

Gender and Transnationalism in the Work of Immigration Agent Elise von Koerber, 1872–1884

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The history of nineteenth-century Canada is one of tentative nation-building when varied influences combined to determine the shape, content, and identity of the new country. Historians and anthropologists are increasingly using the concept of “transnationalism” both to emphasize that individual lives transcend national territory and to acknowledge the undeniable power that national states, cultures, and elites possess in delineating the parameters of multi-sited social spaces and their meaning. The study of immigration agents is a useful tool to demonstrate transcultural competency and its value to both the individual and the host society. Nearly all immigration agents in post-Confederation Canada were men, yet Elise von Koerber is one notable exception. Through her work, von Koerber, whose outlook was profoundly transnational, contested interpretations of the meaning of gender, ethnicity, and class from her own vantage point in the intellectual and ideological borderlands between Europe and North America. Although various currents in 1870s Canada and Continental Europe created a favourable climate for Koerber’s approach, her gendered transnationalism intersected and collided with national projects. Her ideas were cautiously endorsed on both sides of the Atlantic during the 1870s, yet lost ground to the dominant vision of Canada as integral part of the British Empire by the 1880s.

L’histoire du Canada du XIX^e siècle, c’est la tentative de bâtir un nouveau pays à une époque où les influences s’entremêlaient pour en déterminer la forme, le contenu et l’identité. Les historiens et les anthropologues utilisent de plus en plus le concept de « transnationalisme », à la fois pour marquer le fait que la vie individuelle transcende le territoire national et pour reconnaître le pouvoir indéniable qu’ont les États-nations, les cultures et les élites de délimiter les paramètres et le sens d’espaces sociaux à pôles multiples. L’étude des agents d’immigration est utile pour démontrer la compétence transculturelle et sa valeur tout autant pour l’individu que la société d’accueil. Presque tous les agents d’immigration dans le Canada post-Confédération étaient des hommes. Elise von Koerber est une

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exception notable. Par son travail, von Koerber, dont les perspectives étaient profondément transnationales, contestait le sens que l'on prêtait aux notions de genre, d'ethnicité et de la classe à travers le prisme intellectuel et idéologique à mi-chemin de l'Europe et de l'Amérique du Nord qu'était le sien. Si des courants divers créaient un climat favorable à l'approche de von Koerber au Canada et dans l'Europe continentale des années 1870, le transnationalisme de celle-ci se conjuguaient et se butait aux projets nationaux. Durant les années 1870, on a prudemment souscrit à ses idées des deux côtés de l'Atlantique, mais au cours des années 1880, celles-ci ont perdu du terrain à la faveur de la vision dominante d'un Canada faisant partie intégrante de l'Empire britannique.

THE HISTORY of nineteenth-century Canada is one of tentative nation-building as varied influences combined to determine the shape, content, and identity of the new country. Recent studies of this period tend to examine how the nation was imagined and filled with meaning from the ground up, through the efforts of individuals as well as the state.¹ Immigration historians such as Dirk Hoerder have been at the forefront of an additional trend to emphasize the building of societies in their global context.² Historians and anthropologists are increasingly using the concept of “transnationalism” both to emphasize that individual lives transcend national territory and to acknowledge the undeniable power that national states, cultures, and elites possess in delineating the parameters of multi-sited social spaces and their meaning.³ Transnationalism provides a new analytical framework for questions about immigrant integration as well as nation-building. We can shed new light on how migrants managed to insert themselves into one or more national projects and to create alternatives to national identity. We can also discern the limitations, both political and historiographical, that circumscribe the transnational life.

As I have suggested elsewhere, the study of immigration agents is a useful tool to demonstrate transcultural competency and its value to both the individual and the host society.⁴ Immigration agents in post-Confederation Canadian history are particularly interesting case studies because they quite literally inhabited a North Atlantic world.

1 John C. Walsh, “Landscapes of Longing: Colonization and the Problem of State Formation in Canada West” (PhD dissertation, University of Guelph, 2001).

2 Dirk Hoerder, *Creating Societies: Immigrant Lives in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999).

3 Donna R. Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta, *Women, Gender and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Caroline Brettell, *Anthropology and Migration: Essays on Transnationalism, Ethnicity and Identity* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2003).

4 Angelika Sauer, “Ethnicity Employed: William Hespeler and the Mennonites,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 18 (2000), pp. 82–94. The term “transcultural” is used by Dirk Hoerder.

Immigration agents lived in transnational and transcultural spaces: they themselves were often immigrants or descendants of immigrants with a confusing array of citizenships to their names; they crossed the Atlantic and the continental Canadian-American border on a regular basis; they spoke two or three languages; and their children were often raised and educated both in Canada and in Europe. Most importantly, they used their cultural knowledge of both the sending and host societies to build transnational communities.

Nearly all immigration agents were men, as can be expected, yet there is one notable exception: Elise von Koerber, an immigrant who became involved in immigration work as a recruitment agent for the Canadian federal government. Not much is known about the private life of this truly extraordinary woman. She was born in the Grand Duchy of Baden in 1839 and married an Austrian subject who was a member of the lower nobility. The couple migrated to the Province of Canada in the 1850s, and Koerber's husband took up work for the government.⁵ They had four children. One, a boy, died in the summer of 1877 after a brief illness; another boy, 16 years of age in 1878, went to forestry school; and a girl, Matilda, born 1861 in Ontario, worked as a German and French governess in England in the early 1880s.⁶ Koerber's husband, Baron von Koerber, died in 1870 or 1871, leaving his family all but destitute. After his death, Elise's health was fragile, and she periodically succumbed to spells of severe illness that she herself described as "nervous and brain fever."⁷ Koerber spent extended periods of the next 12 years of her life in continental Europe, including Switzerland, Germany and Austria, and Britain. She died alone in a rented room in London, England in April 1884.

What remains of Elise von Koerber's life are various official letters that she wrote during these 12 years, as well as several published speeches in German and English.⁸ These documents show Koerber as an intelligent

5 Ontario Heritage Foundation, Historical Plaque, Centennial Park, Magnetawan, describes her as a native of Baden who had lived in Canada for some 16 years in 1873. In an interview with the *New York Times*, she described herself as the "widow of an Austrian officer who spent the last years of his life in the Engineer Department of the Canadian Government" (*New York Times*, January 23, 1882). In another public address, she claimed that her husband had worked for the government of Canada for nearly 20 years (Elise von Koerber, "Address on Continental Immigration," delivered before the City Council of Toronto, September 1879 [hereafter Toronto City Council speech], p. 9). William Baron von Koerber had worked as a draughtsman in the Lower Canada Surveys and Patents Branch of the Department of Crown Lands from October 1862 onward (Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1867, no. 3, p. 47).

6 Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Records of the Department of Agriculture, RG 17, vol. 238, British Census 1881, Koerber to Lowe, December 19, 1878.

7 LAC, RG 17, vol. 141, Report of Special Immigration Agent Madame von Koerber, August 28, 1875.

8 Koerber's reports to Ottawa were regularly included in the annual reports of the Minister of Agriculture to the House of Commons, along with some of the promotional material she produced

and determined person, vacillating between high energy and occasional despair. Her letters also reveal a high-strung, single-minded, possibly sometimes uncomfortable woman who chafed at the constraints imposed on her by prevailing gender ideologies. Rebellious at times, Koerber had an outlook that was nevertheless clearly defined by her former social position and her current predicament as an immigrant widow and mother. Within this field of structural determinants, she developed strategies to negotiate her own identity through shaping the Canadian government's approach to female migrants. Her case reminds us of the importance of gendering the concepts of migration, citizenship, and transnationalism.

