

## **Virtue and Vice: Consumer Culture in English Canadian Fiction Before 1940**

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Résumé de l'article

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*Virtue and Vice: Consumer Culture in English Canadian Fiction Before 1940*

**Abstract**

*This article explores references to commodities and consumption in English language fiction either written by Canadians or published in Canada between 1890 and 1940. It confirms and expands existing research into Canadian consumer history by showing that consumer themes were central to authors' portrayals of class, gender, and morality. Suggesting that fiction offers important historical perspectives on English Canadian culture, it demonstrates that as Canada became an industrial, urban, and capitalist nation, consumer desire and display became central to English Canadian fiction writers' portrayals of identity, status, and opportunity.*

**Résumé**

*Le présent article explore les références aux produits de base et à la consommation dans les romans en langue anglaise écrits par des Canadiens ou publiés au Canada entre 1890 et 1940. Il confirme et fait connaître les recherches actuelles dans l'histoire du consommateur canadien en montrant que le consumérisme occupait une place centrale dans la manière dont les auteurs décrivaient la classe, le genre et la moralité des personnes. Suggérant que la fiction offre des perspectives historiques importantes sur la culture canadienne anglaise, il démontre que, à mesure que le Canada est devenu une nation industrielle, urbaine et capitaliste, le désir de consommer et de paraître est devenu essentiel aux auteurs canadiens-anglais de fiction pour décrire leurs protagonistes en fonction de leur identité, de leur statut et des possibilités qu'ils rencontrent.*

In Robert Stead's bestselling 1918 adventure novel, *The Cow Puncher*, Calgary resident Mr. Duncan warns rancher Dave Elden about the dangers of fashionable clothing. "You can run into intoxication on fine raiment," he says. "It has virtue in it, but just beyond the virtue lies the vice" (Stead 113). Suggesting that moderation was the best approach to dress, he articulated a common early twentieth-century view of consumer culture. According to several English Canadian fiction works published between 1890 and 1940, consumer goods were an acceptable but treacherous path toward human fulfillment. New garments, furniture, magazines, and other items could make one's life richer and more satisfying, but they could also contribute toward class exclusion and alienation from self and community.

Mass consumer society, or a society characterized by the large-scale production, distribution, and consumption of consumer goods, did not emerge in the United States, Western Europe, and Canada until the 1950s and 1960s. Yet 1890 to 1940 was a crucial period in Western consumer history. Despite working and rural people's limited access to consumer items, this era saw the rise of mass factory production, improved commodity distribution networks, mass advertising, low prices, and increased consumer desire (Stearns, de Grazia, Monod, Belisle). In their attempts to investigate the human condition, to entertain, and to sell books, writers as diverse as Lucy Maud Montgomery, Stephen Leacock, and J. G. Sime explored the place of commodities, shopping, and consumption in Canadian life. Offering commentary on what they believed to be immorality of increased materialism, or, on the flip side, the pleasure of low-priced commodities, they put forward their thoughts on the rise of consumer capitalism.

In his history of popular culture in eighteenth century France, Allan Pasco suggests that fiction sources differ from non-fiction ones in that they allow authors freedom to examine contemporary issues in creative and prolonged ways (382). Pasco does not argue that fiction sources are better than non-fiction ones, but rather that when used alongside non-fiction texts, they broaden historical understandings of the past. This article proceeds in a similar spirit. Existing studies of Canadian consumerism between 1890 and 1940 reveal that as mass production and distribution brought prices down, and as transportation and communication innovations made consumerism possible, people all over the country began to associate material goods with modernity. Advertisements for such commodities as cigarettes, alcohol, and tourist packages attached a range of meanings to commodities, including the conflation of material goods with success, acceptance, and happiness. When the federal government began measuring living costs in the early twentieth century, it too demonstrated that Canadians' access to goods was a component of modern citizenship (Dawson, Dubinsky, Johnston, Liverant, Monod, Rudy, Wright).

This article corroborates and expands existing knowledge of Canadian consumer history during this transformative era. Showing that fiction writers inserted portrayals of consumer goods and consumer behaviour into broader narratives about class, morality, and gender, it suggests that as consumer capitalism expanded between 1890 and 1929, and then faltered between 1930 and 1939, consumerism became for many fiction writers an important indicator of social, moral, and gender status. Authors used consumer goods and desire to describe characters' class, virtue, and gender. They also used the themes of commodity display, consumer inequality, and consumer conflict to probe the English Canadian ideals of democracy and equality. Readers, importantly, appreciated these efforts. As Clarence Karr argues in his study of Canadian literary production, distribution, and consumption between 1890 and 1925, Lucy Maud Montgomery, Robert Stead, Arthur Stringer, Ralph O'Connor

and Nellie McClung became famous partly because their narratives tackled pressing issues of modernization, including urbanization, industrialization, and consumerism (5). Through an in-depth study of readers' letters to these authors, Karr shows not only that readers responded on an intimate level to these writers' fiction, but also that many used favourite writers' plots, themes, and messages to cope with challenges in their own lives (160–61).

The following discussion of consumerism in English Canadian fiction between 1890 and 1940 is based on a wide-ranging study of English language novels and short stories either written by Canadians or published in Canada. As research on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature undertaken by such scholars as Carole Gerson, W. H. New, Clarence Karr, Janice Fiamengo, Carrie MacMillan et al., Lindsey McMaster, James Doyle, and Lorraine York reveals, between the 1920s and 1980s Canadian literary critics disparaged works written in the reform and romance traditions; didacticism and melodrama were particularly frowned upon. Nevertheless, the English Canadian literary landscape between the 1890s and 1930s was highly diverse. Into the Depression, romance, adventure, and reform titles, together with modernist ones, were well received by both English Canadian readers and critics. English Canadian literature between the late nineteenth century and World War II also included many more female authors than those represented in pre-1980s anthologies, reviews, and course lists. As MacMillan et al. put it, "some [female] fiction writers have been ignored or dismissed by the critical academy not because they were naïve, awkward, or coarse, though popular, but because the academy itself in the early twentieth century ... was an all-male group, unable to see or appreciate the language, concerns, and structures of women's writing" (MacMillan et al. 11).

