"Quite the Martinet for Orders": Female Influence in Rural Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Ontario

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Abstract
The unpaid reproductive and productive work of Canadian farmwomen is a contributing factor in their historical invisibility. Because of this invisibility, historians have had to compete with myth, idealized stereotypes, and fiction to reach the truth about the life of rural women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although popular memory tends to view farmwomen as being unable to experience control in their lives due to the patriarchal nature of the family farm, women have, in fact, enjoyed influence through their role as the moral guardian, the rearing of children, and the keeping of traditions and family ties.

Many contemporary observers understand the farmwoman on late nineteenth and early twentieth-century farms to have had little say over certain aspects of her life. In comparison to the celebrated productive work of her male counterpart, it is the farmwoman's unpaid productive and reproductive work that causes her historical invisibility, and as a result, creates this mistaken belief by contemporary observers. Of the limited number of farmwomen who wrote in daily diaries during this time period, few described their feelings regarding their position on the farm, relationships with their husband, or attitudes toward work. This causes historians to compete with myth, idealized stereotypes, and fiction to reach the truth about farmwomen. Despite the contention that farmwomen were unable to have control in their lives because of the patriarchal nature of the family farm, women enjoyed influence through their role as the moral guardian, the rearing of children, and the keeping of traditions and family ties.

The influence that women exercised is interwoven throughout the autobiographies of Mary Jane Metcalf (née Merritt) and William Metcalf's ten children. The base for these autobiographies is the family

1 Monda Halpern, As on That Farm he had a Wife: Ontario Farm Women and Feminism, 1900-1970 (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 25.
2 Halpern, 22.
3 Halpern, 22.
farm located in Burford, Ontario, which the family inhabited during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. The family practised mixed farming on the 60-acre lot; they grew crops such as barley while simultaneously raising livestock. The autobiographies recall the memories of the seven men and three women with Frank and Stanley (the eldest child and fifth eldest child, respectively) writing the most revealing and interesting stories concerning their mother Mary Jane. The autobiographies were compiled at different times; Stanley's was published privately within the family in 1975, and the second book, containing the short autobiographies of all ten children organised by Frank, bears no date. Frank explicitly states that on the farm, his "father was really and truly 'head of the house.'" Although the children may have viewed their father's authority in absolute terms, the influence of Mary Jane is documented implicitly throughout the children's accounts.

When discovering information on the life of Mary Jane through the writings of her children, the reader must keep in mind the obvious biases that were present when they were written. In many cases, the children can only estimate how Mary Jane was affected by, or felt about certain aspects of her life due to various restrictions. The accuracy of the documents could be affected by the age of Mary Jane's children at the conception of certain memories, the quality of their memory, and their willingness to expose themselves and their family in their writings. Autobiographies tend to be less honest than daily journals, especially in terms of how much is revealed because careful consideration is used during the composition of autobiographies; however, these autobiographies are particularly useful because they offer a variety of perspectives of their mother from both genders.

Historically, the family farm has been shaped by patriarchy, which, in effect, causes masculinity to possess a great deal of importance. This can be seen when Stanley wrote, "[Henry] insisted upon doing the ground work which required more muscle and effort, thus trying to prove that he was as good as Frank, even though younger." In addition, one day while working in the fields, Stanley challenged his father to a wrestling match to prove how strong he is. Stanley describes how "the ground rose up to meet him." Although he lost the match, one can still see young Stanley's desire to appear masculine to his brothers and his father. Berit Brandth asserts that farmers express their masculinity through the type of work they do and how they do it. Brandth notes that power, control, strength, and precision are all important to the meaning of masculinity on the farm. As a result of Mary Jane's immersion in

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4 Frank Metcalf et al., Metcalf Family History, 15.
5 Stanley Metcalf, Vintage 1890, 13.
6 Metcalf et al., 23.
8 Brandth, 126.
this hegemonic and masculine environment, it is hard to imagine that a female could readily influence the situation in which she lived. The masculinity that permeated the farm, however, did not restrict women from continuing to exert influence over various aspects of family life.

