be the only thing left and I knew I didn't want to be a nurse and I knew I didn't want to be a secretary.⁶³

Through her surveys, Hilda Laird noticed much the same kind of reluctant choice. For the year 1925, she reported that "many of the 118 future teachers have repeatedly stated that they plan to be teachers only because they do not know what else to do."⁶⁴ One graduate probably expressed a widespread feeling when she admitted that she was "afraid teaching may have been [her] choice by elimination."⁶⁵ Therefore if teaching proved to be the most frequently mentioned "intended profession" of Queen's female students, it was probably because for many it seemed the only interesting career option available, the only profession for university-trained women which guaranteed a certain status and good working conditions.

A striking contrast emerges when we look at the options declared by the "decided" male students. The men of the 1925 sample mentioned ten different career options.⁶⁶ Although the majority (16) of these men did choose teaching, they did so in considerably smaller numbers than the "decided" women. What is more, there is no evidence to suggest that they made their choice as a last resort.

Why should they? Unlike their female counter-parts, they had a whole range of possible careers to choose from.

Whatever the motivations behind the "undecided" and "decided" female students at Queen's, one thing seems obvious: these women had decided that they were going to have to earn their living—at least for a few years. In order to do so, some were even ready to prepare for a profession that left them far from enthusiastic. Thus by the 1920s attitudes towards women's paid work had evolved. Queen's women, unlike their mothers, had come to expect to gain some kind of financial independence—at least for a few years during their adult lives. In this respect, their life after graduation was becoming increasingly comparable to the experience of their male colleagues.

However, if expectations had changed by the 1920s concerning women's paid employment, the Queen's material leaves no doubt that many traditional assumptions about female roles and capacities remained. Female students were still excluded from several male professional preserves. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that Queen's women showed a desire to challenge their exclusion. Some remember being first attracted to male professions but they were soon discouraged from pursuing their initial interest. The segregated working world at the time made little effort to accommodate female recruits who wanted to operate outside traditionally prescribed fields of employment. For instance, one of the former graduates recalled that she had wanted to be a lawyer but before making any decision she talked to the only female lawyer in Ottawa at the time:

She was in the process of moving to Toronto because she said: "There's nothing in law for women at the moment. All you are allowed to do is make wills and sign leases, because the interesting work was not given to women at all." Also she said: "You need a private income because you make nothing."⁶⁷

Discouraged to find that law was not a vocation for women who worked to support themselves, she was forced to reconsider: "So I thought: Oh! dear, I'll take a teacher's course. Not that I particularly wanted to be a teacher."⁶⁸

The large percentage of "undecided" female students and the high concentration in teaching aroused some concern at the university. At a Levana dinner given in 1924, Charlotte Whitton, at that time President of the Alumnae Association, was invited to speak. She "emphasized the seriousness of a college course and advised the girls to plan their careers from the beginning."⁶⁹ What seemed particularly worrisome however was the fact that teachers were graduating in large numbers during the 1920s, leading to serious overcrowding in the profession.⁷⁰ As a response, the Dean of Women persistently pushed for "some kind of vocational guidance."⁷¹ She wanted to make Queen's women aware of various career possibilities other than teaching. Through her initiative, counselling was made available and conferences were set up on alternative women's professions.

In 1925, she presented her first series of lectures on "Professions for Women," explaining that

there is no doubt about the fact that almost all of the students do wish to prepare themselves to enter some profession. The difficulty is that they lack information regarding the nature of the work, the scale of salaries and the living conditions in different professions and regarding the qualifications which are necessary to enter them.⁷²

Although Hilda Laird was somewhat disappointed to report that "the attendance at the lectures was not large: it varied from 50 to 100," she remarked nonetheless that "the students were greatly interested."⁷³ The Dean of Women remained fully convinced of the necessity "to interest a large number of students in professions other than teaching."⁷⁴ Thus a programme of conferences on women's occupations was established for the following years as well. In 1927/28, however, "on account of the lack of funds," the lectures were not given.⁷⁵ It seems that interest in the project did not prove strong enough among the supporting societies that year, including Levana and the Alumnae Association. Miss Laird regretted that both these groups "turned deaf ears to my appeals."⁷⁶ But as it turned out, this apparent apathy proved temporary: for the next two years, the vocational talks reappeared on the agenda. To what can we attribute this lull in interest? Although it seems clear that the Dean's initiative never engendered overwhelming enthusiasm among her protégées, the sources make it difficult to conclude much more. One thing is certain: women at Queen's were being encouraged to seek employment once they graduated and they were also being pushed to broaden their professional horizons. Through her endeavours, Hilda Laird was lending support to the newly emerging pattern of single women's work.

