

# *The YWCA and Reform in the Nineteenth Century*

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The latter years of the nineteenth century saw the beginning of what was to become a strong and energetic reform movement in Canada. This movement encompassed many causes: urban reform, temperance, woman's suffrage, child welfare, and conservation to name only a few.<sup>1</sup> Though each had its own supporters and reform ideology, they all shared the belief that society was an organic or collective unit. This recognition of interdependence between the people of a community or in the case of conservation between people and nature has caused some difficulty in the historiography of the reform movement.<sup>2</sup> Were reformers altruistic or were they safeguarding their own vested interests? Not surprisingly both views have had supporters. Some historians have seen the reformers as saints, while others, especially those analysing from the perspective of the working class,

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on urban reform is perhaps most comprehensive. See C. ARMSTRONG and H.V. NELLES, *The Revenge of the Methodist Bicycle Company* (Toronto, 1977); Paul RUTHERFORD, "Tomorrow's Metropolis: The Urban Reform Movement in Canada, 1880-1920," C.H.A. *Historical Papers* (1971): 203-24; J.C. WEAVER, "Tomorrow's Metropolis Revisited: A Critical Reassessment of Urban Reform in Canada, 1890-1920," in *The Canadian City*, G. STELTER and A. ARTIBISE, eds. (Toronto, 1977): 393-418; P. RUTHERFORD, *Saving the Canadian City: The First Phase 1880-1920: An Anthology of Early Articles on Urban Reform* (Toronto, 1974); J.C. WEAVER, "Approaches to the History of Urban Reform," *Urban History Review*, 2 (1976): 3-12; G. STELTER and A. ARTIBISE, *The Canadian City* (Toronto, 1977): section VI.

For other aspects of the reform movement see R. SPLANE, *Social Welfare in Ontario 1791-1893* (Toronto, 1965); Neil SUTHERLAND, *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth Century Consensus* (Toronto, 1976); T.R. MORRISON, "Their Proper Sphere: Feminism, The Family, and Child-Centred Social Reform in Ontario 1875-1900," *Ontario History*, LXVII (March 1976): 45-64; G. DECARIE, "Something Old, Something New...; Aspects of Prohibitionism in Ontario in the 1890s," in *Oliver Mowat's Ontario*, D. SWAINSON, ed. (Toronto 1972): 154-74; G. HALLOWELL, *Prohibition in Ontario* (Ottawa, 1972); E.R. FORBES, "Prohibitionism and the Social Gospel in Nova Scotia," *Acadiensis*, I (Autumn 1971): 11-36; H.V. NELLES, *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines and Hydro-Electric Power in Ontario 1849-1941* (Toronto, 1975); Janet FOSTER, *Working for Wildlife, the Beginning of Preservation in Canada* (Toronto, 1978); C. CLEVERDON, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto, 1950); J. THOMPSON, "The Influence of Dr. Emily Howard Stowe on the Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada," *Ontario History*, LIV, 4 (Dec. 1962): 253-66.

<sup>2</sup> Allen DAVIS, *Spearheads for Reform* (New York, 1967), p. 19.

have viewed them as sinners or, at the very least, exploiters.<sup>3</sup> The idea that individuals acted through a single motivation seemed to dominate historical writing. In recent years, a more balanced picture has emerged. Historians have begun to appreciate that the response of reformers was often ambivalent, a product of their attempt to cope with change while at the same time trying to preserve the stability of the social order as they knew it.<sup>4</sup> Often reformers were hampered by administrative difficulties, as well as the pressures of society which restrained the way in which they could respond to social needs. Although many reform organizations faced these problems, this paper will concentrate on the early history of only one, the Young Women's Christian Association.<sup>5</sup>

The YWCA was a response to and a recognition of the changing needs of Canadian women, specifically those attracted to cities by prospective employment. The YWCA wanted to help these women. Unfortunately, it was hindered in this by several factors. The duality of goals, religious and secular, weakened the Y's national organization and ability to provide leadership to its local unions. Following the example of early benevolent societies, the YWCA had aligned itself with the church which meant its focus on the temporal welfare of working women was lessened. This was reinforced by the fact that the YWCA's organizational structure was dominated by a select group of women, resulting in little innovation and certainly little challenge to the accepted role of woman's involvement in society. The YWCA was interested in maintaining the domestic role of woman as much as possible in face of the challenge presented by working women. To do this it responded to the needs of working women in a traditional way, that is, through concern over the private sphere (place of residence) as opposed to the public (place of work). Even in this limited response the YWCA was constrained by the tension between a strong, charitable orientation and the perceived need for a new spirit of reform to cope with the

<sup>3</sup> For a positive view of reformers see P. Rutherford, *Saving the Canadian City* (Toronto, 1974); P. Rutherford, "Tomorrow's Metropolis: The Urban Reform Movement in Canada 1880-1920," *op. cit.*; V. STRONG-BOAG, *The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada 1893-1929* (Ottawa, 1976); GREEN, *Working for Wildlife*, *op. cit.* Perhaps the most obvious treatment of a reformer as a saint is seen in K. MCNAUGHT, *A Prophet in Politics, A Biography of J.S. Woodsworth* (Toronto, 1959).

