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A New Woman in Print and Practice: The Canadian Literary Career of Madge Robertson Watt, 1890-1907[1]

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Abstract

Madge Robertson Watt was a successful female Canadian writer, editor, and reviewer whose literary career flourished between 1890 and 1907. Robertson wrote prolifically for numerous publications such as the University of Toronto's student paper *The Varsity*, the *Ladies Pictorial Weekly* (which she also edited in 1892), *The Globe*, and the British Columbia-based *Victoria Times*. During this period, a form of feminism emerged in Canada expressed by women who associated themselves with the phenomenon known as "New Womanhood." Some of the social changes New Women advocated included increased access to higher education, paid work for women, and marriage reform. The purpose of this paper is to consider the journalism career of this Canadian, university-educated woman and to explore the New Woman ideas that are implicit in Watt's writing. Watt's writing contained many of the ideas that were typical of New Woman writers, but compared to the better-known New Woman novelists of the 1890s, her writing was at once both more popular and more conservative because it also perpetuated an air of Victorian propriety by praising traditional female gender roles. Indeed, throughout her writing career, Robertson reflected the ambiguities that Canadian women faced as they adopted elements of New Woman thinking into their writing and their lived experiences.

Theory and Historiography

Despite her impressive literary reputation among her contemporaries, today Madge Robertson's name is not well known in Canada or beyond and her biography has never been written.[2] Throughout her life

[1] Portions of this paper were presented previously at the "Women Writing and Reading: Past and Present, Local and Global Conference," University of Alberta, Edmonton, 5 May 2007, and at the "Berkshire Conference for the History of Women," Claremont, California, 3 June 2005. This research was supported by a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Excellent research assistance was provided by Lee-Ann Fielding, Kristin Ireland, Debra Mann, and Kathryn McLeod. Thanks to Sara Burke and the editors and anonymous reviewers for *History of Intellectual Culture* for their sound advice on revisions to an earlier version of this paper.

[2] Linda Ambrose is currently completing a full-length biography of Madge Robertson Watt. The fact that Robertson is so little known is surprising, particularly because by 1933 she became the founding president (as Mrs. Alfred Watt) of one of the world's largest international women's organizations, the Associated Country Women of

and literary career, Robertson's stance on New Womanhood fluctuated between progressive and conservative ideas. To explain this tendency, the biographical theory put forth by Jo Burr Margadant in her book *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* is useful. Margadant asserted that: "the subject of biography is no longer the coherent self but rather a self that is performed to create an impression of coherence or an individual with multiple selves whose different manifestations reflect the passage of time, the demands and options of different settings, or the varieties of ways that others seek to represent that person."[3] This approach to biography is clearly informed by cultural theorists' attention to the idea of conscious self-representation, known as "the performed self."[4] This is an appropriate and useful approach for a study of Madge Robertson Watt because she occupied different personae at various life stages, most clearly demonstrated through her writing.

Because she left no collection of private papers or journals, this study relies on Robertson's published works. Thus, one hears her voice only through her performed public role as a writer, not in private correspondence. This paper explores how and to what extent she reflected the characteristics of the New Woman writer of her day. While we maintain that the ideas found in Robertson's writing were typical of New Woman thinking at each stage of her writing career, our analysis also reinforces the fact that the New Woman was flexible enough to accommodate a variety of views which Robertson changed as she performed differently at different life stages.

To understand how Robertson's writing reflected both progressive New Woman views and the more traditional Victorian conceptions of femininity, an explanation of the New Woman is necessary. The term "New Woman" was not a North American creation although it was applied to women in both the United States and Canada. The phrase originated in Britain in 1894 to describe women who were demanding unprecedented political, economic, and social rights that contradicted Victorian female gender ideals. Their specific demands included suffrage, access to secondary and higher education, increased access to paid employment, as well as marriage and moral reforms.[5]

Victorian gender roles were shaped around the ideology of separate spheres. This prescriptive ideology assigned the public sphere, which for men encompassed paid work, politics, and education, while women were expected to inhabit the private sphere, that of the home and family. By the late nineteenth century, many middle-class women in North American and Britain were beginning to reject their socially-imposed roles, and they were called "New Women."[6] New Women were considered a major symptom of what middle- and upper-class male (and female) critics believed to be a "crisis of

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the World (ACWW). The ACWW, a group with approximately 9 million members in 70 different countries, remains active today, enjoying consultative status to the United Nations. For more information on the ACWW, see their website: www.acww.org.uk.

[3] Jo Burr Margadant, "Introduction: Constructing Selves in Historical Perspective," in *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. Jo Burr Margadant (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2000), 7.

[4] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 270-82.

[5] Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the fin de siecle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 9; and Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis, eds., *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siecle Feminisms* (Hampshire: Palgrave Publishers, 2001), 5-9.

[6] Sara Burke, "Women of Newfangle: Co-Education, Racial Discourse and Women's Rights in Victorian Ontario," *Historical Studies in Education* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 112.

gender" due to the rejection of the separate spheres ideology by "advanced" women.[7] Many New Women became writers who published sensational novels which advocated New Womanhood.[8]

As historian Sara Burke has demonstrated, the future of women's roles was considered one of the most interesting and important issues of the day.[9] Because of its importance, the issue of New Womanhood was debated widely. In an effort to contain the movement, detractors in the press condemned the behaviour and beliefs of the characters of New Woman fiction. Critics attacked fictional characters as opposed to "real" New Women in an attempt to convince the masses that the New Woman was far from respectable. However, as literary scholar Sally Ledger has suggested, fictional representations were far more radical than the actual beliefs and actions of women within the movement. The literary critiques that emerged portrayed a rather monolithic conception of the New Woman. Indeed, she was often portrayed as a "bicycling, cigarette-smoking Amazon" who was destroying Victorian society by overthrowing traditional gender norms.[10]

Scholarly works examining the New Woman have also focused primarily on literary depictions.[11] By focusing on New Woman fiction, or the critical and satirical commentaries by detractors, or both, scholars have produced numerous works which study various binary representations of the New Woman either as the humble, self-sacrificing, and socially oppressed[12] or as the "unsexed, terrifying, violent Amazon ready to overturn the world."[13] Because these works are based on literary portrayals of New Women, one major question remains unanswered: Did these representations reflect reality for late nineteenth-century feminists? Ledger has argued that for the most part, New Woman fiction and the commentaries of detractors did not wholly (if at all) reflect the lived reality of New Womanhood. In regards to the literary productions of both factions, Ledger insists that the "[t]extual representations of the New Woman (particularly unsympathetic representations) did not always coincide at all exactly with contemporary feminist beliefs and activities."[14]

Looking closely at the lives of New Woman authors and considering how their own experiences ran parallel to those of the characters of whom they wrote is an important way to explore the autobiographical nature of New Woman writing. In this paper, we consider the degree to which Robertson's writing reflected her own experiences of education, paid work, and married life.[15] Scholars such as Ann Ardis and Lyn Pykett have emphasized that academics must move beyond representation toward the scholarly examination of experience if they are to gain a greater understanding of real New

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[7] Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?: Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800-1914* (London: Routledge, 1996), 117.

[8] Lynn Pykett, "Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman: Representations of the Female Artist in the New Woman Fiction of the 1890s," in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. Nicola Diane Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 135.