Through her work, Elise von Koerber, whose outlook was profoundly transnational, contested interpretations of the meaning of gender, ethnicity, and class from her own vantage point in the intellectual and ideological borderlands between Europe and North America. Her immigration work in the 1870s and early 1880s is not well known, but it clearly preceded much better publicized efforts in the field of female migration that were later undertaken by British and Anglo-Canadian organizations. Elise von Koerber managed to tap into various currents in 1870s Canada and continental Europe that created a favourable climate for her transnational approach. However, her gendered transnationalism intersected and collided with national projects. Her ideas were cautiously endorsed on both sides of the Atlantic during the 1870s, yet lost ground to the dominant vision of Canada as an integral part of the British Empire by the 1880s.

Koerber's Motivation

Immigration became an element of official nation-building shortly after Confederation in September 1872. A federal-provincial Immigration Conference identified the recruitment of immigrants as a crusade of national importance that would require an effective system of federal immigration agents in Britain and on the Continent. Irish-born William Dixon was installed as first permanent agent in London at the modest salary of \$1,000 annually.⁹ Until his death in October 1873, Dixon — with two small rooms, two clerks, and a messenger at his disposal — was in charge of overseeing subagents in Britain as well as temporary, special agents sent from Canada to carry out additional recruiting

in Europe and more detailed correspondence. Other handwritten letters are archived in the files of the Department of Agriculture (RG 17). Koerber seems to have written in English or French; there is no indication of translation by a third party. Two of her speeches in English were published by the department as promotional material and are available in the canadiana.org collection.

9 Patrick A. Dunae, "Promoting the Dominion: Records and the Canadian Immigration Campaign, 1872–1915," *Archivaria*, vol. 19 (Winter 1984–1985), pp. 75–76.

drives.¹⁰ There was no coherent approach in Ottawa to choosing these temporary agents or deciding where to send them. Immigration agents were poorly compensated, subject to much criticism at home, and never sure of their next pay cheque.¹¹ Most of the work of recruiting immigrants was left in the hands of commercial agents who worked for various shipping or land companies. In fact, their work gave immigration agency a bad reputation as little more than human trafficking.

What motivated Elise von Koerber to choose immigration agency as a profession when she was well aware of its negative public image?¹² Why would a middle-class woman, in particular, dedicate her life to work of such ill repute? Historians focusing on female activists in Britain correctly portray their protagonists as ladies of means who pursued volunteer migration work out of philanthropic sentiments.¹³ Elise von Koerber did not fit this category of wealthy philanthropist and was well aware of it: "Some people are so fortunately situated as to have both the good will to do useful work and the necessary means to do so combined; others have only their intense desire and the courage of sacrificing time, energy, talent and life's best comforts. I possess but the latter qualification."¹⁴ Her most obvious motivation for immigration work was entirely practical: after the death of her husband, she needed paid employment to support herself and her four children. There were no savings, and no pension for the widow of a civil servant. "I had to fill the place of father to my children, and therefore I had to work myself into a position which would ultimately bring me a salary," Koerber explained in a speech to the Toronto City Council.¹⁵ Her unapologetic pursuit of paid employment, although dressed up in the appropriately gendered language of being a "father" to her children while performing her work in "a very quiet,

10 Gordon H. Skilling, *Canadian Representation Abroad: From Agency to Embassy* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1945), p. 3.

11 Dunae, "Promoting the Dominion," p. 78. Gordon Skilling concludes that the agents were "busy, active men, working with limited funds and few facilities, enjoying no special status or prestige, often subjected to an ill-informed and penny-pinching criticism at home" (*Canadian Representation Abroad*, p. 4). This contradicts the assessment that an appointment as Canadian immigration agent was "a mere matter of knowing the right kind of people" in order to be sent abroad "on a holiday at public expense." See Norman Macdonald, *Canada: Immigration and Colonization, 1841 to 1903* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966), p. 40.

12 Koerber, Toronto City Council speech, pp. 4, 9.

13 Julia Bush, "The Right Sort of Woman: Female Emigrators and Emigration to the British Empire, 1890–1910," *Women's History Review*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1994), p. 394; Lisa-Anne Chilton, *Agents of Empire: British Female Migration to Canada and Australia, 1860s–1930* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007).

14 Koerber, Toronto City Council speech, p. 9.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10. Koerber seems to have taken her children to Europe, but her official letters reveal very little about how she took care of them, with the possible exception of a reference to the high cost of schooling, presumably in German or Swiss boarding schools. One teenage boy died in Germany in 1877, which caused her to take a long leave of absence.

unassuming and womanly way,”¹⁶ suggests a resourceful and astute woman who challenged the boundaries of her prescribed gender role out of necessity. Far from being a victim of circumstances, though, she did not lament her fate and declining fortunes as a widow, but instead used the opportunity to pursue a matter that had long interested her: the improvement of services for migrants in general and for female migrants in particular.¹⁷

Koerber approached migrant work with the same sense of social responsibility of people in higher stations that was also typical of her British counterparts. During her early years in Canada, she recalled, there were few provisions in place for the reception and settlement of immigrants. In due course, she noted, “[P]eople came to us for advice, information, and other types of assistance, and this is when I began to examine the conditions of emigration and the needs of emigrants, or immigrants, and when I eventually concluded that these poor people could be spared much effort and pain and misery, and could save much time and money, if only there were systematic guidance.”¹⁸ On the basis of this personal experience, she developed a desire “to help emigrants in every way possible by guiding them according to certain rules, giving them special advice, caring for them with constant watchfulness, and at the cost and sacrifice of all my time, and all my thought.”¹⁹ This paternalist concern for immigrants, especially of lower classes, permeated her early immigration work and her own writings about it. Like her counterparts in Britain or the United States, she was inspired by the modern methods and ideas of philanthropy; like her counterparts, too, she “sought to establish a non-antagonistic capitalist class structure, not to erase class differences.”²⁰

As a member of her class, the educated bourgeoisie, Koerber felt implicated in the nation-building projects of two countries at the same time. She was genuinely fond of her adopted country and confessed to a German women’s group, perhaps with an ironic smile on her face: “I love

16 Koerber, Toronto City Council speech, p. 12.

17 In 1874 she wrote: “I have been watching the progress of emigration for years, and have been wishing for an opportunity to become active in this line and to try and improve some points in connection with it.” Circular dated September 12, 1874, published in German and circulated among ladies’ societies, translated copy in Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1876, no. 8, p. 163.

18 “[D]ie Leute kamen zu uns um Rath, Auskunft und Hilfe jeglicher Art, und da war es auch daß ich einen tiefen Blick in die Zustände der Auswanderung und die Bedürfnisse der Auswanderer rep. Einwanderer warf, und bald erkannte, wie viel Mühe und Sorge und Elend, wie viel Zeit und Geld den armen Menschen erspart werden könnte durch die systematische Anleitung...” LAC, RG 17, vol. 235, Koerber to Lowe, November 3, 1878, Address to the Dresden *Frauen-Fortbildungsverein*, October 18, 1878 (German original included in Koerber to Lowe, November 3, 1878 [hereafter Dresden speech]).

19 Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1875, no. 40, p. 144, Report of Madam von Koerber, Special Immigration Agent in Switzerland, December 31, 1874.

20 Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885–1925* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), p. 29.

Canada and its simple people with their patriarchal way of living; I am interested in this country because it has a great future ahead of it.”²¹ She approached her work with migrants first and foremost as a European, calling them “emigrants” more often than “immigrants” and identifying with Germany as “her” country and Germans as “her country people.” She saw well-regulated emigration as a necessary social policy for the landless proletariat of the German Empire: “we see in emigration . . . the only way to social reform, the only rational means of assisting our masses, saving them . . .”²² Koerber’s arguments for emigration neatly reflected the ideas of the influential liberal German *Verein für Socialpolitik*, which argued for abandoning Anglo-Saxon *laissez-faire* liberalism in social policy to stem the rising tide of socialism in Germany.²³ A liberal in the German sense, Koerber also found herself in agreement with the Canadian Liberals on the importance of immigrants for Canadian nation-building: “Immigration is the all-important point for the promotion of the welfare of this country,” she told the Toronto City Council in September 1879. “I venture to say that especially now, when you are building all your great railways, you ought to people the country which you open.”²⁴ She recommended “the importation of German education, culture and simplicity”²⁵ and admonished the Canadian government to use more effective methods to recruit in German-speaking Europe,²⁶ relying on educated bureaucrats with expertise in the language, culture, and political conditions of the respective country.²⁷ Nation-building was too important a task to be left to market forces; it required the full mobilization of the resources of the state and the educated middle class that was to be its bedrock.²⁸

21 Koerber, Dresden speech: “Ich liebe Canada und seine einfachen Menschen mit ihrer patriarchalischen Lebensweise; ich interessiere mich für das Land weil ihm eine große Zukunft bevorsteht.”