Yet a brief overview of the lectures on alternative women's professions reveals that the Dean of Women was also abiding by the constraints imposed on women in the predominantly male working world. Women at Queen's were not being encouraged to challenge the pre-established sexual divisions of labour. For one thing, some lecturers advocated preparation for purely traditional female occupations. Out of a total of 20 conferences given between 1925 and 1930, half discussed the advantages and requirements for employment clearly associated with women. Thus, four lectures were given on social work; one on public health and nursing; two on household science; one on teaching; one on interior decorating; and one on library work. Furthermore, the lecturers appear to have endorsed the current assumption that women's work was to be but an interim activity before embarking on the lifelong career of homemaking. They often underlined the benefits of various employment training courses in terms of their usefulness for the future homemaker. In their view, professional training for women at university could also be seen as a preparation for marriage and motherhood. How else are we to interpret what was said at the conference on Household Science?

Miss Laird pointed out that this course [offered at Varsity] was an ideal one for women for, whether or not they ever intended to use it professionally, it fits them for the greatest career of all, that of marriage.⁷⁷

A couple of years later, the advantages of training as an interior decorator were presented in similar terms:

There have been more requests for a lecture on interior decorating than for any other subject. Indeed it is something in which every woman may very well be interested even if not from a professional point of view. There are homes everywhere which can be and should be made more attractive; more comfortable and more home-like.⁷⁸

It remains true nonetheless that female students were advised to seek professional training for new types of vocations, to diversify their interests. Indeed, the ten other conferences offered vocational counselling of a much less traditional nature. Thus women at Queen's were encouraged to look into journalism, business, physical education, law, medicine, and music as well as opportunities in large department stores, in biology and chemistry, and to consider scientific work in the civil service or employment in the field of insurance. It must be noted that while the lecturers encouraged female students to extend their vocational horizons they also took care to present the obstacles and the constraints imposed by male discrimination. They do not appear to have encouraged their audience to challenge these limitations. The idea was to bring out the types of positions women were allowed to hold in these traditional male domains. Thus, at a session on women and business, female students were told by Miss M. MacMahon (manager of the Employment Bureau of the Underwood Typewriter Company and President of the Women's Business Club of Toronto) that

a position in a larger corporation is splendid for experience but promotion is difficult. In smaller concerns [however] there are dozens of women occupying positions of office manager or secretary-treasurer.

She also entreated them to try journalism while warning that "in Toronto at least, there seems to be a concerted effort on the part of the newspaper men to see that [women] remain only reporters." In spite of this, Miss MacMahon felt that a female journalist "does not become segregated or isolated as, for instance, a school teacher almost invariably does."⁸⁰

Although the idea was not to push them to rebel against existing discrimination, female students at Queen's were at least made aware of its prevalence and its implications for their employment prospects. In the case of some Queen's women, this awareness may have helped them look at the working world

differently. An awareness of the sexual division of labour was a necessary first step in recognizing the role of male chauvinism.

Not all Queen's officials were as enthusiastic as Hilda Laird when it came to encouraging female students to discover new kinds of employment. Principal Taylor, for instance, seems to have shown signs of resistance. Although he appeared somewhat concerned over the vocational future of the female population on campus, agreeing that "professions for women are still few in number," he also went on to warn the female students that finding alternative vocations "requires the spirit of adventure while success seldom means the safe monthly cheque."⁸¹

This kind of conservative advice appears to have had a sympathetic audience. Indeed we know from other sources that throughout the 1920s, teaching remained the preferred vocational option among single women. As Veronica Strong-Boag points out,

What counsellors failed to note was that, so long as women were particularly socialized to see their futures as involving children and were restricted to a few sex-labelled employments the problem of overcrowding was bound to remain.⁸²

Certainly, the experience of the graduates interviewed confirms this dominant trend. Of the 21 who ended up working after leaving Queen's, close to half of them (nine) taught.

