

Medical Perceptions of Healthy Women:

The Case of Late Nineteenth Century Canada

by Wendy Mitchinson

Throughout the late Victorian period, Canadians, both women and men, tended to emphasize the differences between the two sexes more than the similarities. The overriding belief was that "women were equal but different." Not surprisingly, physicians, too, espoused such a view and their attitudes towards and treatment of women reflected this.

As early as 1813, William Buchan, in his popular medical guide *Domestic Medicine*, delineated the proper role and place of women in society: "Women, in all civilized nations, have the management of domestic affairs, and it is very proper they should, as nature has made them less fit for the active and laborious employments."¹ Such a view equated civilization and women's domestic role, argued that this role was determined by nature, and that women were not men's equal with respect to work outside the home. For the rest of the century, physicians would emphasize one or more of these themes in their discussions about healthy women.

The reproductive system of women was the major determinant of differences between the two sexes. It not only made them appear to be different, it made them different emotionally, intellectually, and psychologically. However, unlike the male reproductive system, physicians believed that women's reproductive system dominated them — in some respects women were their reproductive systems. R. Pierce, in his *The People's Common Sense Medical Adviser*, asserted that a woman could not be a woman if she did not have ovaries. Without them, she became more masculine and engaged in male endeavors.² Dr. Holbrook, in his *Parturition Without Pain* (1890) went even further when he claimed that "Woman exists for the sake of the womb."³ Indeed, the purpose of women

was seen as bearing children. That was why the reproductive system existed and woe betide any woman who denied her body the experience.

Not only did physicians perceive that women's bodies dominated them, but they also argued that those bodies did not function very well.⁴ They maintained that this was not the fault of society, nor of the women themselves, but due to "the wisdom of the Creator."⁵ By blaming God, physicians absolved themselves of any blame in not being able to bring health to their women patients and suggested that women would simply have to learn to accept the limitations placed on them by their own bodies.

Understandably, physicians were intrigued by the physical differences between the two sexes. It was their responsibility to offer relief to patients who came to them with physical ailments. However, they believed that women's bodies not only made them biologically different (and weaker) than men but also intellectually inferior. William Carpenter, in his 1847 textbook, widely used in Canadian medical schools, declared in no uncertain terms that "putting aside the exceptional cases which now and then occur — the intellectual powers of Woman are inferior to those of Man."⁶ He consoled women by pointing out that their intuitive powers were superior. Other physicians agreed with this, arguing that woman's intellectual development ended earlier than man's, that essentially she was lower on the evolutionary ladder.⁷

The characteristics that the medical profession viewed as specifically female were ones that allowed women to function in a world where they held little power; adaptability and intuitiveness.⁸ Such attributes made the adult female different than the adult male. The danger of such a view was that doctors treating

women lacking these characteristics would deem them deviant or ill.

For most physicians, the central experience in a woman's life was maternity. Motherhood made women equal to men. So strong a belief was this that doctors advised young women against furthering their education, arguing that it would only weaken them and lead to their inability to bear healthy children. For the same reasons, they vehemently opposed any form of birth control.⁹ Women who rejected maternity were to be pitied or, even worse, to be ridiculed. George Napheys, in his *The Physical Life of Woman: Advice to the Maiden, Wife and Mother*, while admitting that some unmarried women could be admired, maintained that most conformed to the stereotypical view of being "peevish, selfish, given to queer fancies and unpleasant eccentricities."¹⁰

The beliefs of physicians regarding women would not be so significant except that they were becoming the arbiters of health in Canada. They were setting up norms about what it meant to be a healthy adult woman. They did not restrict their opinions to the physical woman, but extended them to the psychological woman. Since for doctors, body and mind were linked, they spoke out on a wide variety of issues concerning women with an authority that only in the present day is being challenged.

¹William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine* (London, 1813), p. 410.

²R. Pierce, *The People's Common Sense Medical Adviser in Plain English* (Buffalo, 1882), p. 714. This book had wide distribution in Canada.

³Martin Holbrook, *Parturition Without Pain: A Code of Directions for Escaping*

from the *Primal Curse* (Toronto, c. 1890), p. 312.

⁴See Wendy Mitchinson, "Causes of Disease in Women: The Case of Late 19th Century English Canada," in Charles Roland (ed.), *Health, Disease and Medicine: Essays in Canadian History* (Toronto, 1984), pp. 381-95.

⁵Alvin Wood Chase, *Chase's Recipes*

(London, Ont., 1873), p. 210.

⁶William Carpenter, *Principles of Human Physiology* (Philadelphia, 1847), pp. 911-12, 928-29.

⁷Henry Lyman, *The Practical Home Physician* (Guelph, 1892), p. 842; Alexander Skene, *Medical Gynecology: A Treatise on the Disease of Women from the Standpoint of the Physician* (New

York, 1895), pp. 72, 79.

⁸Skene, *Medical Gynecology*, pp. 80, 82.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 72, 79; Holbrook, *Parturition Without Pain*, p. 312.

¹⁰George Napheys, *The Physical Life of Woman: Maiden, Wife and Mother* (Toronto, 1890), p. 269.

ALISON HOPWOOD

Breakfast table

Too familiar to notice or think of
the table has its everyday look
butter is yellow marmalade orange
creamy brown coffee steams in its mug
slices of bread lie in their basket
between a vase of flowers from the
garden
and the bright rectangular toaster

Pushed the toaster lever goes down
but inside the firm solid shape
some connection is not made
black wires stay black
shining metal stays cold
gives no clue to the breakdown
between yesterday and today

Changed and changing
the flowers look different
funnels of lemon lily are twisted shut
bright poppies lie flat open
pale rose heads hang heavy
Stem leaf petal
are intricate and various

Buds are arrayed from stalk-green to
flower-yellow
orange saucers show off constellations
of pollen-tipped stamens around
swelling pistels
almost-grey sepals point back
to dark-green serrated leaves
Day lily Welsh poppy white rose
invite consideration

Strategies

The heron stands in the small pool
watching for frog or fish wary of us

We sit on a lot waiting too
our picnic lunch will not escape

Cautious we move hands to eat

the heron flies off

Rain pockmarks the grey lagoon
white swans ride steady

With coats buttoned hands gloved
we walk briskly

Rain comes down harder
we leave the park head for shelter

The white feathers shine
on the dark water

The snail retreats into its shell
the butterfly flits elusive out of reach
the bee stings the intruder

Lacking shell or wings
born weaponless
we think about survival

LORRAINE WHELAN

at the opening

he breathed the air in
and never let it go
his hand against his chest
his body expanding weird
the wool of his sweater
got caught in my eye
I was mesmerized
no — hypnotized

he said his name was Jacob
and I searched
for some significance
but momentarily
lost my memory
of everything but the blue
glaring circles
on his face

he was telling me stories

he was telling me lies
he said he had a brother-in-law
who was a professor of art
or mathematics, maybe
psychology or philosophy
whose name he did not know
he said he had a friend named 'Joe'

he said his family ran a gallery
where only family work was shown
every member was an artist
and had been since the Renaissance
but always, yes, always
they had to work to live
he said this gallery was in London
I tried to map it in my mind

I wanted to get away
I wanted to sip my champagne
but could not bring the glass
up to my face, over to my lips
unless I could look
and know that it was still
held in my hand

I wanted to turn my head
but it would not move
and I could not move
I stared
I could no longer
understand what he said
I could no longer
hear him
I said pardon
I said pardon

I thought I must be reading his lips
I was not looking at his lips
it was his eyes
they were talking
I thought he was insane
yet he must be skillful
to keep me there
in stillness
in a trance
as he transmitted
telepathic lies
to me