For a more critical view see J.C. WEAVER, "Elitism and Corporate Ideal: Businessmen and Boosters in Canadian Civic Reform, 1890-1920," *Cities in the West*, A.R. McCORMACK and I. MACPHERSON, eds. (Ottawa, 1975); WEAVER, "Tomorrow's Metropolis Revisited," *op. cit.*; H.V. NELLES, C. ARMSTRONG, "The Great Fight for Clean Government," *Urban History Review*, 2 (1976): 50-7; Wayne ROBERTS and A. KLEIN, "Besieged Innocence: The Problems of Working Women — Toronto, 1896-1914," *Women at Work, Ontario 1850-1930*, J. ACTON *et al*, eds. (Toronto, 1974): 211-61.

<sup>4</sup> For a full exploration of motives H.V. NELLES, *The Politics of Development* is excellent as is his and C. ARMSTRONG's amusing look at Sunday streetcars in Toronto in *The Revenge of the Methodist Bicycle Company*, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> As the paper stresses the early years of the YWCA in Canada particular emphasis will be given to the Toronto YWCA as it was one of the more active centres during the nineteenth century. Only after the turn of the century did YWCAs in the West become stronger and the national organization take on a more prominent role. The Toronto YWCA is typical of YWCAs across Canada in the type of work in which it was engaged.

changing nature of society. All this weakened the reform impulse of the YWCA and pulled it in different directions.

## I

The national organization of the Young Women's Christian Association was weak because of its historical development. The YWCA began in Britain in 1877 through the amalgamation of two existing women's organizations. The first consisted of prayer unions, motivated by purely evangelical aims, with little concern or interest taken in the temporal welfare of those women prayed for. The second, homes for working women, were the consequence of secular need, prompted by a mixture of charitable and reform impulses.<sup>6</sup> The combination of two goals, spiritual and temporal, with several approaches, religious, charitable and reform, prevented any one from dominating, weakening all aspects but particularly effecting the reform impulse. This problem was found in most YWCAs, including those in Canada.

The first two such Canadian associations illustrated the dual purpose of the YWCA. The St. John Association, formed in 1870, reflected the desire to help working women, a class of society which most charitable and benevolent societies largely had ignored. It did this through a "mission school... for the purpose of enabling young girls who obtain their living in the various factories... to secure a better education than they otherwise could obtain."<sup>7</sup> At the same time the YWCA made it very clear that the spirit behind its work was evangelical.

The objects of this Association shall be, the mutual spiritual improvement of its members, the systematic circulation of suitable Religious Literature, the regular visitation of the poor and suffering, and the promotion, whenever and wherever possible, of the knowledge and love of Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>8</sup>

In a similar way the Toronto YWCA was interested in providing cheap and respectable accomodation for young women in the city, and was equally committed to "securing their attendance at some place of worship and... surrounding them with Christian associates."<sup>9</sup>

Initially this duality of goals did not seem to inhibit the growth of the YWCA. Between 1870 and 1894 at least fourteen town and city YWCAs were formed in addition to many student groups. However, there was little unity among them: they had a variety of names (Women's Christian Association, the Young Women's Christian Guild, and the Young Women's Christian Association), they often belonged to different international

<sup>6</sup> Mary Quayle INNIS, *Unfold the Years* (Toronto, 1949), pp. v-vi.

<sup>7</sup> NATIONAL COUNCIL YWCA, *The Story of the YWCA in Canada* (Toronto, 1933), pp. 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> J. HARSHAW, *When Women Work Together* (Toronto, 1966), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Minutebook, Toronto YWCA, 31 Oct. 1873.

affiliates, they were separated by distance, and in many one goal dominated over the other.<sup>10</sup>

Most recognized a need for co-operation and uniformity. As early as 1888-89 the Toronto Women's Christian Association recorded "with reference to the formation of a Dominion Association... letters have been exchanged with our sister Associations in Canada, comparing the work and consulting about the best ways of improving it."<sup>11</sup> When in 1892 a conference in Britain recommended the formation of a world group, various Canadian leaders felt they would prefer to join as a national unit. The real catalyst for the creation of a Canadian Union was the World's Congress of Women at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893.<sup>12</sup> There, the Canadian women who were present were persuaded of the need for and value of co-ordinated effort.

Among these women was Adelaide Hunter Hoodless. Mrs. Hoodless was a prominent member of the Hamilton YWCA and on her return from Chicago she instigated the formation of a national union with the help of three Toronto associations: the Toronto Young Women's Christian Medical Association, the University of Toronto YWCA, and the Toronto YWCA.<sup>13</sup> Miss Berta Wright (Mrs. B. Carr-Harris), president of the Ottawa Association, and Miss Jeanne Botterell (Mrs. R.G. McConnell) of the Montreal Association also assisted. While these two women consulted with the Hon. S.H. Blake to draw up a constitution, Mrs. Hoodless wrote to various towns and cities throughout Canada seeking information on existing YWCAs.<sup>14</sup> In her letter Mrs. Hoodless explained the need for a national association.

Feeling the necessity for combined action on the part of all Women's and Young Women's Christian associations in the Dominion of Canada, in order to give greater permanency and efficiency to general work in which they were engaged, it has been thought advisable to arrange a Convention to consider what steps shall be taken to organize a Dominion Association.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly the various YWCAs had much in common. Most were located in large populated centres and were trying to respond to the needs of working women in those centres. If they came together, they could discuss mutual problems and learn from each other's experience. The advantages were obvious and recognized. At the conference held in December 1893 to discuss a national union the following associations were represented: Montreal, Peterborough, London, Alma College (St. Thomas), Toronto, and Hamilton, and letters of approval were read from the YWCAs in Hali-

<sup>10</sup> NATIONAL COUNCIL YWCA, *op. cit.*, p. 3. Some city YWCAs joined with The International Committee, an American based organization, several student YWCAs with the American Committee while others affiliated with the association in Great Britain.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Minutes, National Executive Committee of the YWCA in Canada, excerpt from *Globe*, 8 Dec. 1893, YWCA Papers, P.A.C.