[9] Burke, "Women of Newfangle," 112.

[10] Richardson and Willis, *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact*, 12.

[11] For a good overview of the ways in which criticism of New Woman fiction has developed since 2000, see Ann Heilman, "The New Woman in the New Millennium: Recent Trends in Criticism of New Woman Fiction," *Literature Compass* 3, no. 1 (2005): 32-42.

[12] Richardson and Willis, *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact,* 13.

[13] Talia Schaffer, "'Nothing But Foolscap and Ink': Inventing the New Woman," in *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact*, eds. Richardson and Willis, 39.

[14] Ledger, *The New Woman*, 1. As Richardson and Willis also suggest, within New Woman fiction in particular, representations of the New Woman portrayed a more drastic break with Victorian femininity than many feminists were willing to make. *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact*, 12.

[15] For a discussion of the autobiographical nature of New Woman fiction, see Lyn Pykett, *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), 177-91.

Women.[16] Studies focusing on experience will allow academics to determine whether or not textual depictions were accurate in relation to the women they supposedly represented. Although Ledger has claimed that New Woman fiction and critiques did not always characterize New Womanhood accurately, the statement is by no means definitive, meaning that at times these writings may have been representative. Historiographically, however, there is a lack of inquiry into the lives of individual New Women to either support or undermine Ledger's claim. This is especially true in the Canadian context.[17] While we know something of the New Woman tendencies of some well-known Canadian writers such as Sara Jeannette Duncan and Lily Lewis,[18] more biographical study of the individual lived experiences of women like Robertson will help to develop our understanding of the Canadian experience of New Womanhood.

Scholars agree that women's journalistic works should be considered when studying New Women. Sally Mitchell has recently called for the inclusion of texts other than novels in order to "identify, recover, and consider the political and social writing by those women, examining it not only for information and opinions but also as texts."[19] As historian Marjory Lang has clearly demonstrated in *Women Who Made the News*, by the end of the nineteenth century, Canadian women were gaining employment in the periodical industry writing women's columns for newspapers such as *The Globe*.[20] Some, such as Robertson, also wrote for women's interest magazines; therefore, the work of these female journalists should also be examined when studying New Women. Carole Gerson agrees on a need to study New Woman texts beyond novels. She argued that: "By privileging books and monographs over periodicals . . . [researchers] privilege authors who could afford book publication over authors who sold their work to periodicals, many of whom were women."[21] Broadening the textual base of our inquiry makes room for women like Robertson, who would otherwise not be included in the canon of New Women in Canada.

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[16] Ann Ardis, "Organizing Women: New Woman Writers, New Woman Readers, and Suffrage Feminism," in *Victorian Woman Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. Nichola Diane Thompson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 194.

[17] Some notable exceptions are: Catherine Munn Smith, "Marion Moodie: From Proper Lady to New Woman," *Alberta History* 49, no. 1 (2001): 9-15; Margaret Kathleen Martin, "Discovering Lily Lewis: A Canadian Journalist and New Woman," PhD Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2001; Tracy Kulba, "New Nation: Emily Murphy, the Famous Five Foundation, and the Production of a Female Citizen," Ph.D. Thesis, University of Alberta, 2004. See also Veronica Strong-Boag and Carole Gerson, "The Canadian New Woman," in *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 59-62.

[18] Misao Dean, "Duncan, Sara Jeannette (Cotes)" *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* www.biographi.ca (accessed 26 June 2007). On Duncan as a New Woman, see Misao Dean, "Literary Feminism: The Woman Question and the Modern Heroine," in *A Different Point of View: Sara Jeannette Duncan* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 58-78; Denise A. Heaps, "Genre and Gender in Sara Jeannette Duncan's Travel Satire, *A Social Departure: How Orthodocia and I Went Round the World By Ourselves*," *Essays on Canadian Writing* (Fall 2001): 73-94. On Lily Lewis and Duncan as New Women, see Peggy Martin, *Sketches of a Canadian Journalist: A Biocritical Study* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006), 13-14, 17-18, 89, 92.

[19] Sally Mitchell, "New Women's Work: Personal, Political, Public," *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 4.

[20] Marjory Lang, *Women Who Made the News: Female Journalists in Canada, 1880-1945* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1999), 144. For a British parallel to Lang's book, see Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, *Women Making News: Gender and Journalism in Modern Britain* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005). See Beetham on "New Journalism" in *A Magazine of Her Own?*, 123-129.

[21] Carole Gerson, "The Business of a Woman's Life: Money and Motive in the Careers of Early Canadian Women Writers," in *Women's Writing and the Literary Institution/L'Ecriture au feminin et l'institution littéraire*, eds. Claudine Potvin and Janice Williamson (Edmonton: Research Institute for Comparative Literature, University of Alberta, 1992), 80.

By examining Robertson's texts in the student newspaper *The Varsity*, the women's interest periodical *Ladies Pictorial Weekly*, *The Globe*, and the *Victoria Times*, clearly, Robertson perpetuated New Woman ideals. Her conception of New Womanhood was at times conservative, however, as she incorporated elements of Victorian female gender norms into her work. When she pursued her writing career after her marriage, she continued to assert (and to live out) many tenets of New Woman thinking, but her ideas about marriage were complex. By examining her life experiences and published works, it is possible to determine that Robertson did consider herself a New Woman throughout her career. While her conception of New Womanhood was far less radical than fictional representations of the New Woman found in the novels of the day, her writings reflect a tension between modernizing trends and traditional values.[22]

Madge Robertson Watt: A Brief Biography

Margaret Rose Robertson (Figure 1) was born in 1868 in Collingwood, Ontario where her father, Henry Robertson, Q.C., practiced law and her mother, Bethia Rose Robertson, was heavily involved in the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Society. The Robertsons' comfortable middle-class existence and progressive views about women meant that Madge, the elder of two children (both daughters), was afforded the rare privilege of a university education. While she was a co-ed at the University of Toronto from 1885 to 1890, Robertson wrote under the pen name "Greta" and contributed to *The Varsity* and other Toronto papers, including *Saturday Night*. After graduation, she taught at Parkdale Collegiate for a short time, and then took up writing full time. Robertson became the editor of Toronto's *Ladies Pictorial Weekly* in 1892 and took a position with *Frank Leslie's Weekly* in New York the following year. During this period, her work also appeared in *The Globe* and *The Mail* as well as several American publications including *Harper's Monthly, Truth,* and *The New York Evening Post*.[23]

When her mother became ill in the spring of 1893, Robertson returned to Canada. Later that year after her mother's death, she married Alfred Tennyson Watt, whom she knew from her student days in Toronto, and the couple moved to British Columbia where Dr. Watt was practicing medicine. The Watts had two sons, born in 1896 and 1906, yet Robertson Watt continued her writing career from B.C. despite the busy demands of her life as a wife, mother, and socialite. Her main writing activity during this period was reviewing books for *The Victoria Times*. When her husband was posted to William Head, BC, as the Inspector of Quarantine for British Columbia in 1897,[24] Robertson Watt was introduced to rural living and she continued to write from her new home outside of Victoria.