Using the above findings as a guide to the English Canadian fiction landscape between 1890 and 1940, research for this article proceeded by selecting a sample of approximately 50 titles. Criteria for inclusion included region, gender, decade, and genre. Specifically, titles were chosen that reflected a diversity of fiction published in different decades by male and female authors living in western, central, and eastern Canada. Titles from the main prose fiction genres of the period were also selected. These include romantic works, or titles that featured chivalry, heroism, and melodrama; realist works, or titles that offered gritty portrayals of everyday life; and didactic works, or titles that made obvious attempts to inspire social and moral reform. By including such criteria, the sample enabled comparisons of portrayals of consumerism and consumption across decades, regions, genders, and genres.

Then, after reviewing these selected titles, a dozen were chosen for extended discussion. It is true, as Pasco argues, that when using past fiction to glean insights into past cultures, historians should employ as large a sample size as possible. Pasco himself has examined over 100 fiction titles for his

research (373). At the same time, however, it is also true that large samples have the potential to generate superficial content analyses at the expense of rich investigations. Indeed, as is illustrated by such excellent studies as Faye Hammill's *Literary Culture and Female Authorship in Canada, 1760–2000*, Rachel Bowlby's *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola*, and Gayle Green's *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition*, all of which make either one author or one literary work the focus of each chapter, it is often necessary to restrict one's sample size in order to examine particular themes, tropes, and devices in depth. Here, a balance has been sought between breadth and focus. This article's review of twelve titles affords comparison across regions, genres, and decades, but it also enables meaningful inquiries into specific passages.

Chronologically speaking, the earliest title under investigation is *Roland Graeme, Knight* (1892) by Christian writer and activist Agnes Maule Machar of Kingston. A reform novel with a melodramatic plot, *Roland Graeme* received favourable Canadian reviews (McMaster, *Working*, 53–54). Romance novel *Kerchiefs to Hunt Souls* (1895) by Halifax writer Amelia Fytche, is another early title; it received positive US reviews but remained obscure in Canada (MacMillan 49–54). For the 1900 to 1910 decade, two works published in 1908 are included. International bestseller *Anne of Green Gables*, set on Prince Edward Island and written by PEI literary star Lucy Maud Montgomery, as Karr puts it, is a “regional idyll” that remains in print to this day. The reform-oriented romance novel *Sowing Seeds in Danny* set in Manitoba and authored by feminist politician Nellie McClung, is today less well-known than *Anne*, but during the early twentieth century it ranked alongside it in terms of sales (Karr 128, 54). Books chosen from the 1910s include one bestselling romance novel, Vancouver writer Isabel MacKay's *House of Windows* (1912); one bestselling collection of humorous sketches, Montreal writer and McGill University Political Economy Professor Stephen Leacock's *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914); one bestselling adventure novel, Manitoba writer Robert Stead's *The Cow Puncher* (1918); and one fairly obscure collection of realist short stories, Montreal writer Jessie G. Sime's, *Sister Woman* (1919). Of these, *Arcadian Adventures*, a satire of the rich set in a fictionalized Chicago, and *The Cow Puncher*, a coming-of-age book set in Winnipeg, were the most commercially successful; Sime's work, about the struggles of single women due to industrialization and urbanization, was not as widely read but did receive some favourable critical reviews (McMaster, *Working Girls*, 50–59).

For the interwar period, four pieces are examined. These include the realist, critically acclaimed, and award winning novel *Wild Geese* (1925) by Martha Ostenso, who was born in Norway and grew up in the US and Manitoba. The novel itself is set in rural Manitoba and depicts the struggles of a wife and children trying to break free from an authoritarian and tight-

fisted husband and father. Also included is an obscure anti-modern adventure novel, *The Magpie* (1923), written by Ontario-raised University of Manitoba English Professor Douglas Durkin. Penned in the aftermath of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, *The Magpie* is critical of both socialism and capitalism; the only solution to modernity's maladies, it suggests, is a return to the family farm. Representing the increased popularity of working class and realist themes during the Great Depression, finally, are two short stories that appeared in the leading left periodicals of the day, *The Masses* and *The Canadian Forum*. The fantastical short story, "Dream of the Air-Meter" (1933), by the largely unknown author Leonard Spier, appeared in the former; it is an anti-capitalist tale of class oppression. The realist short story with a domestic setting, "The Party" (1931), by US-born Toronto author Mary Quayle Innis, appeared in the latter; it evokes a working class housewife's agony over her desire to attain unaffordable dreams of material abundance.

These twelve titles, of course, only skim the surface of the vast amount of English Canadian fiction produced between 1890 and 1940. They provide insights into how female, male, popular, obscure, and critically acclaimed authors living in western, central, and eastern Canada depicted consumerism and commodities, but their limited number does not capture the entirety of themes pertaining to consumerism and commodities that no doubt emerged during this period. Future researchers are therefore urged to conduct further investigations. Examination of fiction by writers not included herein is one important avenue of inquiry; explorations of how politics and religion influenced authors' fictional representations is another. Where possible, the following analyses take into account authors' religious and political leanings; they also show how political and religious themes, such as democracy and asceticism, surface within particular texts. At the same time, this article foregoes lengthy inquiries into individual authors' beliefs in favour of offering detailed analyses of specific references to consumption, both within and across titles. Such emphases allow insight into how a range of both well-known and obscure writers living in different places and times across Canada imagined consumerism and commodities. In this way, they enable deeper understandings of how a diversity of anglophone Canadians perceived and lived through the emergence of modern Canadian consumer capitalism.