Monda Halpern insists that most Ontario farmwomen believed in some form of feminism, although they may not have recognised it as that term. The lack of mass-identification of feminists on Ontario farms did not mean that feminist beliefs did not prevail. Halpern asserts that historians cannot assume that women did not challenge patriarchy, or were satisfied with a position that was subordinate to their husbands.9 Nancy Grey Osterud believes that men had to have recognised and appreciated women's work because it was so integral to the workings of the farm.10 For example, in the 1860s, the Agricultural Association of Upper Canada said that finding a good wife was imperative to running an efficient farm.11 The penetration of patriarchy on Ontario farms is something that cannot be denied; however, it is erroneous to assume that women accepted and lived by its conventions.

Women used social, maternal, and agrarian feminism to assert their importance within the family. Maternal feminism is founded on a woman's biological ability to reproduce and her moral superiority that is connected to reproduction. This type of feminism stresses the expression of influence by women within the private sphere of the home. Social feminism understands gender to be a social construction, and regards female uniqueness as a source from which to attain power — separate from men. Social feminists seek to disseminate female values throughout both the female dominated private, and the male dominated public sphere. When it comes to agrarian feminism, Louise Carbert understands that there is an inextricable connection between the farm's role as a household and the source of the family's livelihood. This connection makes farmwomen especially careful when negotiating their place on the farm, because there is always a threat to family cohesion, and consequently, the livelihood of the enterprise of the farm. Carbert believes this makes the resistance of farmwomen to be even more radical, because their financial and familial future is at stake every time they negotiate an aspect of their lives.12 These three types of feminism are implicitly seen in the life of Mary Jane through her children's writings about her.

During Mary Jane's lifetime, it was widely believed that only women could effectively nurture and care for children.13 This explains the heavy

9 Halpern, 3-5.
12 Halpern, 8-14.
responsibility placed on women during child rearing. It was in the home that children learned respect for authority, and this is clearly seen in the relationship between Mary Jane and her children. Mary Jane was a woman who believed very much in the value of punishment, and did not allow her husband to be the lone source of discipline in the family. Frank described her as “a martinet for orders” revealing that she had no trouble administering order within the home. When she felt that discipline was needed, Mary Jane would send out the unruly child to the mulberry tree in the yard (which the kids nicknamed “the weeping mulberry tree”) where they were directed to cut off the switch that she would use on their legs, shoulders, and backs. Frank also notes that “she didn’t wait for father to come in to punish [the children] but took care of the matter at the time.” These insights into Mary Jane’s punishment practices demonstrates that she saw nothing inherently wrong with delivering punishment herself, rather than waiting for her husband to administer it. This shows her confidence in her role as head of the household and her desire to not let her gender inhibit the following of the household rules.

Stanley wrote of an instance when he and his brothers were swimming naked in a pond on the farm. He explained that their father arrived and the boys received “a stern lecture about how terrible it was for [them] to be there in the nude.” Stanley went on to say, “I feel sure mother sent him out to stop us and that he only did it to please her as I doubt that he thought that we were doing anything that was so terrible.” Mary Jane exerted her influence not only through her punishing of the children, but also through her guiding her husband, which gave her agency. Her role as the moral enforcer allowed Mary Jane to exercise her influence on family life through punishment.

Mothers were also expected to assume moral and religious responsibility for their children, which is something that Mary Jane took very seriously. This is consistent with the belief at the time that women were considered more pious and devoted than men were. It is through their role as the moral guardian that women could influence their surroundings most. The nineteenth century saw religion transferred from the public to the private sphere, which meant that it was increasingly placed in the domain of women. The religious difference between William and Mary Jane was made quite clear from the beginning of the autobiographies, as the children describe two ministers being present at their parents’ wedding:

14 Errington, 53.
15 Metcalf et al., 14.
16 Metcalf, 23.
17 Metcalf, 238.
18 Errington, 53.
one Baptist, the other Methodist. Stanley explained his “father was a Methodist, [his] mother a ‘hard shell’ Baptist. She felt she could not join father’s church” because of their baptism practices. Frank described his mother as “no browbeaten or spiritless being,” particularly when it came to religion, as she had been brought up a strict Baptist and she insisted on belonging to the Burford Baptist Church and taking most of her children with her. As a result of her religious devotion and matrilineal religious conventions, Mary Jane probably influenced her children through a Baptist up-bringing. Her persistence and refusal to submit to her husband, seen in her refusal to convert to his denomination, demonstrates her belief that she should be the one who controls both her and her children’s religion.