By 1909, Robertson Watt became involved in the Women's Institute movement as a lecturer and organizer of rural women's clubs. She took up the responsibility of advising the provincial government on Women's Institutes and traveling extensively to establish local branches. She was one of the first

[22] Scholars are now identifying such "apparently contradictory attitudes and beliefs" as "hybridities." See Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham, *New Woman Hybridities: Femininity, Feminism and International Consumer Culture, 1880-1930* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

[23] See *Saturday Night*, 25 January 1890, 7; 14 June 1890, 3; and *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, 19 January 1893, 43. Robertson's career path mirrors that of many of her contemporaries who tried teaching as a career, then took up writing opportunities in the United States (most often New York City) before returning to Canada. For others who sojourned in the United States, see Carole Gerson, "Canadian Women Writers and American Markets, 1880-1940," in *Context North America: Canadian/U.S. Literary Relations*, ed. Camille R. La Bossière (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 108-09.

[24] For more Alfred Watt's life and career, see "Sad News From Victoria B.C.," *The Collingwood Bulletin*, 31 July 1913, 1; and "Particulars of Death of Dr. A.T. Watt," *The Collingwood Bulletin*, 7 August 1913, 1,5.

women named to the Senate of the University of British Columbia in 1912.[25] With these new interests consuming so much of her time, Robertson's writing career came to an end sometime after 1907. When Dr. Watt died prematurely in 1913, she moved to England with her two sons, where she continued to be active in the leadership of rural women's organizations, both in Britain and internationally for more than thirty years. Madge Robertson Watt died in Montreal in 1948 at 80 years of age.[26]

Figure 1: Miss Madge Robertson[27]

[25] Robertson Watt's election to the UBC Senate was noted in the *Victoria Times* on two occasions: 10 August 1912, 5 and 24 August 1912, 10. For a short biography of her work in British Columbia, see Jean M. Robinson, *Three Women from B.C. and the A.C.W.W.* (Sooke, B.C.: Shirley Women's Institute Historical Research Group, 1990), 32-46; and British Columbia Women's Institute, *Modern Pioneers: 1909-59* (Victoria: British Columbia Women's Institute, 1959), 27.

[26] Robertson Watt's obituary appeared in various newspapers including the *New York Times*, 30 November 1948, 27. Although there is no entry about her life in either the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* or *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, one Canadian source should be noted: "Watt, Mrs. A.T." in *Who's Who and Why: A Biographical Dictionary of Men and Women of Western Canada, Vol. 3*, ed., C.W. Parker (Vancouver: International Press, 1913), 842. See also the British *Dictionary of National Biography* where the listing predictably concentrates more on her later life and her work in the British Women's Institutes than on her Canadian roots or her North American writing career. See Frances Farrer, "Watt, Margaret Rose," in *Dictionary of National Biography, 1941-1950,* eds. L.G. Wickham Legg and E.T. Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 930.

[27] *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, 18 January 1939, 43.

Madge Robertson: Her Toronto Writing

In many ways, Robertson's own life seemed to be the epitome of New Womanhood. In particular, her student experience at the University of Toronto set her apart as a member of a small but growing group; she was among the earliest co-eds to set foot on campus. The pages of *The Varsity* attest to Robertson's full participation in campus life through her involvements with the Modern Languages Club, a variety of campus events, and her noteworthy academic achievements.[28] Robertson was not a silent participant in co-education, but a vocal proponent of women's right to access higher education. She made her views known both on and off campus. According to an 1889 article's description of the fourth year students at University of Toronto:

> Miss Madge R. Robertson is perhaps the best known of the ladies. She is a nice-looking brunette and quite young in appearance. Her talents are most versatile. In Modern Languages she has stood well since her first year. Outside her course she is best-known for her blue-stocking proclivities being a frequent contributor to The Varsity and also to some down town papers. Her non-de-plume [sic] is Greta.[29]

Although none of the texts of her prize-winning essays in Modern Languages seem to still exist, examples remain of her journalistic offerings, both opinion pieces and poetry. In an 1889 article entitled "The Higher Education" published in the campus newspaper, "Greta" wrote to defend women's participation in post-secondary institutions.[30] She was responding to an article published in an earlier issue of *The Varsity*, where a male student had satirically presented female students as frivolous and flirtatious, arguing that women had no place on campus.[31] "It is somewhat unusual," she began, "to offer views on co-education, but . . . I flatter myself I have some original theories to advance — and for such I may be pardoned."[32] Robertson's retort is one of the earliest examples of her support for the women's movement, and a clear indication of the New Woman principles that informed her own student experiences. In the heated exchange, Robertson was not only defending higher education for women, but she was justifying her own place on campus.

While she was a student at the University of Toronto, Robertson was heavily involved in the Modern Languages Club. Members of the club made a deliberate attempt to develop a distinctly Canadian literature and literary culture by encouraging one another to be original in their compositions, rather than imitative. Touting the importance of home-grown Canadian creative efforts, proponents of this view told readers of *The Varsity:* "If Canada is ever going to have a national literature . . . our topics should be Canadian and our treatment of them individual and characteristic . . . Let us be ourselves, and not Europe

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[28] From 1886 to 1890, *The Varsity* mentions Robertson at least fourteen times, both for her involvements as a member of various campus clubs and for her academic achievements.

[29] "With Cap and Gown: Varsity's Fair Students," *Life*, 1889. This press clipping (which does not include date or page number) is contained in the Henry Robertson Scrapbook, 19. The Scrapbook, compiled by Madge Robertson's father, is held by The Town of Collingwood, Collingwood Museum, Collingwood, Ontario. Hereafter cited as Robertson Scrapbook.

[30] "Greta," "The Higher Education," *The Varsity*, 19 January 1889, 1.

[31] "Old Roman," "The Higher Education Again," *The Varsity*, 3 November 1888, 1. On the question of the ongoing debates over co-education, see Sara Z. Burke, "New Women and Old Romans: Co-Education at the University of Toronto, 1884-95," *Canadian Historical Review* 80, no. 2 (1999): 219-241. For an example of a Canadian woman who advocated higher education for women in an earlier period, see Dianne M. Hallman, "Agnes Maule Machar on the Higher Education of Women," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 13, no. 2 (2001): 165-82.

[32] *The Varsity*, 19 January 1889, 1.

or America."[33] Realizing this goal would be complicated because many aspiring Canadian writers sojourned instead to the United States.[34]

After graduation, Robertson worked as a writer for numerous periodicals, both in Canada and in the United States. In 1892, at the age of 24, within just two years of her graduation, Robertson assumed the editorship of the *Pictorial Weekly*, a Toronto-based women's interest magazine with a circulation of over 25,000 copies per week.[35] The publication included features on marriage, child-rearing, religion, homemaking, cooking, literature, leisure, society news, and health issues. From February until July, Robertson vetted other journalists' work and also wrote her own weekly editorials and feature articles for the paper.