### **Consumption and Class Disparity**

Of all the consumerist themes present in the works under consideration, class features most prominently. To denote characters' social positions, authors returned repeatedly to the issue of consumerism. They did so not only to suggest that certain characters were rich or poor, but also to comment upon what they believed were the injustices created by material inequality. Authors in fact frequently conflated the issues of class inequality and consumer inequal-

ity, suggesting that as Canada modernized, consumerism played an important role in class distinction and segmentation.

Two of the most famous books that emerged from this period—Montgomery's idyllic *Anne of Green Gables* and McClung's reform-oriented *Sowing Seeds in Danny*—featured impoverished adolescent heroines whose imaginations and good deeds captured their fellow characters' hearts. Orphaned Anne Shirley is introduced wearing a "yellowish white" wincey that is too small and clutching a "shabby," broken carpetbag containing her self-proclaimed "worldly goods." McClung's Pearlle Watson is "a pathetic little figure in her brown and white checked dress," who stores her "worldly effects" in a birdcage. To ease the hurt of material deprivation, both Anne and Pearlle develop strong imaginations. When Anne wears her wincey, she pretends she is wearing "the most beautiful pale blue silk dress" and feels "cheered up right away." Likewise, Pearlle one day looks up at the sky and imagines she sees a blue hat and cap, with white cloud puffs for edging. "I kin just feel that white stuff under my chin," she says (Montgomery 20–21, 23; McClung 118–19, 128).

Readers' hearts are meant to go out to Anne and Pearlle, not only because they are poor, but because they creatively cope with inequality. Montgomery's and McClung's efforts to win readers' affection through their heroines' deprivation indicates that by the early twentieth century, differing levels of consumption were fostering feelings of class injustice. Encouraging readers to identify with Anne and Pearlle, Montgomery and McClung tapped into readers' own insecurities about the expanding world of goods and likely into readers' frustrations over their own inability to afford status-laden commodities. The ongoing success of Montgomery's novel suggests that readers admire Anne's determination to achieve joy, success, and fulfillment despite her lower-class status. Anne in particular epitomizes modern English Canadian femininity: believing happiness and dignity to be rightfully hers, she uses wits and kindness to achieve them.

Montgomery and McClung differed in that Montgomery wrote for entertainment but McClung for reform (Karr 9). Pathos in Montgomery's work draws the reader into the narrative, but in McClung's it is a critique of class disparity. Anne's experiences of deprivation, such as her lack of puffed sleeves among her well-sleeved classmates, are not calls for reform; but Pearlle's inability to attend school and church due to lack of appropriate clothing and footwear are (Montgomery, 96–97; McClung 13, 19–20). McClung was not the only author who used fiction to call for an alleviation of material deprivation. In *Roland Graeme, Knight*, Machar includes a poverty-stricken and ill single mother named Cecile Travers who lives with her small child in a "bare" and "wretched little room" (18). She is a dispirited soul who eventually succumbs to alcoholism. Machar intends readers to identify not with

her, but with the affluent Nora Blanchard. After visiting the Travers' home, Blanchard awakens to class disparity. She "went to her dainty, quiet room ... and, lying down on the soft luxurious bed ... tried to close her tired eyes," but she could not sleep because she was haunted by images of poverty (69–70). To rectify the young mother's condition, Blanchard takes in her child, sends her to a hospital, and funds her medical care. Blanchard also begins helping Mrs. Travers' wage-earning friend, Lizzie. She gives her a warm winter coat and purchases her a house in the country so she could escape her industrial job. Capping off Blanchard's good work is her creation of a Girls' Clubhouse, to which her friends donate furniture, musical instruments, and food; and at which they host tea parties for working class girls (140, 173–74, 280).

According to *Roland Graeme, Knight*, charity is the answer to material inequality. Without questioning or destabilizing her own class position, Blanchard helps Lizzie and Mrs. Travers achieve a higher quality of life. Another nineteenth century novel, *Kerchiefs to Hunt Souls*, puts forth a more radical view. Heroine Dorothy Pembroke leaves her comfortable Canadian teaching post and travels to Europe for adventure and edification. To pay for her journeys, she intends to become a governess in Paris. Yet she is unable to find respectable employment. Her financial situation deteriorates and, at the novel's end, she is forced to choose between singlehood and destitution, on the one hand, and marriage and material comfort, on the other. She chooses the latter, with disastrous results: her rich but immoral husband is already married. She then contracts a mysterious illness, but is finally rescued by her faithful Canadian friend, whom she does not love but whom she marries to attain security (191, 259–60).

*Kerchiefs to Hunt Souls* follows romantic convention in that it features a hapless heroine who lives by her wits and is rewarded with wealth and marriage. Yet as American historian Nan Enstad shows, writers who worked with this formula did sometimes offer critiques of class and gender injustice (Enstad 59–61). Throughout *Kerchiefs*, Fytche is critical of material disparity. She opens her novel with a storm so fierce that "the bitter cold crept into the hovels of the poor, killing the old and feeble, chilling the sick and puny, and making desperate the unemployed and starving." In contrast, the "wealthy, those whom kind providence had apparently taken under especial protection," enjoyed the tempest, for it "served to heighten for them the pleasure of warm fires and other creature comforts within" (12–13). Stating that fate was the only thing separating the poor from the rich, Fytche sets up her theme of unjust hardship, which Pembroke experiences for the remainder of the novel. In another passage, Fytche condemns bourgeois women's attitudes toward the poor. When Pembroke's reserves run out, she moves into a cheerless boarding house operated by female philanthropists. She becomes roommates with Alice Jeffreys, who is trying to find a position. At one point Jeffreys tells Pembroke, "I detest the charities of the rich; money is the standard by which



you are measured; if you are poor, they think you have no fine feelings, are not sensitive, so patronize you, intrude upon your privacy, give you gratuitous advice upon things you know much more about than they” (198–99). Unlike Machar, who argues charity is the answer to hardship, Fytche suggests that decent employment is the only proper way to end deprivation. In this instance, it is the mainstream bestseller and not the moralist work that offers the more radical solution to class inequality.