<sup>14</sup> NATIONAL COUNCIL YWCA, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Minutebook, YWCA, Toronto 1891-96, 21 Nov. 1893.

fax, Kingston, Quebec, Ottawa, and Belleville.<sup>16</sup> The decision to form a national union was made.

When the Young Women's Christian Association held its first biennial conference in January 1895, the two goals of the British movement which had been reflected in the Canadian locals were enshrined in the objects of the national organization.

[It] shall be to unite in one central body all organizations existing and those to be formed in the future for the purpose of YWCA work which is to promote the spiritual, intellectual, physical and social condition of all young women; believing that the more intimate knowledge of one another's work will result in larger mutual sympathy, greater unity of purpose and plan and therefore in more efficient action.<sup>17</sup>

Although the national YWCA adopted the duality of goals, religious (spiritual) and secular (intellectual, physical and social), of its local associations, it was unable to lead them. It could not bring together separate associations and forge them into a unit with a single purpose. Rather it connected the various affiliates through a national administrative structure. It published the *Young Woman's Gazette* to stimulate contact with and between the local unions.<sup>18</sup> It attempted to foster unity among the separate YWCAs by drawing up a schedule for the order of business, thus clarifying procedure as well as creating uniformity among the local YWCAs. It also sent out national delegates to visit local YWCAs to try and lessen the sense of isolation that many associations felt.<sup>19</sup>

Yet despite these early efforts, the national organization did not become a focal point of association work in the nineteenth century. Between 1895 and 1900 it was an administrative convenience only. The independence of the local unions prevented it from strongly directing the thrust of the work. Locals formed before the creation of the national body had their own methodology, and in many cases the work undertaken varied depending upon whether the particular association's goal was secular or spiritual. Uniformity of direction was difficult to achieve under such conditions. Locals were left to go in any direction they chose. This could only weaken their reform push for though most wanted to help women spiritually and temporally, the two goals were not always complementary. The former especially seemed to weaken emphasis on the latter.

## II

The YWCA had a strong religious commitment. In its early years the Christian emphasis of the YWCA had attracted many women who otherwise

<sup>16</sup> Minutes, National Executive Committee, YWCA of Canada, excerpt from *Globe*, 8 Dec. 1893. In the *Globe* article mention is made of the Winnipeg YWCA. However, according to the National Council of YWCA in *The Story of the Years*, the Winnipeg YWCA was not formed until 1897.

<sup>17</sup> INNIS, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> Minutes, National Executive Committee, YWCA, 8 Mar. 1898.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 Nov. 1895.

might have shied away from a purely secular endeavour. The St. John Association insisted that its members be in good standing with some church<sup>20</sup> and the Toronto YWCA proposed that ministers' wives be honorary members of the Board.<sup>21</sup> By associating itself with the church the YWCA achieved respectability. The connection was also important financially. The thirty-seven churches supporting the Toronto YWCA provided most of its revenue, \$1,050 in 1873 compared to only \$282 from members' fees.<sup>22</sup> In return, the word Christian in the Young Women's Christian Association was not simply an empty gesture but interpreted within a Protestant, evangelical framework.

The religious connection did not always work to the advantage of the YWCA. As the term "Christian" was interpreted within such a limited framework, the Montreal and Quebec associations refused to join the national organization immediately.<sup>23</sup> The more emphasis given to spiritual matters, the less that was given to secular. Such was the case with the college YWCAs, which by 1900 represented the largest number of associations in Canada and which were essentially prayer circles for the members.

The focus on religion also prevented the YWCA from joining the National Council of Women, one of the most significant women's reform organizations in Canada. The association was not hostile to the work of the Council and had asked its president, Lady Aberdeen, to become its patroness and honorary president and she had consented.<sup>24</sup> When the question of affiliation was submitted to the local Associations, the majority opposed it.<sup>25</sup> No reasons for the decision were given, but in the records of the NCW Mrs. Hoodless attributed it to the use of silent prayer by the Council in lieu of audible prayer.<sup>26</sup> The YWCA, with its strong evangelical base, found this unacceptable.

Rejection of the NCW did not prevent the YWCA from co-operating with all women's reform organizations. In 1889 the Toronto YWCA considered sharing a building and lot with the Women's Christian Temperance Union but finally decided that divided responsibility was not feasible and that it preferred to own and control its own building.<sup>27</sup> In 1894 the same YWCA expressed sympathy for the work of the Temperance Union and granted it, free of charge, use of its meeting hall.<sup>28</sup> Such co-operation,

<sup>20</sup> INNIS, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Minutebook, Toronto YWCA, 22 Aug. 1873.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 Sept. 1873.

<sup>23</sup> HARSHAW, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> Minutebook, Toronto YWCA, 3 Feb. 1893.

<sup>25</sup> Minutes, National Executive Committee, YWCA, 30 May 1895, 9 Oct. 1900.

<sup>26</sup> Annual Report, NCWC, 1895, pp. 199-200.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 Dec. 1889.