Robertson exerted control over the content and tone of the *Ladies Pictorial Weekly* (hereafter *Pictorial*), which translated into a great deal of cultural influence for a young female professional in Canada. As journalists, women could essentially write about any topic they wished, and this provided them a certain degree of freedom. Whether their work was published, however, usually depended entirely on the male editors who evaluated their writing.[36] As a woman editing a periodical, Robertson was fortunate to bypass male censorship. Seemingly, Robertson had a high degree of freedom in editing the *Pictorial*, but to ensure the survival of the publication, she also had to consider factors such as raising funds through the sale of copies and advertisement space.[37] Because not all of her readers were New Women, Robertson recognized that her own beliefs and those of some of her readers were not the same, meaning that she had to write and edit carefully if she wanted to present her own ideas without offending more conservative readers. The same may be said of those who advertised with the magazine. Robertson likely realized that they advertised within women's interest magazines because they recognized that females were the primary consumers within Canadian households and wanted to reach that target market,[38] not because they wanted to support women's rights. Given these business considerations, Robertson had to assume an air of Victorian propriety.[39]

In effect, Robertson's work as editor was a delicate balancing act where she was careful to edit and write articles for the *Pictorial* which incorporated her own New Woman ideas, yet still reflected Victorian gender norms. This tension between her own convictions and some readers' more conservative preferences is clearly demonstrated in articles from the *Pictorial* and *The Globe* pertaining to three themes: higher education for women, women and work, and love and marriage.

Women and Higher Education

The first mention of women and higher education is found in the 13 February 1892 issue of the *Pictorial*. In the article entitled "Let us Live," Robertson reinforced her previous assertions made in *The Varsity* as she firmly stated that women belonged in institutions of higher education. She also argued that it was

[33] Ibid., 6 March 1886, 188.

[34] Gerson, "Canadian Women Writers and American Markets," *passim*.

[35] Circulation rates appeared regularly in various issues of the *Ladies Pictorial Weekly* during 1892: 14 May, 317; 21 May, 333; 28 May, 351; 11 June, 384; 18 June, 399; and 25 June, 416.

[36] Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?*, 130.

[37] Sources pertaining to the business operation of the *Ladies Pictorial Weekly* are not known to exist and so commenting further on the ownership of the publication or Robertson's dealings with the owners is difficult.

[38] Cynthia Wright, "'Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance': Writing Gender into the History of Consumption," eds., Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 231-34.

[39] For more on the emphasis on domesticity in a British context, see Margaret Beetham, "The Reinvention of the English Domestic Woman: Class and 'Race' in the 1890s' Woman's Magazine," *Women's Studies International Forum* 21, no. 2 (1998): 223-33.

inexcusable that modern women be expected to put household duties above education: "[i]t is a human being, then, merely a machine, whose chief use is to mend clothing and sew buttons! Shall a bit of mending be exalted before a thousand other duties, privileges or opportunities of life . . . there are plenty of other things to be done by an intelligent girl." To further substantiate her argument, Robertson claimed that "[w]e have fallen on times when the force of educated women is largely needed in the higher ministrations of life. She must become a home-keeper not a house-keeper. There is a vast difference. Or, if she is the life of art, or professions, or social work, her best strength must go to her especial work."[40]

Significantly, Robertson argued for higher education for women while asserting an apparent contradiction, namely that women's place in life should lie primarily within the home — an idea which would likely please her more conservative readers. Yet by listing various possible vocations for women outside the home, Robertson could also extend the *Pictorial*'s appeal to New Woman readers. As Ann Ardis has suggested, many New Woman writers such as Robertson composed their work in such a way that would allow readers to "ignore that with which she cannot identify, to fail to hear/read whatever messages miss her mark" and identify with those elements which she recognized as reflective of her worldview.[41] This allowed larger audiences to consume Robertson's work as certain elements appealed to conservative readers while others appealed to New Woman readers.

Women and Work

Though primarily advocating women's right to higher education, the article "Let us Live"[42] also demonstrated the second prevalent New Woman theme found in the *Pictorial*: women and work (both paid and unpaid). A brief examination of this periodical would lead one to believe that any article pertaining to women and work would discuss women's unpaid work within the home while glorifying domesticity. This is largely due to the fact that aside from providing the title, the masthead also boasted a hand-drawn illustration of Queen Victoria and a quote from writer George Eliot that read: "A woman's rank lies in the fulness [sic] of her womanhood: therein alone is she royal."[43] During the Victorian era, the most highly socially-sanctioned measure of womanhood was domesticity. Section headings within the paper such as "Practical Information for the Housewife," "Culinary," and "Mother's Corner" also indicate the prevalence and the perceived importance of domesticity in the lives of Canadian women. Notably, no section heading related to women's paid work outside the home. Robertson penned traditional and respectable articles on issues surrounding cleaning, cooking, child care, and consumerism. For conservative women who were not seeking to reform traditional gender roles, articles pertaining to topics such as these would have been appealing and useful.[44]

Robertson also covertly expressed New Woman ideas in articles dealing with domesticity, and child-rearing in particular. Robertson recognized the influence of mothers over future generations and insisted that women embrace this role while making their own suggestions as to how this responsibility should be carried out. One of Robertson's central suggestions in articles such as "Teach Your Child Self Reliance" was for mothers to instil a sense of confidence and independence in female children by allowing them to help with housework and paying them for their work.[45] Although this may have seemed like an innocent

[40] *Ladies Pictorial Weekly*, 13 February 1892, 5.

[41] Ardis, "Organizing Women," 198.

[42] *Ladies Pictorial Weekly*, 13 February 1892, 5.

[43] Ibid., 6 February 1892–25 June 1892.

[44] Examples abound in *Ladies Pictorial Weekly*, including "Keeping Pots and Pans Clean," 6 February 1892, 10; "How to Select Wall-Paper That is Cheerful and Effective," 13 February 1892, 10; "Saving Work," 12 March 1892, 10; "Horrors of Dishwashing," 2 April 1892, 218; "Floral Bedrooms," 14 May 1892, 316.

[45] "Teach Your Children Self-Reliance," *Ladies Pictorial Weekly*, 13 February 1892, 14.

piece of advice, which is how some women may have received the article, it was more significant in terms of the New Woman ideas it promoted. Within this article, Robertson was articulating two particular New Woman ideologies pertaining women and work. The first idea was that women should be free to choose the type of work they wanted to do; the second was that women should receive remuneration for their work. Although girls were still to perform domestic duties, Robertson encouraged mothers to allow their daughters to choose the tasks they liked to perform. Robertson may have hoped that by teaching girls to make choices regarding work early in life, then as adults they might choose employment they enjoyed. Paying girls for their work might also ensure that they would eventually expect to earn money for their labour, creating a societal change hoped for by New Women.

In a 1892 article entitled "Woman — Bird's Eye View," Robertson once again embraced women's traditional domestic role while cunningly advancing her New Woman ideas regarding paid work for women. Robertson praised women's work within the home, insisting that women dominate the "domestic circle" and "that within this circle is the centre of energy and education, genius and influence." Having established this, however, Robertson insisted that not all women should "remain in the domestic hut called home." She explained that some women simply wanted independence through work in the public sphere and argued that when women did make this choice, they should be paid fairly. Indeed, Robertson insisted that "where she is admitted, however, as man's equal in point of quality and quantity of labour, we cannot, find a shadow of reason for her remuneration being half, a fifth of that he received."[46]

While Robertson maintained the air of Victorian propriety around the question of women and paid employment in the pages of the *Pictorial*, Robertson was less subtle in other publications. In the winter of 1893, she published a series of columns in *The Globe* entitled "By the Fireside" which provides another prime example of Robertson's writing on the subject of careers for women. Here, she discussed women in a variety of careers including law, newspaper work, nursing, domestic work, teaching, writing, and art. "By the Fireside" featured a cast of fictional characters who discussed the pros and cons of various careers for women and espoused opinions that were in keeping with her New Woman views on women and work. The characters who Robertson created to meet regularly by the fireside were somewhat autobiographical as they took up the topics of women and teaching and women in newspaper work, two fields where Robertson's own experience coincided closely with that of her characters' career choices.