22 Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1876, no. 8, p. 158; Koerber, Toronto City Council speech, pp. 4, 7; copy of Koerber to Jenkins, December 4, 1875.

23 While it is not clear whether Koerber had ties to this association, she later found a political soul-mate in Württemberg lawyer and emigration supporter Dr. Otto Hahn, who is mentioned in a contemporary publication of the *Verein*. E. von Philippovitch, ed., *Auswanderung und Auswanderungspolitik in Deutschland* (Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker und Humboldt, 1892), p. 282. For the *Verein für Socialpolitik*, see <http://www.socialpolitik.org/vfs.php?mode=informationen&lang=2>.

24 Koerber, Toronto City Council speech.

25 LAC, RG 17, vol. 247, “Reception and Protection of Female Immigrants in Canada,” speech delivered in Ottawa, spring 1879 [exact date unknown] [hereafter Ottawa speech], p. 10.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

27 LAC, RG 17, vol. 76, Koerber to Minister, November 20, 1872; vol. 151, Koerber to Minister, February 24, 1876. She herself proved the value of cultural expertise through her moderately successful work in Switzerland. Roxroy West, “Canadian Immigration Agents and Swiss Immigration, 1870–1930” (MA thesis, University of Ottawa, 1978), pp. 28–42. West argues that Koerber had a better understanding of Swiss federalism than any agent before her.

28 For example, she assumed that the German government should give “paternal protection to its subjects” (Ottawa speech, p. 2).

As a middle-class woman and as a German immigrant, Koerber designed for herself an active role in the future of Canada. This point leads us to the crux of her motivation for becoming involved in Canadian government migration work: Elise von Koerber had an agenda, or, as she called it, her “pet plan.”²⁹ Although she ostensibly went to Europe in 1872 to recruit Swiss settlers for Northern Ontario and Tyrolean dairy farmers for the Eastern Townships of Quebec, she in fact carried with her an idea that quickly evolved into a grand scheme: the creation of an international system of female societies dedicated to the management and protection of female migration. Koerber’s initial detour into general immigrant recruitment was necessary because she had to establish a professional reputation and gain the confidence of her superiors. For several years, she worked as recruiting agent while pondering the problems surrounding female migration. She then constructed plans for an elaborate international network of protective measures, provided by women for women. With her work she intended to create a new transnational gendered space, where women helped women migrate from one place to another. Koerber’s ideas allow an insight into what might be called a philosophy of maternalist transnationalism.

Koerber and Female Migration

Like the proponents of the leading bourgeois feminist programmes in both Germany and the Anglo-Saxon world, Koerber was deeply concerned with the structural problem of women’s under-employment, under-payment, and under-education. There was a lively European debate from the mid-century onwards on these issues, exemplified by Josephine Butler’s pamphlet *The Education and Employment of Women*, the formation of the British Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, and in Germany the emergence of organizations such as the *Lette Verein*.³⁰ In the face of perceived gender imbalances, most women’s organizations addressed the plight of Malthusian “surplus” middle-class women. Koerber transcended this class myopia, pointing out that “there are thousands of women who have not received an education, who have to make a living.” She painted the picture of a poor country woman facing the degradation of unemployment and city life.³¹ To Koerber, emigration seemed “a most desirable means to relieve poverty and indigence, and to better the condition of many a poor woman,” especially if one contemplated “the

29 Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1875, no. 40, p. 142, Report of Madam von Koerber, Special Immigration Agent in Switzerland, December 31, 1874.

30 Founded in 1866 specifically to promote women’s education and training. See *Lette Verein*, <http://www.lette-verein.de/verein/frameset.html>.

31 Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1876, no. 8, p. 162, circular dated September 12, 1874; Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1878, no. 9, pp. 117–119, Koerber to *Lette Verein*, December 1875.

great want of females in transatlantic countries.”³² Emigration, far from weakening the sending nation, was in fact regenerating it: “Emigration is meant to be the kind of healthy drainage of surplus resources by which alone a country can maintain its strength and vitality.”³³ Koerber also touched on nation-building themes with her Canadian audiences, reminding them that “sober, hard-working and industrious women are wanted as wives for your settlers, your farmers, who form the bone and sinew of your country.”³⁴

The necessity of single female migration firmly established in her mind, Koerber tackled the thorny issue of how to make such a process safe for respectable middle- and working-class women.³⁵ In all her reports and letters she proceeded from one starting point: “Female emigration is perhaps more abused than that of men & [*sic*] families, at any rate to much more terrible purposes, and while it might prove itself an institution rich of blessing, it is, in thousands of cases a terrible curse.”³⁶ Koerber’s information led her to believe that existing commercialized recruitment had simply created a lively transatlantic sex trade. Many women supposedly “leave their country, allured to do so by worthless characters, who lead them to destruction, and . . . this fearful evil is carried to a terrible extent.”³⁷ Koerber claimed to have heard “tales of shocking abuse” about the “traffic . . . which is made with women as purchasable merchandise. . . . Secret agents are continually traversing the Continent engaging women for evil purposes.”³⁸ She collected data that proved German women were particularly vulnerable. Unemployed governesses and domestic servants “are the ones who, out of desperate poverty, are forced into dishonor.” Exposure to the *Seelenverkäufern* (literally, merchants of souls, or white slave traders) often occurred even before the girl left German territory: “the seducers are following them on our trains and river boats.”³⁹ Koerber vividly evoked other potential evils that lurked at every corner of a transatlantic voyage: “Females, alone and unprotected and inexperienced, are there [in lodging houses] thrown together with all kinds of people, sometimes the very scum of populace, and there it is

32 LAC, RG 17, vol. 141, Report of Special Immigration Agent, August 28, 1875.

33 Koerber, Dresden Speech: “Auswanderung soll ein gesunder Abfluß der überflüssigen Kräfte sein, durch die allein ein Land sich kräftig und frisch erhalten kann.”

34 Koerber, Ottawa speech.

35 Chilton, *Agents of Empire*, chap. 2, on the emergence of the “safe passage” discourse in the 1890s. Koerber’s pronouncements on this issue fit into this category.

36 LAC, RG 17, vol. 182, Koerber to Swiss Federal Council, February 1877, copy in translation (punctuation in original).

37 LAC, RG 17, vol. 141, Report of Special Immigration Agent, August 28, 1875.

38 Koerber, Ottawa speech. White slavery was apparently a special concern in Hesse, where she had done part of her work (Philippovich, *Auswanderung*, pp. 182–188).

39 Koerber, Dresden speech: “die sind es, die in der größten Noth zu ihrer Entehrung gezwungen sind . . . es folgen ihnen die Versucher schon von unseren Eisenbahnen und Dampfern.”

that dangerous acquaintances are formed. I have seen things and people which made me shudder.”⁴⁰ The danger was perhaps greatest aboard ships and in immigration sheds, where women constantly mixed freely with men. The consequences of such “unnecessary exposure”⁴¹ could then be found in North American maternity wards, shelters for prostitutes, and police stations.