With the 1919 publication of her collection of short stories, Sime lent her voice to the literary critique of material disparity. In “Adrift,” a dressmaker and prostitute named Emilie explains her actions to a female dress client. She relates that she is always visiting rich women’s houses, where she sees “lovely things.” The clothes she makes for rich women are “like clouds at night—like flowering trees” (31–32). Emilie creates such wonderful garments, but she cannot afford their materials. Determined to buy them for herself, she sells her body. In her view, prostitution is better than deprivation (33–34). Through Emilie, Sime highlights class injustice. Both upper- and working-class women appreciate beautiful clothes, but only the rich can attain them legitimately. Like Anne and Pearlle of Montgomery’s and McClung’s novels, Emilie is a modern woman who takes action to gain personal fulfillment through commodities; but unlike them, she is a tragic figure. According to the narrator, she becomes “ill” and grows “old” prematurely (34). Sime hence offers a bleaker view than do Montgomery and McClung. Whereas the two latter authors proposed that individuals could overcome class inequality, Sime suggests that for low-waged women, class is an insurmountable barrier to health and happiness.

Fictional portrayals of material inequality reached an apogee during the Great Depression. During this decade, when by 1933 one out of every four workers had lost their jobs, authors decried uneven access not only to luxuries but also to essentials (Morton and Copp 139). In “Dream of the Air Meter” (1933), Leonard Spier critiques capitalism’s commodification of food, heat, and water and also condemns the state’s taxation of such items. The story opens with the narrator walking down a road. He sees a man wearing a machine that is choking him. The machine has a coin slot, so the narrator inserts some money and the choking stops. After inquiring as to why the man would wear the contraption, he learns that “in this land, not only soil, gas, electricity, food and water were monopolized by corporations and taxed by the state, but likewise the air!” The narrator then smashes the air meter, an action that injures the man, but also frees him from the machine. At this point, the narrator awakens and realizes he had been dreaming (46, 48). Implying it was time for readers also to wake up and revolt against capitalism, “Dream” is an indictment of the commodification of essential goods and services. It is also one of the most radical critiques of inequality offered by the works in this study.

Portraying social injustice in material terms, English fiction authors before 1940 indicated that consumption was becoming increasingly tied to class status in Canada. They also reminded readers that Canada did not live up to its reputation as a land of equality and opportunity. In several works, destitute characters suffer because of their lack of commodities. McClung and Montgomery were optimistic about individuals' abilities to overcome class deprivation, but others were less confident. Sime and Spier each proposed that Canadians could not surmount class without inciting radical change. This difference stemmed partly from authors' intended audiences. McClung and Montgomery wanted the widest readership possible and may have dulled their critique. Yet this difference also reflects broader political currents. Whereas liberals tended to believe that individual agency alone was necessary for social success, leftists tended to argue that class was a significant obstacle to low-income people's achievement of higher living standards. Moreover, as many English Canadian fiction works of this era reveal, commodities were becoming important enablers of human comfort, dignity, and edification.

### **The Morality of Consumption**

When they suggested that material deprivation caused suffering, pre-1940 authors implied that equalized access to commodities would improve Canadian lives. In this sense, they demonstrated their congruence with other organizations of this period that pushed for broadened access to goods and services, including the CCF, a social democratic party established in 1932 that sent seven members to parliament in the 1935 federal election. It also included the Housewives League, a late 1930s organization affiliated with both the CCF and the Communist Party (Guard, Sangster). Some authors' support for material equalization also belied a belief that consumerism was a desirable way of life. In their suggestions that all Canadians should have access to goods, they hinted that commodities were positive additions to Canadian culture.

Along with the above-mentioned novel by Stead, Ostenso's *Wild Geese* offers a cautious endorsement of consumption. When teacher Lind Archer arrives as a boarder at the Gare family farm in northern Manitoba, the contrast between her elegant appearance and that of her female hosts is obvious. Whereas the sixteen-year-old Judith Gare wears overalls and men's work boots, Archer's attire includes a "wide lacy hat," "trim outer clothing," "dainty silk underthings," and earrings (60, 16). Archer attempts to help Judith become more than an overworked farm labourer. She brings her to a friend's house to listen to a phonograph, she makes her a dress, and she gives her feminine undergarments. At the book's end, Archer helps Judith escape the farm; Judith marries her lover and obtains a house in town. Consumer goods were not the sole means by which Judith achieved freedom, but they

did symbolize dignity and femininity, two things that Judith's father had denied her (71, 226, 277–88).

McClung also portrayed consumerism as beneficial. At the end of *Sowing Seeds* in Danny, Pearlle's good deeds are rewarded with a substantial gift of money. In the book's sequel, *The Second Chance*, she uses it to buy her siblings new clothes. Upon returning home from shopping, the children are so excited that their parents forbid them to take their "cherished possessions to bed." Yet "when the lights were all out ... one small girl in her nightgown went quietly across the bare floor ... to feel once more the smooth surface of her slippers and to smell that delicious leathery smell" (16–17). Stressing the tactile delights of slippers, McClung reveals an aesthetic appreciation for goods. McClung also remarks on how phonographs and magazines enhanced prairie living. One character's phonograph becomes "an unending source of comfort and pleasure to him as well as to his neighbours and friends"; another character, who had previously filled her evenings with "neverending needlework," was now spending "most of her time" reading "books and magazines" (*The Second Chance*, 239–40; 137–38; 254).