As a former teacher herself, Robertson created one character who found that teaching was too constraining as the woman's entire life was under close surveillance regarding such things as her living arrangements. Moreover, teaching across the broad range of curriculum, including physical education, was very stressful, although certainly not beyond the woman's mental capacity. We wonder if these insights about the drawbacks of a teaching career might serve to explain why Robertson made a hasty exit from teaching in order to devote herself to writing full-time. Robertson's fictional character did not agree with the scrutiny that was given to the details of teachers' private lives and it seems entirely plausible that as a promoter of the New Woman's right to personal freedoms, Robertson was using that character to voice her own views on the subject.[47]

The autobiographical nature of the column was reinforced again when Robertson turned to the topic of women and "newspaper life." Here, she asserted that successful women writers were answering a calling on their lives.

> If a girl can write she will write, and nothing can ever stop her. But if there is any question of choosing in the matter, that is, if she hesitates between writing and any other

[46] "Woman — A Bird's Eye View," *Ladies Pictorial Weekly*, 19 March 1892, 177.

[47] Madge Robertson, "By the Fireside," *The Globe*, 18 February 1893, 6.

> profession, by all means let her take the other. The muse is as hard a mistress as art, and wants your whole soul or nothing. If the girl feels called to write she will not be able to keep from it.[48]

The remainder of the discussion about newspaper work was anything but a romantic picture. Robertson pointed out that until they became established writers, women could not earn sufficient pay to make a living. Opportunities for full-time work on the staff of a newspaper were extremely rare for Canadian women, because as she said, "only half a dozen daily papers employ women at all, and then only, as a rule, one on each paper." The American situation was somewhat better, Robertson explained, but "you have your work cut out for you if you want to keep up with the newspaper times in New York." The problem was the jaded nature of the American reading public, and the competition and pressure associated with writing for the daily press. This particular instalment of "By the Fireside" explained that a woman who aspired to make money by writing had to understand how the writing business really worked. Some women, according to Robertson, "supply the big syndicates with fiction and miscellaneous matter concerning women . . . The best off of all, I suppose, are the novelists or short story writers for the influential magazines."[49] While this column provided a good description of the writing business in the 1890s, we might also read it as a projection of the career path on which Robertson was well launched.

Robertson's overview of modern careers for women gave her readers a glimpse into the New Woman possibilities, but in doing so, she was careful to emphasize the challenges that women faced in attempting to enter various professions. Readers who shared her New Woman sympathies may have read these texts as encouraging forays. However, more conservative readers could have seen the implicit problems that awaited those who challenged established gender roles in the realm of paid work.

Love and Marriage

The third New Woman issue prevalent in Robertson's writing is the reform of heterosexual relationships. According to Pykett, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the "Marriage Question" became extremely problematic. Pykett asserts that while many viewed marriage as woman's highest calling, others believed that marriage was the equivalent of slavery or legalized prostitution.[50] Those who believed that marriage was woman's highest calling also espoused the notion that women should be submissive to their husbands. Robertson situated herself in the middle of the debate as she clearly articulated that women should form heterosexual unions and that these unions should ultimately lead to marriage. Although Robertson recommended marriage, however, she strongly refuted the idea that women should be submissive to their husbands. She stressed the fact that women should have far more autonomy within heterosexual relationships than dictated by Victorian ideals. This was a radical proposal, yet unlike some New Women, Robertson did not call for a complete overhaul of societal norms to advance her ideas. Instead, she called for women to work within their socially-accepted roles to incite change. Similar to her conception of motherhood that called for changes in the way female children were reared, Robertson believed that women should become wives but work to create change within heterosexual relationships by asserting themselves within the union. This, she believed, was the only way for women to be truly happy within marriage.

The first challenge Robertson put forth to combat female submissiveness was the perpetuation of the idea that women had the right to choose who they would marry without others influencing their

[48] Ibid., 28 January 1893, 6.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Pykett, *The "Improper" Feminine*, 144.

decision. This was a drastic break from Victorian norms.[51] Robertson penned articles such as "Whom Not to Marry," and "Courteous Men" to counsel her readers on how they might approach making this important decision.[52] Overall, these works warned women to stay away from "dishonorable" men or men who were "given to any vice," for women who married such men were likely to either loathe their husbands, or, even worse, become just like them. Given the fact that Robertson still espoused many conservative ideals regarding gender, the latter possibility would have been especially disconcerting for her and her more conservative readers. Significantly, Robertson's assertion regarding married women becoming like their vice-ridden husbands might have had an influence on conservative readers who otherwise would have submissively entered a heterosexual union because of family influence or economic necessity. These women may have been swayed into thinking twice before marrying, inadvertently leading them to follow New Woman ideals.

Robertson recognized that given the societal norms regarding female submissiveness, women would also need guidance regarding how to maintain their autonomy within the marital relationship. She emphasized that women who were completely submissive to men would be terribly unhappy. Invoking a racialized example in a commentary regarding the social status of Japanese women, Robertson wrote that they were considered "the most feminine of all women . . . [for they] do not care a mite about woman's rights." In Robertson's opinion, their lack of interest in rights for women and subsequent acceptance of submissiveness meant that "they are no more than the goods and chattels of the household to their husbands, who may divorce them at the smallest pretext." Robertson warned that "A Japanese woman must be submissive; first to the father, then to her husband, and when a widow, to her eldest son. Her lot is not a happy one."[53] Given the negative Western opinion regarding Asian races during the period, Robertson possibly equated Japanese women with submissiveness in the hopes that North American women would question the respectability of the idea itself. By insisting that "undesirable" Asian women essentially embodied submissiveness, Robertson would have caused North American women to question this expectation and thereby insist on autonomy within marriage to differentiate and distance themselves from Asian women.[54]

Robertson suggested ways by which readers could avoid submissiveness. She recognized that while some of her readers would be prepared to make a complete break from submissiveness, this would not be the case with her entire readership. To satisfy the needs of conservative readers and non-conformists alike, Robertson suggested that women assert themselves by using the ideals of female propriety as their tools. In the article "Happy Wives," Robertson offered readers some "kindly advice." She advised women

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[51] As Beth Light and Joy Parr suggest: "The choice of a husband was not a young woman's alone." Because of the economic and social ramifications of marriage on entire families, "parents exercised as much control as possible over a young woman's transition from maiden to wife." Light and Parr, eds., *Canadian Women on the Move, 1867-1920* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1983), 110.

[52] "Courteous Men," *Ladies Pictorial Weekly*, 19 March 1892, 181; "Whom Not to Marry," *Ladies Pictorial Weekly*, 4 June 1892, 358.

[53] *Ladies Pictorial Weekly*, 12 March 1893, 3.