In Koerber’s opinion, any transnational system of female migration had to be based on two premises: that every respectable woman had a right to freedom from sexual exploitation in separate and distinct women’s spaces; and that there had to be close moral surveillance of those girls who, due to their age and class, could not be trusted to make respectable choices for themselves. Older, educated women like herself could seemingly observe sexual conflict from a detached place, unaffected by sexual oppression and seduction. They were capable of serving as protectors and guardians in mixed spaces, for example, as matrons aboard ships. Wherever possible, however, separation was preferable to mixed spaces. Immigration sheds had to provide separate rooms because, as she remarked, existing arrangements in Toronto “would not at all do for respectable women.”⁴² Aboard ships, there should be strict rules “that no women are allowed in the men’s cabin after tea time, and that after 10 o’clock in the evening no women are allowed to be on deck.” These points, Koerber insisted, “are all fundamental necessities for the importation of *respectable* female immigration.”⁴³ Further, there should be a female reception agent. The best interest of the country would be served “if womanly influence could gain ascendancy over the mind of the young women the moment they arrive ashore.” In Koerber’s opinion, it was the moral protection of immigrants, not numbers of immigrants, that represented “the greatest material service” to the country.⁴⁴

Koerber’s plan to address the problem of respectable female migration was premised on the principle of reciprocity. No one person, association, or country could bear such a momentous burden; success depended on the sharing of responsibility among all the countries of emigration and immigration. After several years of study of European conditions and the workings of philanthropic organizations, Koerber settled on the model of the Red Cross Alliance to describe her own system of organization and protection: a uniform system of national entities, rallying

40 Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1876, no. 8, pp. 162–163, circular dated September 12, 1874.

41 LAC, RG 25A–1, vol. 31, Koerber to British Board of Trade, June 1883.

42 LAC, RG 17, vol. 174, Koerber to Lowe, December 6, 1876.

43 LAC, RG 17, vol. 198, Koerber to Minister, August 16, 1877. She repeatedly indicated that she preferred separate, all-female voyages. Ship regulations echoed the desire to seclude women; for example, both Hamburg and Bremen required lockable, separate compartments for women on emigrant ships (Philippovich, *Auswanderung*, pp. 408, 425).

44 LAC, RG 25A–1, vol. 31, Koerber to British Board of Trade, June 1883.

around the main principle (and directed by international headquarters), but each free to adapt to local circumstances and views.⁴⁵ The main point was coordination; if the matter of female migration was treated “as a whole” and internationally (or, as she initially said, “universally”), the goal of comprehensive protection could be achieved. Women’s migration had to be acknowledged as “a system of its own.”⁴⁶

It is not surprising that Koerber, a product of her class and time, would choose women like herself as the only suitable providers of better protection and safer guidance. Everywhere, she saw a distinct opportunity for women, organized in the semi-public philanthropic sector, to effect positive change. “Women of our times have generally become aware that, in order to achieve a true reform of social conditions, they have to get involved, and especially get involved in women’s and children’s issues, and issues pertaining to the youth of our country.”⁴⁷ Koerber appealed to women on both sides of the Atlantic to make service to their own sex, their own “sisters,” their first priority and the equivalent of patriotic duty. After generating general interest on both continents, she intended to create an international network of ladies’ societies to protect and manage female migration from point of origin to point of destination. In close cooperation with each other, women’s associations and their royal patrons would provide for the woman traveller disinterested advice, supervised hostels in the port of embarkation, ship matrons, letters of recommendation, reception homes, and recommended employment.⁴⁸ Moved along by a borderless chain of female hands, a single woman would never have to leave the protected, gendered space thus created. Koerber did not doubt that the “ladies” in different countries would “work hand in hand in this enterprise.”⁴⁹ Seen in this light, migration was not only an issue of national importance but an international humanitarian issue: “We are treating a purely moral question . . . where national interests do not cross each other.”⁵⁰

Elise von Koerber embodied maternal feminism in her rejection of passivity and her attempts to extend the realms of motherly responsibility

45 LAC, RG 17, vol. 382, Koerber to Sir Charles Tupper, September 10, 1883. Her first principle was “that each country should be asked to do its own share in the work.”

46 LAC, RG 17, vol. 141, Report of Special Immigration Agent, August 28, 1875; RG 25A-1, vol. 31, Koerber to British Board of Trade, June 1883.

47 Koerber, Dresden speech: “Die Frauen unserer Zeit erwachen nun fast allgemein zu dem Bewußtsein, daß, soll eine wirkliche Reform der socialen Verhältnisse stattfinden, sie mit Hand anlagen müßen, dabei besonders die Frauen und die heranwachsende Jugend, die Jugend des Volkes berücksichtigen.”

48 LAC, RG 17, vol. 238, notes to the German government, 1878.

49 Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1876, no. 8, pp. 162–163, circular dated September 12, 1874.

50 LAC, RG 17, vol. 382, Koerber to Sir Charles Tupper, September 10, 1883.

beyond the privacy of her family into the public sphere of migrant care.⁵¹ She represented the basic paradox, identified by Mariana Valverde, of a reformer claiming the right to move freely in public while demanding from other women purity through seclusion. Like many middle-class feminists, she further exacerbated that paradox by claiming for herself a powerful role as reformer while reducing working-class women to objects of philanthropic concern.⁵² Bourgeois feminists like Koerber lacked a radical-democratic perspective, and their philosophy “stood rooted in a class-bound patriarchal society.”⁵³ Koerber also used strategies not unusual for feminists of her time. Attempting to create an international campaign organized by women for women, she never hesitated to utilize the help of powerful men to achieve her goals. Yet her insistence that the international management of female migration be placed into female hands, and her attempts to create a paid position for herself at the centre of such an international network, were early steps along the way towards the professionalization of female social service and the evolution of female citizenship.⁵⁴

Indeed, Elise von Koerber was one of the first women to insist on pay equity in the Canadian civil service. She began her overseas recruitment work in the late fall of 1872 on commission. Until the end of 1874, she had problems just getting reimbursed for regular cross-Atlantic voyages, having to rely instead on free trips provided by the Allan Line and financial support by the Ontario government’s Emigrant Office.⁵⁵ In 1875 she obtained her first contract appointment, but for half the salary that male agents received for their work. Koerber was greatly annoyed by this obvious discrimination and pointed out that she, too, was a breadwinner, having to cover not only personal expenses but also the education of her children.⁵⁶ Throughout 1875 and 1876, she demanded to be “placed on the same footing with other agents, as regards the salary, for what I receive now does not suffice to cover my most indispensable daily wants

51 Wayne Roberts, “‘Rocking the Cradle for the World’: The New Woman and Maternal Feminism, Toronto 1877–1914,” in Linda Kealy, ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1979), p. 18.

52 Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water*, pp. 29–30.

53 Bush, “The Right Sort of Woman,” p. 396.

54 Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, “Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of the Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States, 1880–1920,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 95, no. 4 (October 1990).

55 LAC, RG 17, vol. 74, Koerber to Lowe, October 24, 1872. Koerber travelled through Germany, Austria, and Switzerland and returned to Canada three times in 1873–1874. The Assisted Immigration Registers of the Toronto Emigrant Office contain four applications from Koerber for travel assistance to and from and within Ontario, dated July 1873, May 1874, and June 1874 (<http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/english/db/hawke.htm>). She finally received a federal travel allowance by late 1874 (LAC, RG 17, vol. 141, Report by Koerber to Minister, August 28, 1875).