Stead, Ostenso, and McClung operated under the twofold assumption that lives without ornamentation and comforts were bleak, and that commodities helped create edification and refinement. Indeed, the virtuous Mr. Duncan's house in *The Cow Puncher* is furnished with the hallmarks of middle-class refinement, including "a piano and a phonograph; leather chairs; a fireplace with polished bricks ... thick carpets ... and painted pictures" (102). Since it is in these writers' works that the theme of consumerism versus starkness emerges most strongly, it is possible that prairie conditions contributed to their endorsements. When people of Western European descent settled in western Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most believed they were civilizing an untamed region. European institutions such as churches, stores, and schools domesticated the wilderness, as did individual homes. In this context, white settlers perceived well-furnished homes as desirable. Exacerbating this trend was the complete lack of amenities with which so many pioneers contended. Arriving from settled areas in Western Europe, Canada, and the United States, thousands of prairie newcomers cleared their own land and built their own homes (Broadfoot). The incorporation of consumer goods into prairie households symbolized a connection to civilization and modernity.

Despite Stead's, McClung's, and Ostenso's embrace of consumption, it is true that other English Canadian writers put forth indictments of materialism. As Bettina Liverant observes, "authors from Leacock to Callaghan ... cast doubt on the moral character of those able to display items of current fashion or luxury. Those who were materially well-off ... were often lacking in inner virtue" (277). From 1890 onward, conservative and progressive writers

alike suggested that consumerist characters were superficial and greedy. In *Roland Graeme, Knight*—conservative due to its suggestion that charity will alleviate the gap between rich and poor—Nora Blanchard’s mother asks her what she will wear to a party. Blanchard responds, “I couldn’t think of getting anything more now; I have all I really need.” After her mother states that new dress orders help seamstresses, Blanchard wonders if the “world” had lost the virtue of “self-sacrifice” and replaced it with “*selfishness*” (84–85, emphasis in original).

Stephen Leacock also viewed consumerism as decadent. In *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914), an entire chapter is devoted to the excess of wealthy cottage life. The narrator states that “the Newberrys belonged to the class of people whose one aim in the summer is to lead the simple life.” Because Mr. Newberry’s “idea of a vacation was to get right out into the bush, and put on old clothes, and just eat when he felt like it,” he built “Castel Casteggio.” The road leading to the cottage was “private property, as all nature ought to be.” With gardeners, servants, “sweeping piazzas and glittering conservatories,” it “was an ideal spot to wear old clothes in, to dine early (at 7:30), and, except for tennis parties, motor-boat parties, lawn teas, and golf, to live absolutely to oneself.” The Newberrys’ daughter wears an “old dress,” which is two weeks old and “worth the equivalent of one person’s pew rent at St. Asaph’s for six months.” Underscoring the gap between rich and poor, Leacock here suggests the Newberrys are shallow and vain. Indeed, when a cash-strapped niece visits the castel, she brings “a pair of brand new tennis shoes (at ninety cents reduced to seventy-five), and white dress . . . and such few other things as poor relations might bring with fear and trembling to join in the simple rusticity of the rich” (84–93).

Leacock’s critique was biting, but this conservative humorist did not declare an all-out war against the bourgeoisie. Other writers on the opposite end of the political spectrum did however. In *The Magpie*, Douglas Durkin uses the romance novel formula to condemn an immoral capitalist class. At the book’s beginning, farm-raised Craig Forrester moves to the city to work in the grain exchange and find a wife. He meets both goals but finds his new life meaningless. His wife Marion is materialistic and obsessed with social standing. Before a party, Forrester attempts to hug her but she pushes him away, saying he will ruin her dress. This incident reveals the shallowness behind commodity display, as does the revelation that Marion is having an affair with Forrester’s co-worker, Claude. In the novel’s climax, Forrester travels to Claude’s apartment for a confrontation. Claude’s place is richly furnished in “fine velour”; it also has a “polished table,” “upholstered couch,” and “tall lamp with shade of figured silk.” Finding Marion among this luxury, and learning that Claude has swindled him at work, he has a nervous breakdown. Calling them both “liars,” he

picked up a vase ... and crushed it between his hands. ... He lifted the table ... and reduced it to splinters ... He tore bric-a-brac from its place ... and crumpled it in his fingers. He tore the curtains from the arch that led into the hall and ripped them to ribbons. He seized the tall lamp ... snapped the slender pedestal ... and sent the pieces crashing into the mirror against the wall. (320)

After destroying Claude and Marion's sumptuousness, Forrester pays all the debts Claude has created for him, sells his house and car, and—"penniless" but "free"—leaves the city. The end of the novel has him returning to his father's homestead, where he plans a simple and honest life (133–35, 330).

Durkin's critique of materialism is partly class based. Those who are showy and consumerist in his novel are members of Winnipeg's business community, which helped crush the General Strike of 1919. The book occurs after this six-week work stoppage, but it contains references to its events. Marion's mother, Mrs. Nason, refuses to let the mother of a former striker "pour tea for the guests of the society" of which Mrs. Nason "was president." Forrester eventually abandons politics, but another character named Jeannette commits her life to fighting capitalism. She first became "awake," she said, after her husband died in the war. "And one of the first things I saw clearly was the fact that they took him from me—they did—the Nasons of the world, the kindly intentioned men and women who are kind so long as their sense of security is not disturbed." She would like to "put the Nasons where their pampered daughters and their degenerate sons and their faddish wives would have to work for a starvation wage or go begging." Jeannette here articulates class resentment against businessmen's wives and children, whose work-free positions appear lazy and luxurious. She also voices a moralist critique of consumption. Viewing the Nasons as shallow and selfish, she sees their showiness as corrupt. *The Magpie's* narrator is similarly critical of display. In a description of a woman at a party, he states that she was "over-dressed" and "almost vulgar in her appearance, as if she was quite willing that the world should know that her husband was blessed with a substantial income" (133–35, 330, quotes 320, 130).