<sup>28</sup> Minutebook, Toronto YWCA, 5 Nov. 1894.

however, is easily explained. The Temperance Union like the YWCA was strongly evangelical.<sup>29</sup>

The YWCA wanted to respond to the changing needs of society and the way in which they were affecting women, but it wanted to do so working out of a religious context. The YWCA truly believed that an acceptance of Christ would lead to a better life for all. Women, who were the main support of the church, had been told this all their lives. As a Christian Association, the YWCA was duty bound to emphasize the Christian solution in its response to the problems of women. As the Toronto YWCA explained its aim, it was not "to revolutionize or to reconstruct society, saving only in as far as prayer, a godly life and example and holy influences may do so, but it is our vocation to lift up the fallen or unfortunate especially those of our own sex, and bring them near to Christ."<sup>30</sup> Yet a religious goal and religious approach did not seem to be enough. The reform movement in Canada moved in the same secular direction as the problems of society. The church, the one institution from which the YWCA took its cue and which could have lent credibility and support to the YWCA's religious position vis a vis reform was not particularly concerned with secular life and would not be until early in the twentieth century. This was appreciated by the many YWCAs which focused on the temporal improvement of woman's lot as well the spiritual. They did not want to be solely a religious organization.

This was reflected by their interest in the social, educational and physical well-being of young women in addition to their spiritual welfare. The Hamilton YWCA began a circulating library, and training classes in domestic science.<sup>31</sup> As early as 1875 the Toronto WCA organized a Mission and Relief Society.<sup>32</sup> YWCA representatives even met incoming trains so newly arrived women would be directed to suitable temporary residences. In 1874 the Halifax YWCA began work as a Corrective Home for delinquent girls. In order to help them become self-supporting, they were trained for domestic service, an interesting commentary on the place and position that these girls were thought to hold.<sup>33</sup> In 1878 the Prison Gate Mission of the Toronto YWCA opened the Haven for preventive work and the training of young girls and women released from jail.<sup>34</sup> The Toronto ladies believed that a controlled environment was essential to redeem those who had strayed.

The principal aim of our efforts has been to persuade youthful offenders to enter the Magdalene, where, during a twelve month of careful training, and of quiet seclusion from sinful haunts and companions, the soul becomes

<sup>29</sup> W. MITCHINSON, "Aspects of Reform: Four Women's Organizations in Nineteenth Century Canada" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, York University, 1977), pp. 237-44.

<sup>30</sup> INNIS, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Frances DUFF, *Highlights of the Hamilton YWCA 1889-1964*, YWCA Papers.

<sup>32</sup> NATIONAL COUNCIL YWCA, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-31.

<sup>33</sup> INNIS, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> NATIONAL COUNCIL YWCA, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-31.

familiar with, and gradually learns to love, for its own sake, purity, or *virtue*.<sup>35</sup>

Only by removing girls from the world of temptation could their lives be regenerated. Society had to assist as in many cases the young girls were believed to be victims of their own innocence. In order to protect them, the Toronto YWCA in 1877 resolved that the crime of seduction should be made punishable with imprisonment. The members signed a petition to that effect and a committee was formed to persuade others to do so.<sup>36</sup>

The YWCA's main temporal focus, however, was to help what appeared to be a new phenomenon, working women. This took it into an area where traditional religious benevolence was inadequate and somewhat restrictive. To respond to the new secular needs of women more than prayer was needed.<sup>37</sup> The YWCA's religious foundations had provided it with a respectability and an acceptability which allowed it to step beyond the traditional area of woman's organizational involvement with more support than might have been possible without these assets. It remained for the YWCA to take advantage of this and move in a direction which would be of temporal benefit to working women. Unfortunately, the structure of its organization inhibited its ability to follow this secular reform path.

### III

Given the lack of direction from the national organization, if the YWCA was to respond in a way that would meet the needs of working women the pressure would have to come from the local associations. Due to the management of the locals this would be difficult, for the membership of the YWCA was not strongly committed to the work of the organization. Members did not have a voice in determining or implementing policy and consequently few took an active interest in the organization.<sup>38</sup> A Board of Managers, elected by the voting membership, which did not include the boarders, controlled the actual work of the individual YWCAs. The membership only provided financial backing. This type of arrangement was quite in keeping with the way in which charity and benevolent societies had been managed since the early decades of the century.<sup>39</sup> For the YWCA it meant that little discussion over decisions occurred, that each local was dominated by a select group of women, and that the membership was not involved enough in the work of the organization to encourage any policy which went against the accepted norms of women's organizations and society.

<sup>35</sup> Fourth report YWCA, Toronto, 1877, pp. 10-11.

<sup>36</sup> Minutebook, Toronto YWCA, 16 Feb. 1877.

<sup>37</sup> The WCTU experienced the problem of dual goals as well.

<sup>38</sup> HARSHAW, *When Women Work Together*, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>39</sup> For an examination of these societies see W. MITCHINSON, "Aspects of Reform," *op. cit.*, pp. 9-19.