56 LAC, RG 17, vol. 178, Koerber to St. Just, December 9, 1876.

for myself and my four children in countries where the living is so expensive."⁵⁷ Her persistence paid off in 1877, when her salary was finally raised to \$100 per month, the sum paid male immigration agents at the time.⁵⁸

Koerber's Accomplishments

Throughout her public career, Koerber encountered obstacles created by gendered national discourses of bureaucracy, citizenship, and belonging. In the initial phase of her work, identifying potential demand for her system of female migration, Koerber hoped to be able to concentrate on the new German Reich. She falsely assumed that the German government's well-known antagonism towards foreign recruiters was limited to those promoting the emigration of military-aged males, while she herself intended "to promote female Emigration in this country, against which they surely can have nothing to say."⁵⁹ She started work on her "pet plan" by educating the general and philanthropic public on the issues as she saw them. Accompanying several Swiss families and single girls to Canada in June 1873, she observed closely "all that passed on land, as well as on sea" to find evidence for her claim that better protection was needed.⁶⁰ She then published her thoughts on the organization of female emigration in a brief notice which she distributed during her extensive travels throughout Baden, Wurttemberg, Bavaria, Hesse, and Saxony, as well as Tyrol and Switzerland, hoping "to create interest among the different unions of ladies and the authorities to favour the introduction of a system by which to control and protect female emigration from Europe."⁶¹

Matters did not go smoothly at first with her superiors, and Koerber recognized that the difficulties she had in her professional work were due to her gender. She resented the lack of encouragement for her ideas and complained about "the general distrust as to a woman's capacity and judgment in public matters." She challenged her detractors to allow women to contribute their special talents to the nation-building project: "The true and high-minded men of our time recognize in various ways that the gifts of self-devotion, energy, enthusiasm and moral courage are to be despised in no one, and that the cases where women rendered considerable services, even to the State, are worthy of record and

57 LAC, RG 17, vol. 158, Koerber to Minister Letellier de St. Just, May 14, 1876; RG 17, vol. 147, Koerber to Minister, December 6, 1875.

58 LAC, RG 17, vol. 177, Department of Agriculture to Agent General, December 7 and 14, 1876; RG 17, vol. 178, Koerber to Minister Letellier de St. Just, December 9, 1876; RG 17, vol. 180, Koerber to Lowe, January 20, 1877.

59 LAC, RG 17, vol. 74, Koerber to Pope, November 20, 1872.

60 Roxroy West has suggested that she used the girls as informers to provide personal testimony as to the weaknesses of the arrangements for female migrants ("Canadian Immigration Agents," p. 29).

61 Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1875, no. 40, p. 144, Report of Madam von Koerber, Special Immigration Agent in Switzerland, December 31, 1874.

recognition.”⁶² However, male officials in both Europe and Canada continued to disparage her efforts. In 1875 the report of a Swiss delegation to Canada expressed “surprise that the Government of Canada would have laid the interest of the country into the hands of a woman.”⁶³ Her supervisor accused her of indiscrete conduct⁶⁴ and recommended that her work in Switzerland be placed in the hands of a francophone “gentleman.”⁶⁵ In relation to this matter, the author of a thesis on Swiss immigration to Canada has suggested that Koerber’s informal approach to her work and her bypassing of bureaucratic formalities created enemies, and he may well be right.⁶⁶ Koerber resented the bureaucratic chain of command and relied on social networking and personal appeals to powerful men.⁶⁷ She wanted to work in a man’s world, but not by male rules.

In some ways, this personal approach worked well with the European public. By the end of 1874 she had indeed raised “beaucoup d’intérêt [*sic*] dans différents circles [*sic*] officiels et autres”⁶⁸ and established contacts with existing European organizations dedicated to the welfare of women. In the fall of 1874, she was invited to a conference of the Universal Alliance in Frankfurt and met the Grand Duchess of Hesse (Queen Victoria’s daughter Alice) in Darmstadt and Prince Isenburg-Birstein in Mainz. German royalty may have been well disposed towards her plans, but the German federal and state governments were not. Nationalist resentment against foreign promoters of emigration on German soil and issues of a migrant woman’s citizenship became the next obstacles in the path of her transnational efforts. After Koerber returned from a trip to Canada in August 1874, she was suddenly “ordered to leave the territory of Baden” as a result of an inquiry from Berlin which “had its reason in the law, which only permits subjects of the Empire to work in emigration matters.”⁶⁹ If Koerber wanted to

62 Koerber, Toronto City Council speech, p. 8.

63 West, “Canadian Immigration Agents,” p. 26.

64 LAC, RG 17, vol. 127, Jenkins to Ontario Treasurer, January 29, 1875. Jenkins later withdrew his accusation when he found that problems had been caused by rival commercial agents rather than by Koerber herself.

65 Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1876, no. 8, p. 133, Annual Report by Edward Jenkins, December 31, 1875.

66 West, “Canadian Immigration Agents,” pp. 30–31.

67 She did so, characteristically, in response to Jenkins’s request to replace her in Switzerland by appealing to the Minister in Ottawa: “it would be a crying injustice to see my faithful services rewarded by dismissal — I do not think you could do it, Honorable Sir.” LAC, RG 17, vol. 151, Koerber to Minister, February 24, 1876.

68 LAC, RG 17, vol. 121, Koerber to Minister, November 30, 1874.

69 LAC, RG 17, vol. 118, Koerber to Lowe, August 25, 1874; Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1876, no. 8, p. 133, Annual Report by Edward Jenkins, December 31, 1875. Following Bismarck’s suggestion and Prussia’s lead, the government of Baden had withdrawn all licences for foreign agents in 1873 and became very hostile to any activities that actively promoted emigration among

continue her work in German territory she had to sort out her official badge of belonging, her citizenship. This turned out to be more complicated than she could have possibly imagined. The authorities in Baden told her that “as I have been living in Germany one and a half years nearly, I have a right to claim my subjectship and shall do so forthwith.”⁷⁰ However, the widow of an Austrian, naturalized in the colony of Canada before Confederation and born in Baden before the German Empire was formed, found that it seemed impossible to ascertain whether she was a British, Austrian, or German subject. Koerber truly was, as she once said, “a person . . . who enjoyed the protection of no country.” She soon found out that no government was willing or — in the case of Canada — able to defend her interests.⁷¹ It is not surprising that she created in her mind alternative forms of belonging.⁷²

Koerber temporarily moved to London at the beginning of 1875 and decided to use her time wisely “to see what the English Emigrant Societies have, as yet, achieved; what is their mode of working; if it could be adopted as a model to German societies; and if communication could be established between English and German societies.”⁷³ A long-time admirer of Caroline Macpherson (Chisholm) and her work in Australia, Koerber thought that English societies were much further advanced in their thinking on female emigration. She studied Maria Rye’s Female Emigration Society⁷⁴ and its efforts on behalf of middle-class “surplus” women and probably read Josephine Butler’s pamphlets on female employment. If she noticed that the British lady philanthropists were not interested in the emigration of German women to Canada or anywhere else, she did not comment on it. She was grateful, however, to be introduced to Henri Dunant, founder of the Red Cross movement, who promised to establish a Female/Children Emigration Protection Society.

Since she had to tread softly in Germany, Koerber resolved to concentrate her practical efforts in Switzerland, where in any case she had to

the population (Philippovich, *Auswanderung*, p. 152). Later inquiries confirmed that it had been Koerber’s actions as Canadian immigration agent, published in the Canadian Sessional Papers, that had brought her to the negative attention of the German authorities.

70 LAC, RG 17, vol. 118, Koerber to Lowe, August 25, 1874.

71 LAC, RG 17, vol. 130, Jenkins to Minister, March 18, 1875.

72 A piece of correspondence to the German *Letzte Verein* from 1875 is telling: “I come after what I have done, as a weak woman standing alone, to solve the difficult questions. . . . Arriving at a point at which I feel I cannot go further alone, I put myself under the protection of the ladies of Germany, trusting for their assistance in carrying out what I have begun.” Correspondence printed in Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1878, no. 9, pp. 117–118.