According to *The Magpie*, people consume for selfish enjoyment and status display. At the same time, the book reserves most of its scorn for female consumers, particularly Marion, her female houseguests, and her mother. These women's love of clothes, entertaining, and propriety symbolizes their superficiality and selfishness. By portraying middle-class women as profligate consumers, Durkin suggests that consumption is not only about class privilege, but about the fulfillment of base feminine desires. This perspective is similar to that of some left theorists, including Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who suggested in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) that consumers were passive, dim-witted, and feminine (Huysen 44–53).

Durkin's portrayals also dovetail with some leftist depictions of rich women. As American historian Daniel Opler writes, "much of the Communist literature of the 1930s" showed wealthy women as "extravagant, wasteful, and unfeeling" (59). Such perspectives sprang from the left's valorization of the hardworking producer class, and its concomitant denigration of what was perceived as the lazy and effeminate capitalist class (McCallum 62). This framework in turn was related, first, to the left's attempt to re-dignify labour under the denigration of capitalism; and second, to a deep-rooted Western conflation of femininity with insatiability (Kowaleski-Wallace 3–8). As *The Magpie* makes clear, when these different theoretical currents came together in English Canadian thought, they disparaged both women and consumption. Indeed, Durkin's masculinist condemnation of desire and display indicates that as consumer capitalism gained strength in the early twentieth century, certain English Canadian intellectuals projected their misgivings about consumption onto women.

### **Consumerism and Gender**

As disempowering as certain leftists' equation of femininity with consumerism might have been, their concerns are not surprising. The history of capitalism, many historians show, is deeply gendered. Such central political economic tracts as Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) portrayed consumption as a passive, feminine counterpart to the active, masculine pursuit of production (de Grazia 1–10). As well, capitalism's acceleration in the nineteenth century had different implications for men and women. When agrarian livelihoods declined, families moved into cities. Urban men became breadwinners who worked long hours away from home, and urban women became homemakers who raised children and managed households. As industrialization expanded, both cash and low-priced goods became more available. To save time, homemakers began purchasing goods in the consumer marketplace. By the early twentieth century, the connection between homemaking and consumption was firmly in place.

Pre-1940 English Canadian fiction confirms this historical conflation of women's domestic labour with consumption. Kitchens are sites of traditional manufacture—Mrs. Bjarnnason's kitchen in *Wild Geese* has a "warm, good smell" and a homemade braided rug adds cheer—but characters also incorporate store-bought goods into their routines (50). Nellie Slate in *Sowing Seeds in Danny* uses "baking powder instead of tartar and soda," and prefers buying tinned "goods" to making her own (184). Women's clothing production also blends the traditional with the new. Characters purchased fabric and accessories, and modelled their clothes after styles in magazines, but they still either sewed their own attire or had someone make their clothes for them. Mrs. Lynde of *Anne of Green Gables* copies the latest fashions to make attractive clothes for Anne (98).

In contrast to Durkin's depiction of consumer interests as corrupt, female authors tended to portray women's consumer skills as admirable. In *The House of Windows*, Isabel MacKay celebrates the consumer skills of her female heroines, sisters Ada, Celia, and Christine Brown. When a friend visits the sisters' apartment, she is delighted by its appearance. The narrator states, "the curtains, which were of some dainty, figured stuff, had been made to fit, and were surmounted by a graceful valance of the same material" (19). They were poor, but the sisters had purchased, made, and arranged décor to create beauty and comfort. MacKay thus suggests the sisters' domestic artistry was evidence of their womanliness. Female writers also evinced characters' femininity by referring to attractive outfits and hairstyles. When Dorothy Pembroke of *Kerchiefs to Hunt Souls* goes to London, she allows herself one "extravagance" and purchases a "visiting costume." It includes a "lovely, tender, apple-green cashmere and silk frock, black-lace hat with cream roses, black parasol with ... chiffon flounce, long, black undressed kid gloves, and black ostrich boa." This detailed description suggests that Fytche included this passage not only to highlight Pembroke's artistic femininity but also to please her readers, who were presumably interested in such matters.

MacKay's and Fytche's celebration of fashion and beauty arose partly from literary convention. In romance novels, heroines are meant to fulfill readers' yearnings for adventure and success. Since many Canadian women depended upon their looks to gain husbands and economic security, beauty was an important component of femininity during these years. Yet the romance genre was not the only reason behind fiction authors' valorization of fashion and beauty. Sime's realist *Sister Woman* also portrays these skills positively. Altabelle, the heroine of "Mr. Johnston," is a penniless drugstore clerk who "looks like the countess of Malmesbury" every day. To achieve her beauty, she buys a black suit once a year, launders it meticulously, and changes her shirts and accessories according to the seasons (122–23). In this passage, Sime expresses admiration for working class women who maintain their dignity and beauty without spending a lot of money. She also suggests women's fashion and beauty talents represent skill and creativity.

Perhaps because of their own encounters with shopping, homemaking, and fashion, female authors were more sympathetic than male authors toward consumption. Particularly striking in this regard is Mary Quayle Innis' short story "The Party." Wanting to prove her financial security to her friends and family, a working-class housewife named Ethel hosts a get-together. She purchases a new bedspread, lamp, cushions, dress, and playing cards for the occasion; she also has dessert catered by the most expensive eatery in town, leaving the boxes on the counter so her guests would know where she purchased them. It would have been easy for Innis to cast Ethel as superficial, but Innis instead demonstrates that Ethel was both creating an image for her guests and fulfilling her desire for a beautiful home.