When Stanley was a teenager, his mother wanted to have bible readings both in the mornings and after supper. He described his father as unenthusiastic about the idea; he recalls that “it fell to mother to conduct them.” Stanley and his brothers did not like this idea either; however, they “still did not actively oppose it, as parental word was law in those days.” The wording is interesting to note because of his use of the term ‘parental’ rather than ‘paternal.’ The children considered the word of both their mother and father to be of equal importance. Mary Jane’s decision to guide the family in bible readings furthers her image as the moral enforcer and reveals that she had no problem taking the initiative and completing tasks herself rather than waiting for her husband to do so.

Stanley explained that religion was a large part of his life growing up on the farm, and “the fear of the Lord had been thoroughly drilled” into him and his brothers and sisters. His mother did this to protect and nurture the morality of her children. Religious nurturing in the home was a form of moral surveillance by women, which linked behaviour in the private sphere with the church in the public sphere, showing that farmwomen were more connected to the non-domestic world than previously supposed. Religious women were able to influence their families through childhood nurture, marital pressure, fundraising, and moral surveillance. Their religiosity allowed them to influence their families as the moral enforcer, and allowed women to escape the restrictions of their home to enter into the larger sphere in an acceptable way.

Mary Jane also exerted influence through her steadfast belief in the morality of temperance. Frank explained that the farm’s “big cash grain

20 Metcalf, 5-6.
21 Metcalf et al., 15-16.
22 Van Die, 248.
23 Metcalf, 6.
24 Metcalf, 6.
25 Metcalf, 16.
26 Van Die, 252.
27 Van Die, 254.
28 Van Die, 254.
crop was barley, though mother put up many a bitter fight over it because the barley went eventually to the breweries to make beer.\textsuperscript{29} Mary Jane never allowed any form of alcohol to enter onto the farm, and even prohibited all hired men from consuming any whilst being paid. Frank also told the story of a barrel of cider that his father kept in the basement, from which he served the workmen throughout the day while they worked in the fields. Frank's recalls, "When mother, an ardent Temperance Woman, learned about it she was furious. She apparently had read about Carrie Nation going to the saloons with a hatchet and wrecking the beer kegs. So she took an axe and busted the cider barrel to father's great disgust."\textsuperscript{30} There is some discrepancy among the autobiographies as to whether or not the contents of the barrel actually were alcoholic. The importance of this story lies in Mary Jane's agency in following her own beliefs over the wishes of her husband. This story also shows that she believed in her moral superiority over the male "head of the household."

Women were able to assert their influence not only through her role as moral guardian, but also through the everyday business. When it came to giving her children the best practical education she could offer, Mary Jane could be gender-blind at times. This is seen when Stanley told the story of him and Leslie harvesting their own pumpkins as children. Stanley wrote that when they asked their mother to make pies out of them, "very wisely, she said that we could make our own, and she showed us how."\textsuperscript{31} Mary Jane also taught Leslie and Stanley how to make cookies when "she could not keep them supplied."\textsuperscript{32} This demonstrates Mary Jane's desire to raise her children with as much knowledge as she could offer - even if it was not specific to their prescribed gender roles.

Being a mother of such a large family must have taken a lot of mental and physical strength. Threats to new babies and small children were everywhere on the farm, which meant that ill or injured children required a lot of attention by their mothers or other female relatives.\textsuperscript{33} Disease was common and widespread for children in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Illnesses like influenza, whooping cough, scarlet fever, the measles and cholera were common infections for children.\textsuperscript{34} Stanley wrote about how the children in his family got "the usual children's diseases" three or four at a time. He said that, "resourceful mother suggested that [they] learn to play chess" while they convalesced. Since none of them knew how to play, their mother suggested that they look it up in their father's encyclopaedia. Not only was Mary Jane concerned with their physical health, but their mental health as well. It

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\textsuperscript{29} Metcalf et al., 19.
\textsuperscript{30} Metcalf et al., 23.
\textsuperscript{31} Metcalf, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{32} Metcalf, 11.
\textsuperscript{33} Errington, 69.
\textsuperscript{34} Errington, 69.
also shows how resourceful women had to be, especially when it came to ill children who were confined to the house. Another example of Mary Jane's resourcefulness is when she taught Stanley how to crochet while he was bedridden due to illness. It was primarily the woman's role to look after sick children, and this took up a good deal of time.