73 LAC, RG 17, vol. 141, Report of Special Immigration Agent, August 28, 1875.

74 Maria Rye had brought 100 female domestic servants from London to Canada in 1868 (Chilton, *Agents of Empire*, p. 126).

spend a good deal of time for her regular work.⁷⁵ Time had now come to move from the information-gathering and networking stage into the phase of organizing committees that would oversee the selection of single women for emigration and issue letters of recommendation. Throughout 1876 she held drawing-room meetings in various Swiss cities and managed to tap into an existing sentiment of protective philanthropy as well as existing organizational and international gatherings, such as the Congress that established the *Union Internationale des Amies de la jeune fille* in 1877 as part of the international abolitionist movement. Switzerland was clearly receptive to the ideas that Koerber espoused, and she enjoyed a friendly reception.⁷⁶ A committee formed under her guidance in Lausanne and later selected a number of young servant girls that Koerber herself accompanied to Canada for placement in Kingston and Ottawa.⁷⁷ One of her girls even made it into the household of the Governor General at Rideau Hall.

The Swiss success notwithstanding, Koerber's heart was set on initiating similar committees in Germany. She pursued cooperation with the *Lette Verein*,⁷⁸ an association that enjoyed the patronage of the German Crown Princess Victoria, Queen Victoria's oldest daughter who was married to the Prussian Crown Prince.⁷⁹ It was with the Crown Princess's interest in female welfare that Koerber's fondest hopes rested. To her delight, she received an invitation in early April 1876 to attend a conference of the *Lette Verein* in Hamburg that had the question of protecting female migrants on the agenda. Since she could not travel to Germany in her official function, she had to decline an audience with the Crown Princess. However, she sounded out the German Foreign Office in Berlin as to whether her work protecting emigrants, rather than promoting emigration, would be acceptable to the German government. The results were sufficiently encouraging to embolden her to indicate to her boss, the Minister of Agriculture, that "my female emigration scheme has arrived at so important and interesting a stage that it is

75 Koerber, Ottawa speech.

76 A publication commented on the "unverkennbar menschenfreundliche Bestrebungen" and the "wohlgefällige, anspruchslose Auftreten der edlen Dame." Friedrich Jaeggi-Enger, *Die schweizerisch-kanadische Auswanderungsfrage mit Rücksicht auf die Thätigkeit der Frau Elsie von Koerber* (Bern: Jeht & Reinert, 1876). Even the German Ambassador in Bern, General von Röder, commented, "Madam von Koerber has during her stay here moved in the very best society in Geneva, Lausanne, Berne and Zurich" (Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1878, no. 9, p. 123).

77 Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1878, no. 9, pp. 169–170, Report of Special Immigration Agent, December 31, 1877.

78 She initially approached the *Lette Verein* in late 1874 with an introduction by Princess Alice of Hesse (correspondence printed in Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1878, no. 9, pp. 117–118).

79 Dorothee Arden, "Kronprinzessin Viktoria, Kaiserin Friedrich" (MA thesis, University of Frankfurt, 2000).

absolutely necessary for me to have a personal conference with you as soon as possible.”⁸⁰

During her time in Canada in late 1876, she not only received what she interpreted as semi-official encouragement for her female emigration scheme by the Minister but also began to lay the groundwork for the reception of female migrants.⁸¹ She had established contacts with the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in Toronto during earlier visits and negotiated the use of their reception home in 1877. She also attempted to form “Ladies’ Immigration Protective Societies” in Montreal and Ottawa and have them officially recognized by the government. Unfortunately, the German aspect of her work was moving much more slowly, with many people still not convinced that emigration of women or their protection was necessary. It was not until two years later, in the fall of 1878, that Koerber set out for another congress of the *Letzte Verein* in Wiesbaden. She renewed her acquaintance with the Grand Duchess of Hesse, and later expressed to the Minister in Ottawa her hope that Alice would convince her royal sister Louise, wife of the Governor General, to place herself at the head of the ladies’ committees in Canada: “then our cause would be save her.”⁸² Koerber then moved on to address a *Frauen-Fortbildungsverein* in Dresden in October. It was there that she realized a change in the general climate surrounding her work in Germany. For the first time, people were ready to talk openly about emigration, and a committee was formed, holding out the prospect of sending many hard-working Saxonian women to Canada.⁸³ What had happened? For one, the new international abolitionist movement united bourgeois women’s associations across Europe in a common effort to protect travelling women from sexual trafficking and prostitution.⁸⁴ More specifically, in Germany, the political conversation had begun to turn towards Germany’s future role in the world and the positive part that German migrants could play in securing trade and cultural connections, if not formal colonies. Emigration was no longer necessarily seen as a drain on Germany’s national strength.⁸⁵

For these two reasons, Koerber reached a turning point in her female emigration work. She went on to Berlin to see whether the ladies there,

80 LAC, RG 17, vol. 160, Koerber to Minister, June 4, 1876.

81 She promised the Minister, “I shall acquire the German subjectship should the German Government make this condition an unavoidable one” (LAC, RG 17, vol. 178, Koerber to Minister, December 9, 1876).

82 LAC, RG 17, vol. 235, Koerber to Lowe, November 3, 1878.

83 Koerber, Ottawa speech, p. 7.

84 Anne Summers, “Which Women? What Europe? Josephine Butler and the International Abolitionist Federation,” *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 62 (Fall 2006), pp. 214–231.

85 Agnes Bretting and Hartmut Bickelmann, *Auswanderungsagenturen und Auswanderervereine im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1991), p. 220.

after two and a half years of deliberation, were ready to act, and found to her surprise and delight that they were. The Crown Princess granted her a personal interview and told her that “well protected emigration is by far the most rational means of helping a portion of our sex.” Next, the Union of Patriotic Ladies informed her that Her Majesty, the Empress of Germany had taken a lively interest in her plans, which the Empress thought “well worth being furthered.” Koerber was near speechless and confessed that “my reception [in Berlin] has been a favourable one above all expectations.”⁸⁶ She began to contemplate finally taking out German citizenship, moving to Berlin, and having her children become German subjects. Just at this moment, in a case of singularly bad timing, the newly elected Conservative government in Ottawa terminated her appointment as part of a larger retrenchment programme. Koerber managed to stay on until a meeting on January 6, 1879, at which Lina Morgenstern, co-founder of the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Frauenverein* (the leading German feminist organization), spoke in front of German and Swiss press, and Baron Theodor von Bunsen, a diplomat from a famous Anglo-German family, was designated as the head of the newly appointed German Central Committee for female emigration. This was a moment of triumph: “Letters of congratulation came to me from all sides, for those who understand the difficulties with which I have had, and still have, to battle can judge also the extent of my success.”⁸⁷

After her return to Canada in 1879, matters seemed to develop according to plan. She finally convinced a group of Ottawa philanthropist ladies and gentlemen to form the Central Committee for the Reception and Protection of Female Immigration under the presidency of Mrs. R. W. (Mary) Scott, with Roberta Tilton as secretary, and to ask for government aid and recognition. A branch committee in Toronto was formally constituted in late 1879 or early 1880 under Mrs. L. J. Harvie;⁸⁸ a Montreal committee followed suit in 1881 under Mrs. G. H. Mussen.⁸⁹ The wife of the Governor General indicated that, like her royal sister the Crown

86 Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1879, no. 9, p. 115, Report on Female Emigration, December 18, 1878.

87 Koerber, Ottawa speech, p. 8.

88 LAC, RG 17, vol. 272, Mrs. L. J. Harvie, Toronto, minutes of the two first meetings of the “Committee for the Protection & Organisation of Female Immigration,” February 17, 1880.

89 LAC, RG 17, vol. 326, Mrs. G. H. Mussen, Montreal, resolution from “Committee for the Organisation & Protection of Female Immigration,” October 25, 1881. The name clearly identifies this as a Koerber-inspired committee. Mussen began to identify the committee as the Women’s Protective Immigration Society from February 1882 onward. This is clearly the same committee that Barbara Roberts talks about as having been established by members of the Montreal elite for British work only. She fails to acknowledge Koerber’s crucial role in its origins and the early work of the WPIS with German female migrants. Barbara Roberts, “Sex, Politics and Religion: Controversies in Female Immigration Reform Work in Montreal, 1881–1891,” *Atlantis*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1980), p. 27.