[S]he wasn't only showing off ... it was that once, just once, she wanted to have everything absolutely perfect. Every day she was buying round steak and looking for a really good dollar cleaner. Just this once she wanted to have the kind of bedspread and lamp shade you saw in the movies, the kind of refreshments they probably served at the government house. Just once she wanted to feel like one of the society women in the picture section of the newspaper. (154)

Contrasting the glamorous lifestyles of the bourgeoisie with the lived experiences of working-class homemakers, Innis suggests that commodity display is a complex blend of status communication and wish fulfillment. It is, furthermore, hard labour. When polishing her floor before her guests arrive, Ethel is "depressingly certain that the society hostesses in the paper didn't have backs that ached the way hers did" (154). Offering an early feminist critique of the unpaid work of home décor, "The Party" is a nuanced portrayal of consumerism.

"The Party" is also significant in that it explores the conflict between husbands and wives over spending choices that emerged alongside the expansion of consumer capitalism (Liverant 269). As she prepares for the gathering, Ethel hopes her husband "wouldn't notice" their new décor. Yet "the first thing he said" when he arrived home from work was, "'where'd you get that?' pointing at the [new] lampshade." He remained angry all evening and, after the guests left, told her he had been laid off from work. Innis intends this statement to heighten Ethel's sense of consumer guilt, as well as to illuminate housewives' lack of financial autonomy. Ethel spends her days looking after her toddler, keeping house, and cooking suppers for her breadwinner husband. For one day, she takes time away from her wifely duties. When she puts on her dress "before the mirror," she "had a moment of clear happiness." It "too was new, something she had kept from Todd" (153–54; 155). Through new décor and dress, then, Ethel hopes to achieve fulfillment. Yet because her husband does not care about new goods, and because he worries about financial stability, he is critical of her purchases. In "The Party" Innis captures the gender conflicts that highlighted women's subordinate familial positions that accompanied the rise of consumer capitalism.

If Innis' critique of gendered consumer conflict is subtle, McClung's is overt. *The Second Chance* (1910) opens with a farmer named Mr. Perkins refusing to give his eighteen-year-old daughter Martha two dollars to purchase a magazine. He justifies his decision by stating he bought her an "eighteen-dollar wallaby coat last year." Reflecting on her father's position, Martha weeps. "All her early rising and hard work," and "all her small economies," had saved her father the "wages of a hired man." And yet "she had not been able to get even two dollars when she wanted it" (3–4). In this passage, McClung not only makes reference to the Biblical Martha, whom Jesus admon-



ishes for spending too much time on housework (Luke 10:38–42), she also suggests that patriarchal familial control was detrimental to women. In the name of thrift, Mr. Perkins does not give his daughter any financial revenue for her work. His power over the family economy means that the grown-up Martha was dependent upon him for comfort and edification. If women wanted to take control of their own situations, McClung implies, patriarchal familial control had to be overthrown.

Ostenso's *Wild Geese* offers an even more sustained argument for unfettered access to commodities for wives and daughters. Interestingly, Douglas Durkin, author of the anti-consumerist *The Magpie*, was Ostenso's English professor and lover when she wrote this novel (Arnason 304). There is no evidence that Durkin and Ostenso discussed consumerism, but the different portrayals of consumption in their books do underscore the centrality of gender to consumerism in the 1920s. Caleb Gare, the head of *Wild Geese*'s main family, covets wealth. In ways reminiscent of McClung's Mr. Perkins, he uses his four grown children as free labour. Believing they will abandon him if he allows them to experience leisure or pleasure, he forces his daughters to wear overalls and men's boots. He treats eyeglasses and false teeth as luxuries, and refuses to purchase these items for his daughter Ellen and wife Amelia, though their health is failing. He does all the family shopping and, learning that his daughter Judith is going to sell her calf in the fall to buy a new coat, instead sells her calf in the spring and pockets the money. Caleb hence wields his financial power as a tool of emotional abuse. When, at the end of the novel, he dies while trying to save his crop from a wildfire, it is fitting that Amelia and her children achieve the ability to purchase consumer goods. A neighbour visits the Gares some months later, and Amelia serves "her with excellent coffee, bought in the city" (306).

In *The Second Chance* and *Wild Geese*, fathers and husbands who deny daughters and wives access to consumables are ignorant of women's needs for happiness and education. Such depictions suggest that McClung and Ostenso believed women's dignity and fulfillment depended upon certain commodities, whether they be as important as eyeglasses, as simple as magazines, or as luxurious as lacy underclothes. Since both of these writers had spent their adolescent years on the plains—McClung in Manitoba and Ostenso in Minnesota, South Dakota, and Manitoba—it is probable that patriarchal control of the family purse contributed toward their consumerist portrayals. A survey of 364 farmwomen conducted by the United Farm Women of Manitoba in 1922 revealed that while many of the province's farms had modern implements, their domestic life remained rudimentary. Women hauled water in buckets, cooked without electricity, and washed laundry by hand, but men used "tractors, combines, binders and threshing machines" (Sundberg 194). Such findings spurred the United Farm Women to argue for immediate

improvement of rural domestic conditions, and no doubt also contributed to gender tensions throughout the region.

Importantly, though, neither Ostenso nor McClung fully embraced consumerism as a means to fulfillment. In *Wild Geese*, Mrs. Sandbo and her daughter are so fashion obsessed that they remain ignorant of deeper matters (128–29). McClung also cautions against consumer excess. A character named Arthur in *The Second Chance* must choose between two women, Martha and Thursa. Both wear fashionable clothing and cosmetics, but their personalities are different. Martha can “bake and scrub and sew and keep things tidy”; she is also considerate. In contrast, Thursa loves shopping and urban entertainment more than farm life. Arthur is at first smitten by Thursa, but eventually finds her too shallow, and chooses the selfless Martha (246).