More significantly however, the professional future of these Queen's women confirms the changes that had taken place by the 1920s and which have been underlined in this study. As we have seen, these women entered university expecting to be employed after graduation. All but two of them fulfilled this expectation. Indeed, in addition to those who opted for teaching, five others worked as librarians, three worked in journalism, two became dieticians, one worked as a secretary, and one became a bank administrator. Getting a job for a few years thus appears to have been a definite goal among Queen's female students. Like their male colleagues they looked forward to employment after graduation—if only for a short period.

The temporary nature of this work period, however, needs to be underlined. The experience of the former graduates can serve as an illustration of this dominant pattern during the 1920s. Indeed 14 of the 23 women interviewed who eventually became wives and mothers conformed to the traditional dictates of domesticity by stopping work. Two others who chose to ignore this well-established convention of "early retirement" after marriage were definitely made to feel uncomfortable. One recalled that while she worked as a supply teacher "they used to look down their noses at me for doing it after I was married."⁸³ In fact, this convention more often than not became a condition of employment. When applying for her first job teaching in a high school a female graduate of Queen's

remembered being asked by the principal of the school if she was engaged. She replied, "Oh! no" and he said:

"You have to promise that you won't get married for 6 years (or something like that) because you're no good to a school until you've been teaching at least that long." I would have promised never to get married at this point! So I got the job.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, by the 1920s women would gain some experience in the working world.

But the evidence from Queen's points to another significant development. Indeed, it appears that the expectation of employment had an influence on women's attitudes towards higher education. More specifically, university training was increasingly seen by women students, and their parents, as a preparation for their interim career between graduation and marriage. The sources make clear that female students at Queen's did not just want a job—they wanted a higher status job. And by the 1920s these women felt that a university training would prepare them to attain this goal. The large number of aspiring teachers on campus confirms this attitude. These women were not only aiming to teach—they were preparing themselves to teach at the high school level and become eligible for promotion to various administrative posts in the educational system. In other words, they were seeking to qualify themselves for the rare positions open to women at that time which offered prestige and better working conditions.

The Dean of Women's sustained efforts at vocational guidance provides yet another indication of the evolving role of women's higher education. That such a close supervisor of the female population on campus was encouraging female students to diversify their professional interests in both traditional and non-traditional fields of work could only serve to reinforce the notion that women should be thinking about their future occupations while at university. In this way those who arrived at Queen's without an "intended profession" would inevitably be exposed to some kind of professional counselling.

The notion that single women should become economically independent, even temporarily, had radical implications. At least for a brief interlude in their lives, women would be employed and have the possibility of managing their own finances. For those who did not marry, this economic independence could be prolonged for a lifetime. Not only would single women no longer be dependent on relatives for financial support, but with an income, they were also in a position to postpone marriage. What is more, those who married might very well decide to continue working until they became mothers. Certainly the experience of Queen's suggests that traditional attitudes towards paid employment and higher education for women were being eroded in the 1920s.

NOTES

1. This article is a revised version of my 1986 Queen's University M.A. research paper, "Women at Queen's in the 1920s: A Separate Sphere." I would like to thank Joy Parr, Chad Gaffield, Rebecca Coulter, Dominique Jean, and Jacqueline Neatby for their very useful comments on earlier drafts.
2. Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1988), 2.
3. Alison Prentice et al., *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1988), 218.
4. Veronica Strong-Boag, "Canadian Feminism in the 1920's: The Case of Nellie McClung," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 13 (1977): 67.
5. There are no specialized studies on Canadian women in higher education in the 1920s. There are only a few articles discussing women at university for the preceding or following decades. See John Reid, "The Education of Women at Mount Allison University, 1854-1914," *Acadiensis* (Spring 1983); Lee Stewart, "Women on Campus in B.C.: Strategies for Survival, Years of War and Peace, 1906-1920," in *Not Just Pin Money*, ed. K. Latham and R. Pzadro (Victoria: Camosum College, 1984); Lynne Marks and Chad Gaffield, "Women at Queen's University, 1895-1905: A Little Sphere All Their Own?" *Ontario History* LXXXVIII, 4 (Dec. 1986); Paul Axelrod, "Moulding the Middle Class: Student Life at Dalhousie University in the 1930's," *Acadiensis* XV, 1 (autumn 1985): 84-122.
6. Mary Vipond, "The Image of Women in Mass Circulation Magazines in the 20's," in *The Neglected Majority*, ed. Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), 118.
7. The records of the 14 other female students were missing from the files. The total number of first-year male students for 1925-26 was 199. The sample of 61 male students was created by choosing every third man from the student records. Male students in engineering were not included in the sample.
8. In the case of the female graduates, an effort was made to interview an equal number of graduates for each year. All years except 1920 and 1922 were represented. Some male students were also interviewed to see whether their backgrounds and attitudes were similar. The cities of Kingston and Ottawa were selected for reasons of convenience. The graduates agreed to be interviewed on condition that they would not be given any personal publicity. Their anonymity was therefore guaranteed. However, each female graduate student has been given a number to identify her in the footnote; the men have been given a letter.
9. Strong-Boag, *New Day Recalled*, 41.
10. See Vipond, "The Image."
11. Mary Vipond points out that about 90% of the gainfully employed women were single, while married women only made up about 3% of the labour force during the 1920s. She notes that during that decade Canadian women "turned to their real careers, marriage and motherhood" at the average age of 25. See Vipond, "The Image," 117, 118, and 120.
12. See the discussion of companionate marriages in the 1920s in Prentice, *Canadian Women*, 254-55, and Axelrod, "Student Life," 44.
13. Strong-Boag, *New Day Recalled*, 25.
14. Int. #22.
15. Based on data from M.C. Urquhart and K.A.H. Buckley, eds., *Historical Statistics of Canada* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1965), 601 and R.S. Harris, *A History of Higher Education in Canada, 1663-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 351-52.