Princess of Germany, she took “an individual interest in the effort you are making to get girls and women from Switzerland and Germany to Canada, to provide good homes for them on their arrival here.”⁹⁰ The model of royal patronage was extended into Canada. In the meantime, Koerber attempted to make herself useful to the Conservative government as consultant in Ottawa on matters relating to the Continent and lobbied hard for pay and reappointment.⁹¹ She never did become a German subject and reverted to representing herself as the widow of an Austrian naturalized in Canada.

Finally, in 1882, she was offered reinstatement as general immigration agent but declined. She no longer wanted to be involved in immigrant recruitment and “was compelled to make a daring dash for my circumstances” looking for “other auspices under which I could create a wider field”⁹² by placing her scheme “on an entirely philanthropic basis and claim[ing] public support for it.”⁹³ Koerber also started to dream about expanding her international system or organization and protection into the United States. After all, German and other European women were arriving in New York in large numbers and “here the ruin of young immigrants goes on a large scale.”⁹⁴ Koerber arrived in New York in early 1882 intent on organizing another “council of ladies . . . for the protection of female immigrants.” Her investigations indicated that protection was badly needed in New York. Apparently thousands of young women went astray while “the houses of ill fame in that city are fed by the supply furnished in the shape of young immigrants, so called ‘green girls’ [M]ost of the cases are traceable to the ships coming from abroad, the acquaintances made by young women, more or less unsophisticated, during the voyage” Koerber’s protective scheme, the *New York Times* noted with approval, “would prevent thousands of young girls from engaging in a life of sin and shame and greatly reduce the number of criminals in the City and State of New York.”⁹⁵

After introducing her plan in New York, Koerber returned to Europe in the spring of 1882. Her purpose was twofold: in England, she established contact with the new Women’s Emigration Society (WES), founded in 1880 by a group of philanthropists under Lady Jane Taylor with the

90 Quoted by Koerber in Ottawa speech, p. 9.

91 LAC, RG 17, vol. 242, Koerber to Minister of Agriculture, July 17, 1879; RG 17, vol. 278, Koerber to Minister, April 5 and 26, 1880.

92 LAC, RG 25A-1, vol. 31, Koerber to British Board of Trade, June 1883.

93 LAC, RG 17, vol. 376, Koerber to Lowe, June 9, 1883.

94 Silke Wehner, “Auswanderung deutscher Dienstmädchen in die USA, 1870–1920,” in Monika Blaschke and Christiane Harzig, eds., *Frauen wandern aus: Deutsche Migrantinnen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Bremen: Labor Migration Project, 1990), especially pp. 33–34.

95 LAC, RG 17, vol. 379, Koerber to British Board of Trade, June 1883; *New York Times*, January 23, 1882.

intent of encouraging single women of all classes to emigrate. By September Koerber was in Liverpool, arranging a public meeting to be attended by Lady Jane. The meeting was supported by several prominent gentlemen and successfully established a branch of the WES in the seaport city.⁹⁶ Koerber's second goal also enjoyed some limited success at first. In early 1883, she organized in Germany an arrangement with Mathilde Weber, executive member of the *Frauenverein* for the selection of 20 "respectable, capable" servant girls from Stuttgart and Tübingen to be sent to Montreal and Ontario. The Montreal Protective Immigration Society was willing to advance the fare of £5 each for six girls. If the seedling movement worked out, there would have to be government assistance for the other women.⁹⁷

From mid-1883, things went badly wrong for Koerber and her plans for the international organization and protection of female emigration. First, Koerber's request for government funding for the German women "with the view of giving them the same advantages as are offered to young women proceeding from Great Britain" was declined without comment.⁹⁸ Next, Koerber got into an argument with Lady Jane Taylor, as a result of which Koerber's cooperation with the WES came to an end, and the British press attacked the unpatriotic character of her international ideas. She desperately attempted to organize an English protection society that would work parallel to the promotion work of the WES and even jettisoned her German plans for this, but the doors seemed to be firmly closed for her. At the same time, a Miss Richardson made herself the spokesperson for female migration in Canada and was not only appointed to a government position in Quebec City but also obviously enjoyed the endorsement and cooperation of the WES and the Montreal Protective Immigration Society (WPIS). Competition had suddenly burst on the scene, and Koerber found herself thoroughly marginalized and alone. She protested the "encroachment on *my* territory," listed her role in initiating the various efforts, and requested that her "first claims upon the Department" be respected.⁹⁹ Sadly, nobody listened. Female migration work re-emerged in the mid-1880s exclusively as a project of strengthening the British Empire, and has been treated as such by historians since. As for Koerber, her pleas to be put back onto the government payroll were increasingly desperate,

96 *New York Times*, September 12, 1882; James Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen: Genteel Poverty and Female Emigration, 1830–1914* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), pp. 148–149.

97 LAC, RG 17, vol. 361, Montreal Women's Immigration Society (Protective) to Pope, February 5, 1883.

98 LAC, RG 17, vol. 361, Galt to Minister, February 8, 1883; RG 17, vol. 371, High Commissioner's Office to Minister, May 23, 1883; includes HC to Koerber, May 4, 1883.

99 LAC, RG 17, vol. 376, Koerber to Lowe, June 9, 1883; RG 17, vol. 382, Koerber to Sir Charles Tupper, September 10, 1883.

yet unsuccessful. Her career in female migration management, and her life, ended ignominiously with a terse note by the High Commissioner's office asking for permission to dispose of her body.¹⁰⁰ The position she had craved and worked for, that of superintendent of female immigration, was created three years later, in 1887.¹⁰¹

The Importance and Limitations of Koerber's Work

Koerber's ideas clearly emerged in the context of a larger European debate and were not her own, but many of her initiatives are reflected in later developments in Canada. A Reception Home opened in Montreal, even during her lifetime. Women's protection societies formed all over the country to receive, supervise, and control female migrants. Female migration work started as philanthropy but was soon professionalized and bureaucratized, without being de-feminized. As Koerber had predicted and desired, it stayed in female hands. The Women's Emigration Society, which according to Koerber had suffered from Lady Jane's lack of experience and ineffective organization, disintegrated in 1884¹⁰² and was replaced by the deliberately Anglican British Women's Emigration Association, which implemented through women's societies in Britain and Canada much of the seamless, transnational protective system that Koerber had envisioned.¹⁰³ Stricter regulations were put in place to protect female passengers and to control male-female contacts aboard ships,¹⁰⁴ while the "white slavery" scare reached a fever pitch in England and Canada, with tales of unprotected girls and women being dragged and drugged into prostitution.¹⁰⁵ The moral reform movement and its metaphors of housecleaning became an integral part of nation-building and state formation by the turn of the century

100 LAC, RG 17, vol. 400, High Commissioner London to Department of Agriculture, April 8, 1884.

101 Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 86.

102 James Hammerton seems to agree with Koerber's criticism when he concludes that "the society's control organization was never placed on a sound footing, however, and by 1884 it had disintegrated" (*Emigrant Gentlewomen*, p. 149). Julia Bush suggests that the WES "remained deeply sympathetic to the middle-class emigrant" at a time when the dominions were clearly looking for working-class domestic servants ("The Right Sort," p. 389).

103 Lisa Gaudet, "The Empire is Woman's Sphere: Organized Female Imperialism in Canada, 1880s to 1920s" (PhD dissertation, Carleton University, 2001). The BWEA was established as an outgrowth of the emigration work of the Anglican Girls' Friendly Society (p. 259, n. 3; pp. 276–277). Gaudet gives the credit as "pioneers" of a system of selection, commendation, supervision, and lodging for female migrants to Ellen Joyce and Louisa Knightley. As in Roberts's work, Koerber does not get a mention.

104 Kelley and Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic*, p. 85. Section 184 of the Criminal Code of 1893 made it an offence for officers and seamen to seduce a female passenger.