The major areas of responsibility for men and women on the farm were distinct; women were in charge of meeting their family's needs and men were in charge of productive labour.35 The descriptions from the children about the division of labour would make it seem that on the Metcalf farm, gender played a major role in who did what work. On most farms in the nineteenth century, the field was a masculine space, and the home was feminine, leaving the barnyard as a space where the lines were blurred due to the keeping of chickens and the milking of cows.36 From the descriptions of the children, it seems that the division was quite clear; the women's domain was inside, and the men's domain was outside. There is no mention of Mary Jane doing any work outside of the home, although when Stanley described the farm's small orchard of fruit trees, one must ask who picked this fruit? Mary Jane most likely did this work, as she also most likely preserved the fruit into jams and jellies to save for family consumption or perhaps sold them in the local market.37 One can only assume exactly who is doing this work, as it is never explicitly explained. Frank has a few pages devoted to descriptions of the bee keeping that their family practised. There is no mention of the work that Mary Jane did in this process, which most likely consisted of the processing of honey into jars that were sold at the local market.38 When Stanley describes the work that his mother did, it is only within the domestic domain. For example, Stanley recalls that his “mother was a good housekeeper—she had to be with a family of ten children—and she was handy with the needle so that she always kept us presentable, though it was probably a great relief to her when summer came around and we didn’t need to wear many clothes.”39 This excerpt is unique compared to the rest of his autobiography, because it sympathises with the volume and difficulty of his mother's work, whereas most of his descriptions of work do not include his mother. An example of this is when he described threshing season as “very hard work for the men.”40 Stanley neglects to mention that threshing season was as stressful for the women as it was for the men because of their duty to prepare food for all the workers, as well as the food for their family. Although it is not explicit, Mary Jane exerted

36 Osterud, 150.
38 Kechnie, 79.
39 Metcalf, 14.
40 Metcalf, 17.
her influence through her participation in productive labour of the farm.

In combination with being the moral guardian of their family and productive labourer, women also played a big role in stretching the family's income. This can be seen with Mary Jane's purchase of a flock of Southdown sheep with money that was from the Merritt estate. Frank "remember[s] they did very well on the farm." This is an example of Mary Jane putting all of her resources toward the good of the family farm. Women played a large role in the self-sufficiency of the farm, through mending clothes, canning and preserving. In this way, Mary Jane exerted her influence by making do, and stretching the family income as far as it could go.

Through the maintenance of the fabric of kinship communities, women influenced their environment, as it united and strengthened families. Stanley wrote, "occasionally some of us would go to...Scotland [Ontario], five miles south, to visit my mother's relatives. More often they came to visit us." An even more significant trip that was made in the name of kinship was that of Mary Jane when she went alone to see her sons Stanley and Arthur when they lived in western Canada as homesteaders. Stanley wrote that "Mother visited us [out west] in the summer of 1910, on her way to British Columbia and then California to visit Henry. Mother occupied the cabin and Arthur borrowed a tent from our nearest neighbour and set it up a short distance from the cabin. When she left she was less worried about our welfare." This trip made by Mary Jane is important not only because her travel exemplifies her emancipation from the domestic sphere, but also it demonstrates her concern for her children even after they left home. The trip that she made alone illustrates how important the maintenance of kinship ties was to Mary Jane.

Although it is mainly Stanley and Frank whose voices describe their mother in detail, the long-term effect of Mary Jane's influence as a mother can be seen in the lives of all her children, but most specifically in Mary and Arthur. Mary studied art and exhibited all over the United States and won many prizes. During the war, she opened up her home to a group of women who made surgical dressings and women who served in the Canadian Red Cross. She was presented to the Governor General of Canada and Princess Louise when they visited Niagara Falls. King George also gave Mary the medal for Service in the Cause of Freedom. Arthur became a Baptist Minister, most likely influenced by the fervent

42 Metcalf et al., 20.
43 Neth, 31.
44 Van Die, 254.
45 Metcalf, 24.
46 Metcalf, 36.
religiosity of Mary Jane. The strength and independence that developed in all her offspring, but especially in the female children, was engendered by the courage and perseverance of Mary Jane over the years that she reared them. The resistance to subordination by women grew from a belief that their work was an essential aspect to the efficiency of the farm. Through their role as the moral enforcer, the raiser of children, and the keeper of family traditions and ties, women influenced the world around them, despite being surrounded by the hyper-masculinity of the patriarchal farm.
**Works Cited**