16. Statistics compiled from the *Principal's Reports of Queen's University* (hereafter cited as *PR*) and the *Calendars of the Faculty of Arts* from 1919/20 to 1929/30, Queen's Archives.
17. Statistics taken from the *Report of the Dean of Women* (hereafter cited as *R of DW*) in the *PR* of 1928/29 and 1929/30, Queen's Archives.
18. Frederick W. Gibson, *Queen's University, Vol. II, 1917-1961: To Serve and Yet Be Free* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), 32 and 111.
19. *Ibid.*, 110.
20. See Vipond, "The Image," 118, and Axelrod, "Student Life," 4.
21. Marks and Gaffield, "Women at Queen's," 338.
22. Gibson, *To Serve*, 103.
23. *Ibid.*, 448.
24. After looking at the occupational groupings from the *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921 Occupations*, vol. 6, xxxiv and those drawn up by Paul Axelrod in his study on students at Dalhousie University in the 1930s, I compiled a list of six occupational categories in order to determine the social origin of Queen's students: 1. Professions (teachers, ministers, civil servants, doctors, engineers); 2. Business (merchants, real estate agents, insurance agents, contractors); 3. White Collar (railway agents, newspaper employees, customs service officers); 4. Artisan-Skilled (electricians, carpenters, printers, musician); 5. Unskilled (labourers); 6. Primary Producers (farmers, millers, market producers, fishermen)
25. In the female student sample, 11 did not specify their father's occupation. In the case of the men's, 7 left out this information.
26. Marks and Gaffield, "Women at Queen's," 337.
27. *Ibid.*, 338.
28. Int. #17.
29. Int. #11.
30. One graduate explained that "my mother had died by then and my father said: "You don't need to (work)—but my brother did." Int. #9.
31. Int. D.
32. Int. G.
33. Int. H.
34. Charlotte Whitton, quoted in an article addressing female students in the *Queen's Journal* (hereafter cited as *QJ*), February 25, 1921.
35. *QJ*, January 22, 1924.
36. *QJ*, October 15, 1920.
37. Int. #14. Out of the six, three worked for one summer only.
38. *QJ*, December 7, 1928.
39. Int. #5.
40. Int. #1.
41. Int. #6.
42. "Qualification for teaching in the public high schools was a university degree and a training course at a Normal School or, as in Ontario, at a College of Education....the universities of Canada were not involved in the training of elementary school teachers in 1920. This was done in Normal Schools." Harris, *A History of Higher Education*, 296.
43. Int. #9.
44. One former graduate recalled interrupting her studies after the B.A.: "actually I intended to go back for my M.A.: when my mother died you see, I didn't...so I stayed with dad till I got married"; Int. #23. And another graduate remembered being allowed to

register at university because "I was the eldest in the family and they didn't need my help in bringing up the family so I could go"; Int. #8.