Non-prairie female authors also suggested that moderation was the best approach. Sime may have been supportive of Adelaide’s consumer skills in “Mr. Johnston,” but in another short story from *Sister Woman*, “The Social Problem,” she suggests a well-lived life must include non-commodified pursuits. The main character, Donna, is an appearance-obsessed woman who chooses to maintain her looks over all other activities. She therefore misses opportunities for personal and social fulfillment and resembles “a beautiful tropical bird” in a “cage” (215). In expressing their preference for temperance, English Canadian women writers implied that successful consumerism entailed judgement and restraint. At the same time, romance novelists Fytche and MacKay, adolescent fiction writers Montgomery and McClung, and realist authors Innis, Ostenso, and Sime all recognized that consumption could be a path toward women’s comfort, edification, and happiness. So strong was McClung’s and Ostenso’s support for women’s unfettered access to commodities that they portrayed fathers and husbands who denied wives and daughters access to consumables as oppressive. As long as women were in charge of their consumer urges, they could safely enjoy the fruits of industrial capitalism.

### **The Triumph of Moderation**

As consumer capitalism emerged and accelerated in Canada between 1890 and 1930, and then faltered during the 1930s, fiction authors responded by incorporating portrayals of commodities and consumption into their writings. Sampling twelve English language prose titles representing works penned by authors of different decades, genders, regions, styles, and levels of fame, we find that English Canadian writers were deeply concerned about the ethics of consumption. Authors’ individual portrayals differed, but together their works indicate that consumption was becoming central to notions of class, morality, and gender. They also indicate that many English Canadians were ambivalent about consumer issues. At times, authors embraced consumerism, seeing it as

a step toward human comfort, leisure, and enlightenment, but at other times, authors denigrated consumerism, viewing it as decadent and immoral, and portraying material disparity as evidence of inequality and corruption.

It might be expected that works intended for a mass audience would valorize consumerism and that works intended for an intellectual audience would denigrate it, but both popular and literary writers endorsed consumption as an acceptable path toward happiness and edification. So long as it was approached in moderation, popular authors McClung, Montgomery, and Stead, as well as realist authors Sime, Ostenso, and Innis suggested that the use and pursuit of commodities could make Canadians' lives more fulfilling. This study also reveals that authors living in western Canada, central Canada, and eastern Canada all displayed sympathy toward consumer interests. Therefore although the country's two largest cities, Toronto and Montreal, were dominant consumerist centres during this period, it was also true that consumer culture was expanding in other regions.

Three prairie novels were especially supportive of consumerism. According to Stead's *The Cow Puncher*, McClung's *The Second Chance*, and Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, commodities eased the starkness of prairie life, improved one's education, and in McClung's and Ostenso's cases, provided freedom from the miserliness of husbands and fathers. These depictions suggest that the settlement conditions of isolation, outdoor labour, loneliness, men's familial authority, women's financial dependence, and poverty contributed to an atmosphere in which consumer goods became symbols of comfort, modernity, and for women, independence. In contrast to those who to this day nostalgize pre-1940 prairie life as less modern than urban life, these books indicate that consumerism was an important feature of English Canadian prairie culture during this period.

Consumerism was so prevalent in Winnipeg, in fact, that Douglas Durkin condemned it in his 1923 *The Magpie*. Evincing a masculinist distaste for consumption, this novel delivers a class-based critique of consumerism that is hostile toward bourgeois women. *The Magpie* is unique in this study in that it merges an anti-female perspective with a socialist one, but other authors were also wary of consumerism's class components. Conservative writers Machar and Leacock, feminist writers McClung, Innis, and Sime, and socialist writer Spier each suggested that consumer inequality was indicative of class privilege. The authors may have put forth different solutions to ending material disparity, but all agreed that consumption was an intricate component of class in Canada, and crucial to social opportunity and success.

Commodities were also central to constructions of gender identities. According to *The Magpie*, producerist masculinity during this period was partly defined through opposition to the consumerist and the feminine. Other

ideal masculinities presented in pre-1940 English Canadian fiction were more amenable to consumption. Stead's Mr. Duncan, Dave Elden's middle class role model in *The Cow Punchers*, lived in a well-furnished home and urged Elden to wear tasteful, well-fitting garments. Consumerism was even more important to femininity. In pieces by Fytche, MacKay, Montgomery, McClung, Sime, and Ostenson, well-decorated homes and attractive bodily ornamentation underscored female heroines' womanly virtues.

Even as female authors celebrated consumerist femininity, they cautioned readers to exercise moderation. Works by McClung, Sime, Ostenson, and Innis include female characters who put their love of shopping and fashion above their responsibilities to themselves and their communities. According to these writers, personal fulfillment and community harmony arose not only from consumerism, but from mothering, loving one's husband, and doing good works. In this view, consumerism was necessary but must never become one's *raison d'être*. As consumer capitalism expanded in early twentieth-century Canada, these female authors urged their audiences to keep a portion of themselves outside the marketplace.

In his analysis of the movement against alcohol consumption in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canada, historian Craig Heron demonstrates that by the 1920s many members of the bourgeoisie and working class were beginning to view prohibition as "prudish." In 1919, therefore, provincial governments began modifying laws banning alcohol, choosing instead to legalize liquor and regulate its distribution. "The new watchword," Heron writes, "was 'moderation'" (213, 270–71). A similar process occurred in the realm of consumption in English Canadian literature between 1890 and 1940. During this period, a few English Canadian writers depicted consumerism as immoral, arguing that it promoted vanity and selfishness. More, however, proposed that if commodities were pursued and displayed in tasteful moderation, they could enhance one's gender identity as well as provide status, comfort, edification, and fulfillment. For these writers, the keys to proper consumption were decorum and self-discipline. Excessive and out-of-control consumer appetites, they asserted, threatened individual well-being and destabilized the social order. To be a successful consumer of goods and services between 1890 and 1940, one had to exercise not only taste, but also restraint.

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