105 Rev. J. G. Shearer, *Canada's War on the White Slave Trade* (Toronto: The Board of Moral and Social Reform, 1910).

and further legitimized the expansion of women's work in the public sphere.¹⁰⁶

It appears as if Koerber anticipated several trends of the following two decades. Why, then, has she received no credit for her pioneering work, either then or now? I would suggest that Koerber's biggest handicap, both at the time and from an historical perspective, lies in the fact that her vision and ideas were outside any dominant national narrative. She crossed borders, not only literally in her travels but figuratively in her thinking, and imagined spaces and communities that were not confined to any one national or historiographical territory. Like the inhabitants of the borderlands between two countries, she straddled European and North American culture, drawing inspiration from each but belonging to neither. She was an outsider wherever she went.

From the beginning, she encountered hostile nationalist attitudes and policies in Germany. While some legislators and certain influential intellectual circles were sympathetic to her ideas of emigrant protection, the German government was set against any act that was seen as promoting, directly or indirectly, emigration. Koerber's insistence that there was a difference between promotion and management of migration was too subtle for the imperial government in Berlin. Therefore, Koerber's one-time superior, Edward Jenkins, was probably right when he insisted that the German government would not ever be supportive of her efforts. Others were more blunt, saying that Koerber would risk her personal liberty if she insisted on pursuing her program in Germany.

Elements of German middle-class society were similarly hostile. The associations she approached at first all told her in a more or less friendly manner that their mandate was restricted to helping women in Germany; they would not spend money on helping women leave their country.¹⁰⁷ Many said: "[T]hose who want to leave can very well look after themselves."¹⁰⁸ Koerber was personally attacked for her efforts: "I was deemed to be unpatriotic because I am initiating discussions about emigration in Germany."¹⁰⁹ Even her former friends in Baden deserted her over accusations that she was a so-called white slave trader trying to lure girls into prostitution.¹¹⁰ Koerber tried to shrug off the rumours and

106 Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water*, pp. 27–28.

107 Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1878, no. 39, p. 117, *Lette Verein* to Koerber, November 22, 1875 (reproduced).

108 Koerber, Dresden speech: "die, die gehen wollen, sollen sehen, wie sie zurechtkommen."

109 *Ibid.*: "Man hat mich unpatriotisch genannt, weil ich in Deutschland diese Auswanderungsfrage anrege."

110 West, "Canadian Immigration Agents," p. 34. Koerber pretended to shrug off the ludicrous accusations: "the most extraordinary conjectures were made, nurtured, and aggrandized by a very lively imagination; all the horrors of Brazilian Emigration, and of the slavery of the South were recounted and applied to Canadian Emigration; even the flattering intimation was made

scoffed that emigration would no longer seem so horrible “once you have dared to venture beyond the boundaries of your fatherland.”¹¹¹ Obviously her own transnationalism blinded her to the depth of nationalist attitudes in the new German Reich.

Similarly, her emphasis on better, rather than more, immigration failed to excite her Canadian compatriots in the 1870s. During his European tour in the summer of 1875, Jenkins poured cold water on her scheme for a universal women’s emigration society “which, for the reason that it is to be universal, I told her I did not see how the Government of Canada could employ her to organize.”¹¹² Her increasingly defensive reporting suggests that she was accused of not serving Canadian interests when she worked for her female system. Koerber was aware that, as an employee of the Canadian state, she was supposed to promote only the interests of Canada, but she defined these interests in moral, not just material terms. She was not interested in recruiting the largest possible number of settlers and openly admitted that such a lack of motivation made her “a useless agent, such as that position is unfortunately generally looked upon by Canadians.”¹¹³ It is interesting to note that, despite all this, her activities were tolerated and even cautiously supported for several years during the 1870s.

This changed rather markedly after the election of the Macdonald government in 1878. Many of Koerber’s personal crusades now became anathema. Under John A. Macdonald, the element in immigration that Koerber tried to de-emphasize, the commercial interest, quickly gained the upper hand. Macdonald’s government was beholden to big business, and it showed: by 1881 the Allan Line with its deep links to the Conservative party opened its own emigration office in London and developed its own advertising campaign. Any dreams of Canada as part of a North Atlantic labour migration system that included Continental Europe and the United States were no longer welcome. The abrupt termination of her German migration plans in 1883 made that clear to her. “Will you kindly inform me if I am to infer . . . that Canada does not wish the immigration of German women?” she asked angrily. She provided her own answer: “If women are not wanted, then, I suppose, German immigration in general is not wanted either.”¹¹⁴

that I engaged women for wicked purposes” (Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1878, no. 39, p. 122, Report on Female Emigration, July 1, 1877). The state of Baden had prohibited agencies from sending emigrants to Brazil in 1876.

111 Koerber, Dresden speech: “wenn wir uns einmal ueber die Grenzen unseres Vaterlandes hinaus gewagt haben.”

112 Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers*, 1876, p. 132, Annual Report by Edward Jenkins, December 31, 1875.

113 LAC, RG 25A–1, vol. 31, Koerber to British Board of Trade, June 1883.

114 LAC, RG 17, vol. 371, Koerber to Sir Alexander Galt, May 14, 1883.

The dominant discourse in Canada of the 1880s had become British and imperial to the exclusion of any North American or North Atlantic dimension. In the final analysis, this is what put an end to Koerber's life's work and even her friendships. There are clues that she left Canada in 1882 not "out of spite" but for "private motives [that] will soon be understood."¹¹⁵ The Montreal Society shortly afterwards turned away from her German work and became associated exclusively with empire migration. Increasingly, female immigration work in Canada became denominational, another turn away from the secular approach that Koerber represented. She soon felt that she did not have any "sincere friends" left.¹¹⁶

Her work in Britain also ran into heavy criticism. She was accused of trying to construct a society that would serve international rather than imperial interests. Her competition, the scheme of "Temperance Colonization," was intent on sending British women only to British colonies and dominions.¹¹⁷ She noticed the change in the political climate by the summer of 1883: "My idea first was that my future position should be international in its character but . . . I have lately followed the advice of warm friends of the cause, and have now decided to place myself and my work under English auspices."¹¹⁸ It was too little too late. The German lady with her awkward turn of phrase was no longer taken seriously in imperial London.

Historiographically, this redirection of female migration into imperial channels and Canada's turn to an imperial nation-building discourse has removed Koerber from the record. She quite simply does not fit into a story of female migration that emphasizes middle-class Anglo-Canadian women's complicity in empire-building. Her ideas were imperial, but not British imperial. She was a bourgeois feminist, but her inspiration was German and more generally European rather than narrowly British. She half-heartedly talked about single women as future wives of Canadian farmers but, like a political economist, really considered them as supply in the international labour market. Her trust in royal patronage gives her work an odd, almost pre-national, connotation that further confuses the issue. Yet Koerber's ideas about state formation are modern. She was a German liberal in that she placed the state's protective role above personal freedom. She placed confidence in a modern, post-colonial and gender-neutral bureaucracy of talent and expertise, well paid and well

115 LAC, RG 17, vol. 384, Koerber to Mrs. Elinenhorst, September 25, 1883.

116 LAC, RG 17, vol. 376, Koerber to Lowe, June 9, 1883.

117 LAC, RG 17, vol. 382, Koerber to Sir Charles Tupper, September 10, 1883.

118 LAC, RG 25A-1, vol. 31, Koerber to British Board of Trade, June 1883; RG 25, series B-1-a, vol. 31, Koerber to Colonial Office, July 3, 1883.

respected.¹¹⁹ She had an alternative vision of building a modern Canadian nation, imagining it to be the part of a North Atlantic world that it would soon become. To her misfortune, there was no room for her in the Canada that was. Her subjectivity became invisible.

119 She told the Toronto City Council: "I do not know whether it ever struck you that the Government pays no more to its agents than a second-rate mercantile house to its commercial traveler. How can agents take a position of influence?"