45. Quoted in Gibson, *To Serve*, 103.

46. Gibson, *To Serve*, 102-3. The national statistics tell much the same story: "The ratio of female to male undergraduates declined throughout the 1930s." Prentice, *Canadian Women*, 241-42. In Strong-Boag, *New Day Recalled*, 24, the author calculates that between 1930 and 1935 the percentage change in undergraduate enrolment for women was +.89% whereas for the men it was +7.79%.

47. *QJ*, November 18, 1927.

48. *QJ*, November 15, 1927.

49. "Levana" is the name given to the female students' association at Queen's. *QJ*, March 2, 1926.

50. Int. #16.

51. *QJ*, March 2, 1926.

52. Queen's Archives, *R of DW, PRD*, 1925/26, 65.

53. Thus the first-year students of 1926/27 did not change these proportions: the findings for the 326 female students of that year also showed how more than half (190) left the "intended profession" category blank when they registered; Queen's Archives, *R of DW, PR*, 1926/27. The Dean of Women's results for the year 1928/29 reveal the same pattern: out of a total 377 female students more than half (199) were "silent;" Queen's Archives, *R of DW, PR*, 1927/28. My sample study of 1925 only served to confirm the Dean of Women's findings. Half (34) of the "freshettes" (first-year female students) left "intended profession" blank on their student file.

54. Thus, for instance, at Queen's female students were not admitted into medicine or into the engineering programme.

55. Int. #14.

56. Usually through short training sessions given in specialized schools or the actual workplace. See Marjory MacMurchy, *The Canadian Girl at Work* (Toronto: King's Printer, 1919) and Ellen Knox, *The Girl of the New Day* (Toronto: McClelland, 1924). It must be noted that progressively throughout the decade, women were able to train in universities for some of their occupations. Thus, in 1919, "the first university degree programme in nursing in the British Empire was established at the University of British Columbia" (Prentice, *Canadian Women*, 225). Universities started to give out certificates, diplomas, and finally degrees in library training. A degree in household science was also created at some universities. Queen's, however, was still not granting these specialized degrees during that period.

57. Int. #6.

58. Queen's Archives, *R of DW, PR*, 1925/26, 65. The sample of the first-year students in 1925 confirms this result: of the 28 who gave an "intended profession," almost all (23) chose teaching.

59. In 1926/27, teaching as before was by far the most popular occupation, attracting 124 out of 136 female students; Queen's Archives, *R of DW, PR*, 1926/27, 58. In 1927/28, of the 178 who did declare a profession, 143 opted for teaching; Queen's Archives, *R of DW, PR*, 1927/28, 38.

60. Int. #15.

61. MacMurchy, *The Canadian Girl at Work*, 36.

62. Int. #6.

63. Int. #6.

64. Queen's Archives, *R of DW, PR*, 1925/26, 65.

65. Int. #4.

66. Teaching, law, commerce, wrecking, business, business administration, foreign trade, ministry. As for the women, apart from those who chose teaching, three opted for secretarial work, one for journalism and another wanted to become a dietician. This pattern was reflected at the national level: "While men were widely dispersed over a broad range of industrial groups, women were heavily concentrated in far fewer, with 70.9% of women in only 6 of the 25 categories covered by the census...."; Strong-Boag, *New Day Recalled*, 51.

67. Int. #6. The impossibility of earning a living as a "lady lawyer" was confirmed by another graduate as well. She recalled that "I wanted to be a lawyer but my father said: 'You couldn't earn your living and you're going to have to earn your living.'" Int. #16.

68. Int. #6.

69. *QJ*, March 4, 1924.

70. See Strong-Boag, *New Day Recalled*, 64-5.

71. Queen's Archives, *R. of DW, PR*, 1925/26, 65.

72. *Ibid.*

73. Queen's Archives, *R of DW, PR*, 1927/28, 66.

74. Queen's Archives, *R of DW, PR*, 1926/27, 58.

75. Queen's Archives, *R of DW, PR*, 1927/28, 66.

76. *Ibid.*

77. *QJ*, February 22, 1927.

78. *QJ*, February 19, 1929.

79. This is brought out, for example, in some of the conference titles: "Opportunities in Large Department Stores," "Opportunities in Biology and Chemistry," "Women in Business." They certainly were not led to believe they could compete for the same jobs as men at all levels.

80. *QJ*, March 19, 1926.

81. Queen's Archives, Principal Taylor, *PR*, 1927/28, 6.

82. Strong-Boag, *New Day Recalled*, 64-5.

83. Int. #16.

84. Int. #12.