An example of this reluctance to venture forth was the ladies' unwillingness to assume full responsibility for the management of their organization. When the Toronto YWCA was formed the women quickly decided that an advisory board of men was needed. Interestingly this board did not have any connection with the YMCA.<sup>40</sup> The board was composed of socially prominent men in the community.<sup>41</sup> In 1873 such a board was understandable given the probable difficulty in attracting funds if the women had had no male financial advisers. The Toronto YWCA, in addition to its male board, had men reading its reports at its public meetings. This created the anomalous situation of a gentleman reporting on the accomplishments of the ladies. Although capable of running and managing boarding houses for working women, the women of the YWCA apparently felt unable to speak out in public until almost the end of the century.<sup>42</sup>

The inability of the women to accept full responsibility for their work was tied to the dominating image of womanhood in late nineteenth century Canada. Women were to remain in the home. If they ventured out it was to participate in charity and religious organizations only. It is understandable then, why the women of the YWCA followed closely the example of such organizations. The reluctance of the YWCA members to step outside their own traditional role was going to make it that much more difficult for them to respond to women who did and who thereby challenged the role the YWCA members could not or would not challenge.

#### IV

The response of the YWCA to the working woman was a response to the times. More and more young women were entering the work force. In 1891 111 women per 1000 (ten years of age and older) were employed. By 1901, this had risen to 120, representing an increase of 41,959 workers or 21.4 percent.<sup>43</sup> Many of these workers had been attracted away from rural communities into the cities.<sup>44</sup> According to the YWCA, these young women, unfamiliar with their surroundings, needed assistance.

It was decided that the first work which should be done was to establish a board and lodging house for young women engaged in various industries in the city who had not friends to board with and could not yet board in a respectable place [and] also for strangers coming to the city seeking situations of various kinds. In connection with this a registry office would be kept.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of the YWCA see David Macleod, "A Live Vaccine: the YMCA and Male Adolescence in the United States and Canada 1870-1920," *Histoire sociale — Social History*, XI (21) (May 1978): 5-26.

<sup>41</sup> Minutebook, YWCA, Toronto, 3 June 1873.

<sup>42</sup> 25th Annual Report of the Toronto YWCA, 1898, p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> *Sixth Census of Canada* vol. 4, 1921, pp. xi-xiv.

<sup>44</sup> S. Cross, "The Neglected Majority: The Changing Role of Women in 19th Century Montreal," *The Neglected Majority*, ed. S. TROFIMENKOFF and A. PRENTICE (Toronto, 1977), p. 66: originally in *Histoire sociale — Social History*, VI (Nov. 1973): 202-23.

The YWCA was formed to help young working women who were independent but who needed a respectable and cheap place to live. Certainly many women took advantage of the boarding house arrangements provided. In 1881-82 the Toronto Association had 391 boarders: 11 machinists, 13 governesses, 6 house-keepers, 127 domestics, and 106 from various other trades.<sup>46</sup> It is interesting to note that in the case of domestics, the Toronto YWCA had a rule not to receive any who had held situations in the city except in special cases and not without an "explanatory note from their last employer."<sup>47</sup> The ladies of the YWCA wanted to ensure that they were providing homes for "respectable" women and ones who were willing to work and who did not leave employment for the least excuse. It may also, ironically, indicate the low esteem in which domestic servants were held.

One area in which the ladies of the YWCA believed working women needed help was in their lack of domestic knowledge. Working women were "outside the sacred influence of Christian homes with little or no time to develop what nature with infinite pains has given her a peculiar fitness for, the ability to be home maker."<sup>48</sup> The YWCA was designed to provide such a home environment and, through its educational facilities such as domestic science classes, the training needed when these young women assumed the administration of their own homes. As Adelaide Hoodless, the most prominent woman engaged in this effort, declared, "Apart from my family duties the education of mothers has been my life work."<sup>49</sup> So active was Mrs. Hoodless and the YWCA that by 1900 domestic science was being taught in schools throughout Canada.<sup>50</sup>

Although it acknowledged the homemaker role as the natural one for woman, the importance of the YWCA lay in its recognition that the working woman was not a transitory phenomenon. More significantly, the Y wanted to help these women. It organized coffee rooms so they would be able to purchase hot, nourishing meals cheaply, meals necessary for health and endurance when working the long hours normal at the time.<sup>51</sup> In 1886 the Toronto YWCA opened a serving room which provided work for over one hundred and fifty women.<sup>52</sup> Various YWCAs organized classes in nursing, dress making, millinery, domestic science, phonography, stenography and typing to help more young women develop skills with which to obtain better employment.<sup>53</sup> In 1889 the Hamilton YWCA organ-

<sup>45</sup> Minutebook, Toronto YWCA, 24 May 1873; See also *Young Women's Gazette*, Feb. 1900, p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> Annual Report, YWCA, Toronto, 1881-82.

<sup>47</sup> Second Annual Report, Toronto YWCA, Minutebook.

<sup>48</sup> *The Young Women's Gazette*, Feb. 1900.

<sup>49</sup> Ruth HOWES, "Adelaide Hunter Hoodless," *The Clear Spirit*, Mary Q. INNIS, ed. (Toronto, 1966), p. 106.

<sup>50</sup> Jill DOUGLAS, *Modern Pioneers* (Vancouver, 1960), p. 5. For more information on Adelaide Hoodless and her campaign for domestic science training see Ruth HOWES, *Adelaide Hoodless, Woman With A Vision* (Millet, Alberta, 1965).

<sup>51</sup> INNIS, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> NATIONAL COUNCIL YWCA, *op. cit.*, p. 27-31.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

ized an employment service for domestic servants to assist both those looking for work and those women in need of reliable help.<sup>54</sup> All these areas directed women into service roles. Thus if women were going to work they would be encouraged by the YWCA to do so in a way that least challenged sexual stereotypes.