[54] W.D. Scott commented that at the turn of the century and afterwards, in the context of immigration to Canada, "the Japanese are, from a Canadian standpoint, the most undesirable of the Orientals." Thomas Thorner, ed., *A Country Nourished on Self-Doubt: Documents in Canadian History, 1867-1980* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1998), 93. The racism implicit in this essentialist argument was not atypical of the period. Indeed, attention to the theme of race and ethnicity has recently emerged as an important focus in New Woman studies. See for example, Beetham, "The Reinvention of the English Domestic Woman"; and Cecily Devereux, "New Woman, New World: Maternal Feminism and the New Imperialism in the White Settler Colonies," *Women's Studies International Forum* 22, no. 2 (1999): 175-84. See also Mariana Valverde, "'When the Mother of the Race is Free': Race, Reproduction, and Sexuality in First-Wave Feminism," in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, eds. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 3-26.

never to pry into their husband's affairs and not to pester men when they came home late at night. Instead, Robertson told women to act understandingly, for this would induce guilt in men who knew that they had done something wrong. Robertson reassured women, telling them that "[i]f you are patient[,] his heart is full of remorse and he loves you the more . . . In time you can rid a man from his every bad habit and you will be much happier in the end."[55] For Robertson, influence, not outright assertion, was women's solution to shifting the balance of power within marriage.

Robertson also advocated marital reform by making appeals to husbands. She believed that contrary to popular opinion, husbands should refrain from dominating their wives because marriage should be a partnership of equals. To attain equality, Robertson stressed the fact that familial emotional nurturing should not only be the responsibility of wives. In the article "Man's Love," Robertson insisted that men were capable of loving as wholly and as compassionately as women.[56] To conservative contemporaries, this would have been a shocking suggestion as socially-constructed Victorian gender roles were largely formed on the basis that women were inherently far more nurturing and sensitive than men. To some, this may have been read as an overt attempt to undermine the traditional conception of masculinity.

Robertson suggested that men could love and nurture their wives by altering their perception of marriage as well as their actions. For instance, Robertson suggested that after the wedding, men should never forget the "courtesies of life" they had showed their wives prior to marriage. Also, Robertson proposed that husbands should show appreciation for the domestic work done by their wives by sending them on a vacation.[57] Whether or not husbands were to accompany their wives on these vacations is not made clear, nor is that husbands actually read Robertson's articles. However, due to Robertson's assertions, female readers were exposed to the message that men should not always expect submissiveness from wives.

Madge Robertson Watt: Victoria Reviews

Despite Robertson's many cautions to women regarding marriage, she strongly believed in the institution and she herself accepted a proposal of marriage from her varsity sweetheart, Dr. Alfred Tennyson Watt. In December 1893, the happy couple was wed in Robertson's hometown of Collingwood, Ontario. After a honeymoon trip by train across the continent, the couple settled in Victoria, BC, where Dr. Watt had established a successful medical practice. Just a few years before, writing as "Greta," Robertson had seemed to be at the forefront of reform as she wrote forcefully about women's rights to access co-education, but now as a new bride, she seemed to be the epitome of respectability.

How much of Robertson's New Woman tendencies did she bring forward into her married life? As Mrs. Watt, Robertson entered fully into the society life of Victoria. Her cultural activities included involvement with the University of Toronto's Alumni Association, the University Women's Club, the Royal Conservatory, the Mother's Club, and the King's Daughters. The Watts were regular guests at Government House for various functions, and even after Dr. Watt accepted a federal patronage appointment as Medical Inspector of Quarantines for BC, stationed at William Head, the couple still made frequent visits to Victoria. Robertson gave leadership in several path-breaking positions for women including being one of the first women elected to the Senate of the new University of British Columbia in 1912 and being appointed to the British Columbia Women's Institutes Provincial Advisory Committee in 1910 as a promoter of Women's Institutes. In this latter role, Mrs. Watt worked cooperatively with the provincial government to promote a movement that would provide domestic science education, access to

[55] "Happy Wives," *Ladies Pictorial Weekly*, 9 April 1892, 237.

[56] "Man's Love," *Ladies Pictorial Weekly*, 11 June 1892, 381.

[57] "Give the Wife a Vacation," *Ladies Pictorial Weekly*, 19 March 1892, 189.

health care, and various other kinds of support to rural women in their roles as homemakers and mothers.

Yet in the midst of her busy life as a socialite, wife, and mother, Robertson still maintained her literary interests on several fronts. In 1894-95, she was invited to give a series of lectures on literature to a group of young women at the St. Ann's Academy in Victoria where she spoke on a wide range of authors including Woodsworth, Shelley, Browning, Milton, and Tennyson. The *Victoria Times* followed her lectures closely, reporting on each one. This is evidence of putting her own education to good use, but it also demonstrates her encouragement of higher education for women. At the conclusion of the series, she said that "the cause of education ought to lie near the hearts of all good women."[58] Evidently, some aspects of Robertson as a New Woman seemed to be consistently brought forward as she pushed for higher education for women.

Meanwhile, Robertson's publishing career continued to flourish, particularly in New York magazines where her fiction regularly appeared under her maiden/pen name "Madge Robertson." Even after her own wedding, her short stories on romance presented marriage as "problematic," giving a female perspective about the issues women faced in attempting to select suitable mates. She revisited questions regarding marriage that she had entertained earlier during her time as editor of the *Pictorial*. Her fiction addressed the problem of whether women should propose marriage and how brides would negotiate the power relations inherent in marriage. As Chris Willis has noted, the dilemma of how to find the right kind of man surfaced repeatedly in New Woman fiction.[59] In a short story Robertson published in 1895 entitled "The Illustration of the Orthopedic," the woman found her true love in a man training to be a medical doctor, who could not separate his emotions from his profession. The young man gave the gift he had originally purchased for the heroine to a sick child, and when she heard about this selfless act of tenderness, she was convinced they should be married.[60]

Other female characters in Robertson's short stories also wrestled with the question of the woman's powerful role in deciding to accept or reject a proposal of marriage.[61] One of the most humorous of Robertson's short stories broached the question of whether or not a woman should keep secrets from her intended about previous love interests and experiences. In that example, the heroine revealed in confidence to her husband's friend that she had pressured the young man to propose to her but she had always wondered if she made the right choice of man.[62] Unfortunately, without any surviving diaries or personal papers, to know to what extent these musings about marriage were autobiographical is difficult. Having written so often about these questions in the lives of her fictional characters, Robertson must have entertained the same questions as she wrote the script of her own life.

In the fall of 1896, Robertson took up a new and rather demanding position as book reviewer for the *Victoria Times*. Her book review column, entitled "By Book Post" was a regular feature of the paper for more than ten years. Robertson had an arrangement with several publishers in Toronto, New York, and London, England, who sent her review copies of books by mail, and presumably paid her to comment upon them. She continued this work until 1907 and reviewed hundreds of titles. She was extremely prolific with her reviews; this study samples but a few. By analyzing her columns from the month of December each year, some valuable insights are gained into her review work and the context in which it was done. The month of December was chosen because this was a particularly key time for book lovers to seek recommendations about the titles available for Christmas gift giving. During the Decembers

[58] Robertson Scrapbook, p. 55, contains a press clipping from *Victoria Times*, February 1895.

