

“Rebel Woman,” “Little Woman,” and the Eclectic Print Culture of Protest in *The Woman Worker*, 1926–1929

The cultural material in interwar periodicals of protest is a vital site of information regarding the complex history of Canada’s early-twentieth-century “woman question.” It also has much to tell us about the tangled history of the welfare state in Canada and its relation to women’s discourses of reform, which might seem surprising, given that the magazine of interest here, *The Woman Worker*, was published between 1926 and 1929 by an affiliate of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC).¹ Yet, as later Communist periodicals such as *Masses* (1932–1934) and the *Daily Clarion* (1936–1939) attest, the CPC and its affiliates made significant contributions to nascent ideas about the welfare state in modern Canada. This is particularly true of the periods during which the CPC was engaged in “united” and “Popular Front” initiatives, through the 1920s and during the latter half of the 1930s, for example.² Nonetheless, what Dennis Guest calls the “largely unrecorded history of attempts to introduce ‘citizen participation’ into policy making and administration” (85) that is embodied in early- and mid-twentieth-century periodicals of protest (particularly those on the far left) has not played much part in shaping narratives of the development of the welfare state in Canada.³ Less visible still is the role of women, and particularly working-class and immigrant women, in this ephemeral history of “citizen participation.” Important groundwork has been laid: studies in labour history, such as Margaret Hobbs’ and Joan Sangster’s invaluable 1999 survey of *The Woman Worker*, have mined early- and mid-twentieth-century periodicals of protest for their political arguments and as sources for social history, and literary critics have begun the work of analyzing the literary content of and

the role played by women editors and writers within these publications.⁴ This essay will build on this historical and literary scholarship to examine how the cultural material in the pages of *The Woman Worker* plays a crucial role in its performance of protest. Yet the object of social and political change is not constant in *The Woman Worker*, a fact that can be attributed to the political and cultural eclecticism of its creators and readers and that testifies to the diversity of the conceptions of “woman” that the periodical was engaging. A contradictory iconography and discourse of womanhood, and hence of political change, runs through the periodical’s poetry and fiction: if what one reader calls the “rebel woman” gestures obviously to *The Woman Worker*’s Communist affiliations, its support of equal-rights feminism, and its fraught negotiations with a masculinist tradition of workers’ verse, a figure I characterize as the “little woman” suggests its equally frequent recourse to the ideologies of parliamentary reform and maternal feminism, as well as its use and revision of the Anglo-American novel of social reform.

***The Woman Worker* and Its Contexts**

Labour historians have long appreciated the value of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century protest press, and their work is a wonderful resource for understanding its contents. By the 1920s, the leftist periodical press was a central part of creative and political culture in Canada. The first major leftist periodical in Canada was the weekly newspaper of the Nine-Hour Movement, the *Ontario Workman* (1872-1875), which featured a fair quantity of creative writing. Leftist periodicals subsequently developed in tandem with the growth of trade unionism and political radicalism in Canada. According to F. W. Watt, by the 1920s, these periodicals “emerged not merely from the dissident minority among the working classes, but from the respectable middle-class intellectuals who had earlier remained aloof” (467). Literary and cultural scholars in Canada have, for many years, acknowledged the importance of the mid-twentieth-century “little-magazine” movement, but only recently have scholars interested in the cultural history of protest begun to examine periodicals that an earlier generation of scholars deemed unliterary and thus outside the movement. While foundational essays such as Ruth I. McKenzie’s “Proletarian Literature in Canada” (1939) and Watt’s “The Literature of Protest” (1965) mapped out literary histories of protest in Canada that brought previously occluded periodicals into literary-critical view, these scholars also clearly felt ambivalent about the aesthetic qualities of the “horary chants and indignant diatribes” they were recuperating