Such a response by the YWCA was a reflection of its own beliefs and the reality of the time. The YWCA believed in the domestic ideal of womanhood, and it was from that ideal that its members and most women gained their prestige. The ladies of the YWCA would be unwilling to see that ideal challenged for two reasons. First, because it would be a challenge to their own domestic role and second, because they really did believe that the domestic role was the best, most satisfactory one, for women. Encouraging domestic science training and providing classes in 'service' roles was also coping with reality. Most young women who went through the YWCAs would probably marry and so domestic skills would be of use to them. Also most of these young women were working because they had to. They needed the jobs which were available and these were in the service areas. They could not afford to be the vanguard opening up traditional male employment to women. Given reality and the YWCA's own orientation, the Y was responding in an effective way to the plight of the working woman.

The YWCA's interest in working women extended only to their private lives, that time spent away from their jobs. The YWCA never became involved in trying to ameliorate the conditions under which these women toiled, being itself a bad employer. One historian of the organization discerned a patronizing attitude towards its own employees.

In the beginning days of the Association, the main qualification for staff was that they be Christian, genteel ladies, a cut above a governess perhaps but more or less regarded and treated by the Board as upper class servants. Many of them had no vocational training and they were grateful for a roof over their heads even though the pay was meagre.<sup>55</sup>

An illustration of this occurred in 1873. In that year, the ladies of the Toronto YWCA were considering a matron to manage their boarding home. One applicant whom they all found suitable asked for £10 a year extra. Although this was not an out of the way request, the ladies felt obligated to reconsider her application.<sup>56</sup>

If the YWCA was insensitive to the situation of its own workers, it is not surprising it refused to interfere with that of its boarders. One exception was shown by the Toronto Association in 1881 when it approached the Bell Telephone Company and requested that it not compel its employees to work on the Sabbath.<sup>57</sup> A connection was made at the time between Sabbath Observance and morality and the YWCA was

<sup>54</sup> DUFF, *Highlights of the Hamilton YWCA*, *op. cit.*

<sup>55</sup> J. HARSHAW, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>56</sup> Minutebook, Toronto YWCA, 3 June 1873.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 Dec. 1881.

certainly concerned with the morality of the young women under its care.<sup>58</sup> The boarding houses were begun originally to ensure that young women had a place in which to conform to the moral structures of the time. In many cases this is what the parents of the young women expected. Religion was seen as the foundation of this morality and any interference with it would be opposed. In general the YWCA was not interested in ameliorating the working conditions of women, only in making it easier for them to cope with existing conditions. It provided cheap and respectable living accommodation for the working woman, but never asked why it was so difficult for her to find such accommodation without help.<sup>59</sup> The ladies of the YWCA treated the symptom, not the cause, which in most cases was low wages.

One reason for this was the outlook of the YWCA members. They were working out of the framework of "domesticity", the dominating image of womanhood in late nineteenth century Canada. It insisted woman's place was the home and the focus of her concern. Women activists never challenged that concept, all they did was extend it as far as possible. This can be seen by the separation the Y made between the living conditions of working women and their working conditions. The YWCA was able and willing to interfere in the former but not in the latter. For its members this would have been interfering in a sphere not theirs. Theirs was the private sphere, the home. Man's was the public sphere, the work place. They would only intervene in it if it threatened the private, as working on the Sabbath appeared to do.

The response of the YWCA to the problems of working women was limited. It was torn between its secular and spiritual goals, and it was constrained by the limits of domesticity. Yet the YWCA was part of the reform impulse forming at the time, especially among women. Its national co-ordinating effort, though weak, made it part of a new movement emerging in late nineteenth century Canada: the formation of national women's organizations. The national effort was important. It recognized that the problems the local YWCAs were attempting to deal with were problems which knew no community barrier. Certainly few women's charitable societies had been able to act on that perception. However, the new women's organizations, like the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the National Council of Women, were not only national in extent but also reform in approach.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, a charitable inclination which was part of the YWCA's heritage coloured its attitude towards the working woman and made it difficult for the YWCA to participate fully in this reform movement even in the limited sphere it had chosen, that is, the domestic life of working women.

<sup>58</sup> For the close connection made by Canadians between Sabbath observance and morality see NELLES and ARMSTRONG, *The Revenge of the Methodist Bicycle Company*, *op. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> There is no evidence of this in the record books.

<sup>60</sup> For an examination of the NCW see STRONG-BOAG, *The Parliament of Women*, *op. cit.*; for the WCTU see MITCHINSON, "Aspects of Reform," *op. cit.*, Chap. V & VI.

## V

The YWCA did realize that it could not treat working women as objects of charity. In 1897 the Toronto Association, when confronted with several girls who could not pay their board, suggested that some arrangement be made with the WCTU's shelter committee until they obtained work.<sup>61</sup> Clearly this YWCA was not willing to distribute charity, at least not through its homes. This does not mean the YWCA had a callous attitude towards the young women. It wanted its boarding homes to be self-supporting, with no hint of charity about them which could reflect upon the independence of those using the homes and which might prevent others from taking advantage of their programmes. Certainly, when cases warranted it, the YWCA always seemed willing to lessen its rates, but it was unwilling to be exploited. The Toronto YWCA increased the rates for those who could afford it when it discovered some women were boarding at its facilities simply because it was inexpensive.<sup>62</sup> In this way the boarders seemed to pay according to their means and maintained a semblance of independence. The label of charity, then, could not be applied to their situation.