[59] Willis, "Heaven Defend Me," Richardson and Willis, *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact*, 57.

[60] Madge Robertson, "The Illustration of the Orthopedic," *Truth*, 7 December 1895, 12-13.

[61] Madge Robertson, "Poor Ainsley," *The Globe*, 24 December 1892, 1; and "A Fine Sense of Humor" *Truth*, 18 May 1895, 6.

[62] Madge Robertson, "The Delicate Question of Which?" *Truth*, 6 June 1896, 10-11.

between 1896 and 1907, Robertson reviewed an astonishing total of 143 books including a variety of fiction, history, children's books, school textbooks, and periodicals.

During the period of Robertson's review work, the Canadian publishing industry was in its infancy and battles were raging over questions of copyright and protectionist policies designed to encourage Canadian authors and publishers.[63] George Parker has argued that a network of distributors, agents, and publishers colluded together to help support the fledgling market for books in Canada from 1900-1920.[64] While Parker considers the business relationships and rivalries that existed, the role that women such as Madge Robertson Watt were playing in promoting Canadian authors and publishers is important to consider. Of the books that Robertson reviewed, interestingly, 18 were published in the United States, 12 in Britain, and the remaining 113 in Canada. Robertson's reviewing of books from all three countries reflects the literary exchanges in the 1890s and 1900s. Her column was clearly part of a larger effort to promote Canadian authors. Through her regular columns in the *Victoria Times*, Robertson spoke with authority and influenced countless readers about their book selections and purchases. Her work in reviewing books provided an important link in the chain from writer to publisher to reading public.

Robertson worked closely with four main Canadian publishers, all based in Toronto: Copp Clark, William Briggs, George N. Morang and Company Limited, and Fleming Revell. Of the 113 titles she reviewed which were published in Canada, 10 were published by Fleming Revell, 20 by Copp Clark, 29 by William Briggs, and 38 by George N. Morang.[65] Book reviewing was an important way to promote new releases and to create a market in the emerging consumer culture of book buying. As Robertson wrote to recommend these titles, she did so with the assumption that her readers had the funds and the leisure to buy books as gifts and to read them during holiday times, summer vacations, and travels.

Reviewing New Women Novels and Marriage

During Robertson's tenure as a book reviewer, several New Woman novels crossed her desk.[66] The first one she reviewed was Sarah Grand's famous work, *The Beth Book*.[67] Robertson did not like the book very much, as her review makes clear. She reported that it was a "jumbled, illogical, but clever bit of work" and she felt that "it would be unfair to condemn the book, since it is a work of such pretension and written with moral intent. But it is unpleasant to read medical books unless one is a doctor, even if disguised as novels." In judging the book's main character, Robertson concluded: "Beth's cleverness

[63] Michael A. Peterman and Janet B. Friskney, "'Booming' the Canuck Book: Edward Caswell and the Promotion of Canadian Writing," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 30, no. 3 (1995): 60-90; Eli MacLaren, "'Against All Invasion': The Archival Story of Kipling, Copyright, and the Macmillan Expansion into Canada, 1900-1920," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2006): 139-62. On the copyright question, see George N. Morang, "The Copyright Question: A Letter to the Toronto Board of Trade" (Toronto: George N. Morang Ltd, 1902) www.gutenberg.org/files/14673/14673-h/14673-h.htm.

[64] George Parker, "Distributors, Agents, and Publishers: Creating a Separate Market for Books in Canada, 1900-1920. Part I," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada/Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada* 43, no. 2 (2005): 7-65.

[65] These four publishers represented the bulk of the titles that Robertson reviewed, but she also wrote about books published by the following publishers: Up to 1901: Gage (1); Westminster (1); Musson (2); George McLeod (1); McLeod & Allen (1); In 1907: Macmillan (3); Oxford Press in Toronto (3); Henry Frowde (3).

[66] For an example of New Woman journalism in British Columbia, see: Françoise LeJeune, "The American New Woman and Her Influence on the Daughters of the Empire of British Columbia in the Daily Press, (1880-95)," Heilman and Beetham, *New Woman Hybridities*, 74-89.

[67] Sarah Grand is considered an influential New Woman writer. Her 1894 essay "The New Aspect of the New Woman" inspired Ouida, another prominent New Woman author, to coin the term "The New Woman." Ledger, *The New Woman*, 9.

saves her from being tiresome. She is witty, if you like, but showing the poorest judgment in the company she keeps."[68] Robertson gave a mixed review to another Sarah Grand novel, *Babs the Impossible*.[69] While she deemed Grand's writing to be admirable (the story was "cleverly and satirically told"), Robertson did not condone the characters that Grand created. "It is . . . in her most fascinating ability to record conversations and in her inspired gift of bold character sketching that Sarah Grand's fame must eventually rest, and not upon her power to put bewitching angel-faced, but naughty-hearted young girls in the otherwise respectable pages of a novel."[70] Robertson also read Ouida, another well-known New Woman novelist, concluding that: "[E]ven if Ouida is excessive, she is always picturesque."[71] One can conclude from these reviews that although she was not a great fan of New Woman novels, Robertson found some redeeming features in many of them.

Robertson considered one New Woman novel completely unacceptable. In 1898, the Robert Lewis Weed Publishing Company of New York published Mary Ives Todd's *The Heterodox Marriage of a New Woman*. Robertson wrote a scathing review that is best expressed in her own words:

> Once in a while a thoroughly unworthy book comes through the mail. "The Heterodox Marriage of a New Woman" . . . has, so far as I can judge from a hasty skimming through, not a single redeeming feature. It is vulgar, pretentious, of no literary merit and with no good moral tendency. I shall not go so far as to say that it would ever have a bad influence, because no one will ever read it through.[72]

Why would a New Woman writer like Robertson react so strongly against the work of a fellow New Woman author? Was Robertson not a New Woman after all, at least not as Mrs. Watt? Had married life changed her views and given her a decidedly conservative turn of mind? New Woman fiction was not without its implicit contradictions. Scholars of New Woman literature such as Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis have come to recognize that: "New Women themselves did not always define their goals clearly: their fiction and prose-writing reveal contradictions and complexities which resist reductive, monolithic readings."[73] Yet while New Woman literature might oft-times defy categorization, Richardson and Willis maintain that: "[N]evertheless, from the various competing definitions of the New Woman[,] certain common features emerge: her perceived newness, her autonomous self-definition and her determination to set her own agenda in developing an alternative vision of the future."[74] Approaching Robertson's writing as a reviewer of books with these characteristics and contradictions in mind is important. Certainly as a married woman, her involvement in and promotion of higher education was still a firmly-held conviction; it was one that she acted upon through her lecture series and involvements in the University of Toronto Alumni Association, and membership on the University of British Columbia Senate. Her fiction writing continued with great success in New York, and no noticeable change is evident in theme or tone during the years after her marriage. Robertson was still an advocate of paid work for women, as she herself was remunerated for her writing both before and after her marriage.

The marriage question alone, and specifically the suggestion of non-traditional marriage, provided the one point of departure where Robertson refused to entertain expressions of that institution that strayed outside her own views. The Mary Ives Todd novel that she reviewed in 1899 celebrated the

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[68] "By Book Post," *Victoria Times*, 11 March 1898, 6.