Although the YWCA did not want to be seen as a charitable organization, a tension remained between its charitable and reform impulses. The early history of the YWCA was very much dominated by charitable concerns. The *Globe* typically referred to the ladies of the YWCA as "benevolent ladies." This image was well founded, for many YWCAs had begun as charitable organizations, concerned with weekly visits to the gaols, hospitals, and homes needing help, as well as providing weekly prayer meetings "in any court or alley where the occupants would allow [them] their kitchen to hold it."<sup>63</sup> As late as 1894 the Toronto Relief Society in connection with the YWCA still saw systematic charity as its purpose.

The highest aim of the Society is to help more particularly the respectable poor, who, on account of adverse circumstances, are in sore straits, but with temporary aid can be set on their feet once more... Emotional charity supports hordes of hypocrites, and when it blunders into helping a worthy man, it only helps to pauperize and degrade him. Therefore the need of system...<sup>64</sup>

This desire to help those in need through charitable endeavour created a problem for the YWCA as it was at odds with the approach used in its work with working women. The YWCA had tried very hard to eliminate any aura of charity surrounding its boarding homes, for it believed charity compromised independence. By providing working women with a cheap place to live the YWCA was helping them remain economically independent. With this independence the women would be able, it was hoped, to resist temptation, material and moral. The latter was especially important. As the Toronto YWCA minutebook declared, "the aim of the

<sup>61</sup> Minutebook, Toronto YWCA, 4 Mar. 1897.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 Sept. 1873.

<sup>63</sup> INNIS, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>64</sup> 19th Report of Toronto Relief Society, 1893-1894, p. 4.

institution is not to dispense charity but rather to inculcate self-dependence."<sup>65</sup> This point had to be continually stressed by the president of the Dominion YWCA.<sup>66</sup>

The YWCA was oriented towards reform. Its concern was not, like charitable endeavours, to see that the poor survived, rather it was to ensure that women workers remained respectable. A major concern of the middle class about working women was the fear that participation in the work force would lead to a decline in morals. This was reflected by The Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital. Time after time the commissioners asked workers and employers alike whether the moral standards of workers had declined because of the presence of both sexes in the work force.<sup>67</sup> The YWCA was no different. It wanted to ensure the morality of working women and it did so through the creation of a controlled environment, that is, its boarding homes. Women in the home, cut off from the temptations of society already lived in a controlled environment. The focus of much of the YWCA's work was on achieving it for women not in the home. Unfortunately, the ladies of the YWCA did so in a way that was highly insulting to the boarders and in a way which reflected the charitable as opposed to reform impulse, that is, they stressed the separation between themselves and those they were trying to help.

YWCA members worked in a *we/they* context with little feeling of affinity with their boarders. They were middle class, the boarders were working class. The YWCA provided a service and the boarders accepted it. An example of their attitude was given at the inaugural meeting of the Toronto YWCA when the Ladies Committee discussed "who should be *objects for 'the Home'*"<sup>68</sup> indicating these women believed that those accepting their assistance were less than equals. It also indicated that the women were still working within a framework more conducive to charity than reform. Eventually this attitude, when felt by the "objects", would lead to discontent and lessen the effectiveness of the YWCA.

The YWCA maintained close supervision of the girls. The Toronto YWCA insisted that they make their own beds, tidy their own rooms, and be in the home before 9 p.m., after which time the house would be closed.<sup>69</sup> It also required character references from those resident in town. Boarders were forbidden to take friends to their rooms without special permission and were expected to attend church at least once on Sunday and be present at prayers every evening.<sup>70</sup> In order to meet any of the complaints that might arise, two of the House Committee were to be present at the Boarding House every Monday morning till

<sup>65</sup> Minutebook, Toronto YWCA, Second Annual Report.

<sup>66</sup> J. HARSHAW, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>67</sup> See *Canada Investigates Industrialism*, Greg. KEALEY, ed. (Toronto, 1973) and Susan Mann TROFIMENKOFF, "One Hundred and Two Muffled Voices: Canada's Industrial Women in the 1880s," *Atlantis* 3, 1 (Fall 1977): 66-84.

<sup>68</sup> Minutebook, Toronto YWCA, 9 May 1873.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 Aug. 1873.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 May 1876. Most YWCAs had such rules.

twelve o'clock.<sup>71</sup> Considering that the time set aside was during working hours, it is difficult to imagine how those with grievances were expected to be present.

But the YWCA went further than this supervision. The women had to ask for every favour and freedom. In 1874 boarders were permitted to invite *one female friend* for Christmas dinner.<sup>72</sup> In 1896 at the meeting of the Toronto Directresses, complaints concerning the "incessant" calls for boarders at the telephone had been received. As a result telephone privileges were removed, that is, boarders now had to pay five cents to use the phone and no one could receive calls; all messages were taken by the secretary or matron.<sup>73</sup> In 1899 the boarders sent a letter requesting a social evening and dance. The former was agreed to but the latter was refused "as the action of the Board in allowing it might be misconstrued."<sup>74</sup> Clearly the Board was concerned about what its supporters and membership might think. This concern for appearances was often uppermost, and boarders had to supplicate the Board for privileges, not rights. The women of the YWCA appeared very patronizing towards the boarders, often treating them as charges. Resentment on the part of the boarders was the inevitable result.