[69] Sarah Grand, *Babs the Impossible* (New York: Harper Books, 1900).

[70] "By Book Post," *Victoria Times*, 27 June 1901, 6.

[71] Ibid., 25 May 1900, 6.

[72] Ibid., 23 January 1899, 6.

[73] Richardson and Willis, *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact*, 12.

[74] Ibid.

marriage of a heroine that was performed outside the confines of Christian tradition — indeed it was even outside the accepted legal practice of state-sanctioned civil ceremony. According to Robertson's review, the heroine Rae and her fiancé Paul "marry themselves by each repeating part of the Quaker contract. 'They don't approve of church or state marriages.'" And clearly, Robertson did not approve of their unconventional "ceremony." That expression of modernity was going too far for Mrs. Watt but it was not the only element that caused her to react so strongly to the novel. The heroine of the novel and her lover were deeply committed to socialist causes. They intended to travel to Siberia to further the revolutionary movement. As their future plans unfolded, Paul proposed to take Rae "to my ancestral home [Russia] and spend my time teaching and helping my peasants in their development as Tolstoï is doing. He seems to be getting along well and to be doing . . . fine work." As laudable as that goal was, Rae protested saying: "But Tolstoï is hardly a pattern for me; he is abjectly orthodox, a non-resistant of the most slavish type. I am heterodox and believe in eternal vigilance and eternal resistance to tyrannical encroachment."[75]

Although Robertson could be considered a New Woman in many respects, she could not and would not accept a marital union that went that far outside the accepted boundaries of her Christian tradition and her views of proper monogamous heterosexual relations. Nor could she endorse an approach to reform that called for revolutionary overthrow of the ruling class, a class that as Mrs. Watt, she identified so closely with as a member of the educated elite in late nineteenth-century Canada. Furthermore, Robertson had a great admiration for Tolstoy, particularly his Christian socialism, as she expressed in a December 1902 review.[76] For all of these reasons, she simply could not endorse the version of New Woman fiction that she read in Mary Ives work. In so many ways, it was simply too radical for her.

With a passion equal to that with which Robertson had denounced *The Heterodox Marriage of a New Woman*, she applauded a book, *The Confessions of a Wife*, in a December 1902 review.[77] Robertson adored this book. "The quality of the writing is of that same subtle sort that drives the plot and its elaborations far out of one's consciousness until the force of the story penetrates." Robertson not only admired the writing but also the book's Victorian propriety and respectability. She also found that part of the plot to be its greatest disappointment.

> The tale is of the most tragic. I think it is true that every reader will regard the re-union of husband and wife at the end as a distinct misfortune. It would have been so much more humanly and artistically pleasing if he had conveniently been killed by his charming morphine habit and had given way to the real hero of the book, Doctor Robert. There would have been general thanksgiving among the readers of this much-talked of book.[78]

The reader's attention is caught by the shocking recommendation of a different ending. How is it that Madge Robertson, Mrs. Watt, a leading society woman in Victoria, who had grown up in a Presbyterian family with such a strong Christian worldview, could regard the "happy ending" of a reunited couple to be a misfortune? She was instead advocating a romantic liaison between a married woman and a

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[75] Mary Ives Todd, *The Heterodox Marriage of A New Woman* (New York: Robert Lewis Weed Company Publishers, 1898), 182-83.

[76] "By Book Post," *Victoria Times,* 27 December 1902, 12.

[77] Mary Adams, *The Confessions of a Wife* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1902). According to Robertson's review, this book had first appeared in serial form in the American magazine, *The Century*, and had attracted a great deal of attention. Robertson made it clear that the serialized version had garnered a large following of readers, and she was delighted that it was now being released in book form. Madge Robertson, "By Book Post," *Victoria Daily Times*, 27 December 1902, 12.

[78] Ibid.

charming doctor (albeit made respectable by the death of the husband) rather than the propriety of a dutiful wife continuing to be trapped in a loveless marriage. "The character of Marna, the wife, is too beautiful for me to profane it with words. Her self-confession in letters, written in the abandonment of joy and of sorrow is so sacred, so intimate, that the woman in all of us is roused by the cruel injustice of her life."[79] Marna was not leading the satisfying life that Robertson wished for New Women who chose their partners carefully and negotiated the power relations within their marriages. That situation roused Robertson's (New) Womanly instincts.

Speculating too closely regarding possible autobiographical parallels would be pretentious, but that Robertson wished for the death of this fictitious husband seems macabre in light of what happened in her own marriage just a little over ten years later. In July 1913, her husband of almost twenty years committed suicide while he was being treated for depression. While it is uncertain how long he had suffered from that condition, Dr. Watt's mental health worsened in the spring and summer of 1913 as a result of a series of professional pressures. Robertson's husband was at the centre of a widely publicized scandal that resulted in a government commission of inquiry. The suicide happened before the commission had finished its deliberations, and Dr. Watt was posthumously cleared of all charges.[80] While evidence is slim to argue that Robertson had been living in a loveless marriage prior to her husband's death, her tenderness and empathy for the fictional Marna is noteworthy. For Robertson, more than ten years before she faced her own tragic turn of events, romance seemingly trumped tradition. She noted with pathos the tragic ending of a fictional woman who dutifully lived out her life with a husband recovering from an addiction and mental illness.

Conclusion

While she was tenacious about women's right to higher education and paid work, Madge Robertson Watt could scarcely be considered as terribly radical. Compared to some of the New Woman novelists who were publishing highly controversial works in the 1890s, Robertson adopted what Willis has characterized as a "distinctly more light-hearted" tone to her writing, and as a writer for the commercial market, she was one of the authors who "by marketing the New Woman for mass consumption . . . ensured her a prominent and lasting place in popular culture."[81] Another of the main contributions of Madge Robertson Watt's New Woman writing was to communicate something of the woman's own point of view since so much of her work was at least partly autobiographical. As a university-educated writer, Robertson understood the workings of the literary world and she could speak from experience about the challenges and rewards of women pursuing higher education and then putting that education to work to make a living for themselves.

Yet Robertson did not embrace the most radical aspects of New Woman thinking that rejected the institution of marriage and motherhood. Instead, she found a way to put her own writing career together with her marriage and motherhood and to argue for reforms for women from a position of privilege as a member of the elite class in turn-of-the-century British Columbia. Robertson stood in support of traditional marriage and in opposition to heterodox forms of that institution that contradicted her Christian worldview. Within that framework, however, Robertson advocated for significant reform. She was comfortable with the idea of the woman proposing marriage, maintaining a degree of autonomy after marriage, and redefining the power relations between husband and wife. Robertson nonetheless reinforced and even promoted the appearance of traditional Victorian propriety. Robertson's writing

[79] Ibid.

[80] Linda M. Ambrose, "Quarantine in Question: The 1913 Investigation at William Head, BC," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History/Bulletin canadien d'histoire de la médicine* 22, no. 1 (2005): 139-53.

[81] Willis, "Heaven Defend Me," 54, 64.

career demonstrated that the New Woman defied categorization and homogenization. Like the most interesting characters in the fiction of the day, she shared certain values and objectives in common with most New Women. At the same time, however, Robertson's writing and life reflected many of the complexities and implicit ambiguities that Canadian women were facing at the turn of the twentieth century.