The members of the YWCA wanted to keep a close watch over the boarders, many of whom were away from the influence of their families for the first time. The YWCA members felt that their boarding homes would be a substitute and they the arbiters of the girls' morality. The control over these women is perhaps analogous to that of a mother over her child. But working women were not children — they were independent adults, a fact which the YWCA had difficulty in fully accepting.

The ladies on the Board of Managers of the Home became, whether deliberately or not, figures of authority. As Mary Q. Innis has concluded, "these women worked for girls, not with them.... The girls were regarded as helplessly passive and the Association ladies decided what was best for them and worked hard to provide it."<sup>75</sup> Certainly some of the young women were sensitive to this. On 18 September 1874, one boarder in the Toronto YWCA wrote the following letter to the Board of Managers of the Boarding Home.

Ladies, I regret to have to trouble you with any complaint from me as regards this Institution but it were better you should hear them openly from me than to hear from others. I came here with the expectation of finding a kind and Christian home but at present it cannot take that name. It is a libel on the word Christian. For where there is no kindness to the sick or suffering there is no love of God. We have a blessing asked at meal times and prayer in the evenings but they are mere forms I think for were they true sentiments of a Christian heart, you would be treated half kindly or even with respect, but as it is we who pay our [\$3.00 per week] are treated as though we were taken of [sic] the

<sup>71</sup> INNIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>72</sup> Minutebook, Toronto YWCA, 21 Dec. 1874, emphasis mine.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 Dec. 1896.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 Feb. 1899.

<sup>75</sup> INNIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

streets and should be thankful for even a crumb of Bread. I am not one who has just left my mother's knee but have taught school for five years and of course make allowances for all boarding houses, but I never was treated by servants as I am by those who call themselves Ladies. I was glad when I heard of this Institution being opened and supposed many could avail themselves of such good protection and a Christian home.<sup>76</sup>

The purpose of the YWCA was to help working women. These women were not destitute and could not be treated as objects of charity. For the most part, the women of the YWCA were conscious of this fact, but unfortunately for the success of the YWCA they did not always act upon the realization.

## VI

Although the YWCA may have assumed the traditional approach of charitable societies, its purpose was different. It was concerned, not with helpless and destitute women, but with self-supporting women, a concern which reflected the changing role of women within Canadian society. By helping them the YWCA gave guarded acceptance to that change. It was also a reflection of a new perspective. The destitute and helpless had long received assistance through charity associations. Now working women, struggling for economic independence, were to receive assistance as well. Many Canadians believed that the helpless and destitute would always be with them. The position of the working poor was somewhat different. Their poverty, after all, did not stem from the inability or dis-inclination to work. Perhaps their position could be altered. This could only be done through reform of the social and economic system. It is by inadvertently bringing attention to the working woman that the YWCA helped lay the groundwork for such reform.

Although the YWCA recognized that working women were not a transitory phenomenon and wanted to help them, it was constrained by several factors. First, because of the historical development of the YWCA, the national organization never provided strong and co-ordinated direction to aid nineteenth-century working women. It was weakened by the strength and different aims of local unions. The college YWCAs tended to be prayer unions whereas the city YWCAs were comparatively oriented to secular reform. Attempting to forge a strong national union out of such different locals was a major task and dissipated what energy the national union had for reform. This dissipation was also felt by the local associations, for each one shared the not always compatible pulls of spiritual and temporal aims. It was also difficult for the YWCA to respond to its temporal goal in the dynamic and innovative way usually associated with reform because of its organizational structure.

The YWCA was dominated by a small group of women who had the passive support of the membership, a situation hardly conducive to meeting the real needs of working women, for this would have neces-

<sup>76</sup> Minutebook, Toronto YWCA, 18 Sept. 1874.

sitated involvement not only in their place of residence but also their place of work. This would have taken YWCA members from concern with the private sphere to concern with the public, a step at odds with their own perception of womens' proper roles.

The ladies of the YWCA conformed to the domestic ideal of womanhood which insisted that women should not work and be independent. The YWCA's stress on domestic science revealed its approval of the ideal, and its home rules and regulations over working women reflected a determination to see that the domestic ideal was challenged as little as possible. The YWCA wanted to maintain social stability, and for its members this was maintenance of the domestic ideal. Given this their hesitancy in attacking the problems of working women head on becomes understandable. Their dilemma was similar to many reformers — how to maintain a society of which they basically approved while responding to the needs of certain groups within it.

Even in the private sphere their response to working women was ambivalent. They were dealing with independent women and yet their approach was coloured by charitable attitudes preventing YWCA members from treating these women as equals. They insisted upon having control over their activities in the boarding homes. The homes were not the homes of the boarders but the homes of the YWCA and the YWCA made the rules, just as parents made the rules for their children. While the YWCA recognized the independent working woman it had not fully accepted her independence.

The YWCA, like most reform organizations, was influenced in its responses to the problems of nineteenth-century Canada by many factors — its desire to improve society, vested interests, the values of society, organizational difficulties and traditional responses to new problems. All these came into play in the YWCA response to the working woman in Canada. The members of the YWCA were neither saints nor sinners but middle class Canadian women responding to a need in society as best they could. They are perhaps open to criticism for not doing more but the reasons they did not were hardly machiavellian. These reasons do underline the need for historians to appreciate the sometimes conflicting and complex pressures on Canadian middle class reformers at the turn of the century.