(Watt 471-72). Contemporary critics such as James Doyle, Caren Irr, Dean Irvine, and Candida Rifkind reject the aesthetic cringe of McKenzie and Watt, and find historical *and* cultural interest in the interwar leftist periodical press in Canada, particularly the press of the troubled 1930s and publications such as *Masses* and *New Frontier* (1934-1936). Irvine and Rifkind follow trends in the new modernist studies and cultural studies (for instance, in the work of Michael Denning and Cary Nelson) and seek to validate Canada's early-twentieth-century protest press by incorporating its experiments into the modernist fold. Indeed, in his history of women's participation in Canada's modernist "little magazine" movement, Irvine insists on the inclusion of interwar leftist publications such as *The Woman Worker*, claiming that despite its origins in the CPC newspaper *The Worker* (1922-1936), its "typical little magazine format" renders it an example of a category that he modifies to include "those non-commercial literary, arts, and cultural-interest magazines whose editors facilitated and participated in the construction of a magazine culture for their contributors and readers—but not, primarily, for profit" (195, 16). As I seek to demonstrate, however, the narrative of literary modernism's arrival in Canada does not fully explain the literary, aesthetic, and political eclecticism of a periodical like *The Woman Worker*.

Left of such well-known progressive periodicals as the *Canadian Forum* (1920-2000), numerous serial publications flourished in the 1920s; *The Woman Worker* was one of them. *The Woman Worker* was published by the Toronto-based Canadian Federation of Women's Labor Leagues (CFWLL). Although Women's Labor Leagues in Canada predate the First World War, these groups assumed a new organizational structure in the wake of the creation of the CPC in 1921.⁵ At the urging of the International Women's Secretariat of the Communist International (Comintern), the CPC set up a Women's Department in 1924 and began to demonstrate a new "measure of sympathy for women's particular oppression" (Sangster 27-32). This Department strove to centralize the scattered WLL movement under the Toronto-based CFWLL—a not inconsiderable task, given the mixed heritage of the movement in British WLLs and the Finnish "sewing circles" attached to the prewar Social Democratic Party of Canada, and considering the ethnic diversity and regionally specific political priorities of these groups (Hobbs and Sangster 8-9; Sangster 45-52). Florence Custance was the national secretary of the CFWLL, and she became editor of *The Woman Worker* when it was launched as an organizational tool from an office at 211 Milverton Blvd. in Toronto in 1926.⁶ Modest in appearance but professionally

printed by the Sutherland Printshop in Toronto, devoid of colour save the muted green front and back cover, small in stature (just shy of twenty-four centimetres tall and sixteen centimetres wide), and almost entirely without images, the sixteen-page *Woman Worker* was antithetical in every way to the large-format, mass-circulation magazines with glossy paper and full-page illustrations that became so popular in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁷ It did, however, share a ten-cent price tag with its mass-market peers, such as *Canadian Home Journal* (1896-1958). *The Woman Worker* attempted to reach readers who were bombarded by the visual pleasures of such periodicals as *Canadian Home Journal*, *Mayfair* (1927-1961), and *Chatelaine* (1928-). It is not surprising that some League members, such as the women who attended a 1926 miners' picnic in Blairmore, Alberta, compared it unfavourably to its more colourful counterparts.⁸

As a leftist periodical published by and for women, *The Woman Worker* represents a significant first in Canadian history: its contemporaries on the left—*Holos Robitnytsi* (1922-1924) and *Robitnysia* (1924-1937), which were published by the Women's Section of the United Labor-Farmer Temple Association—were edited by men, and more general attempts in the socialist periodical press to include women's voices or to address their specific concerns were generally confined to "women's columns" (Hobbs and Sangster 8). *The Woman Worker* began as such a column in 1924—"The Working Women's Section" of the CPC paper *The Worker*. If this initial effort in many ways anticipates the politicized character of its progeny, later women's columns in CPC publications, such as the "With Our Women" column that ran during the 1930s in *The Worker* (later called the *Daily Clarion* [1936-1939]), worries less about women as wage-earners and political activists and more about their identities as homemakers who might be seeking recipes, housekeeping advice, and dressmaking patterns. Columns such as "With Our Women" spoke to working-class women by adapting but not fundamentally challenging the conception of women in new forms of mass media, such as mass-circulation magazines and movies. For example, in the 5 February 1936 issue of *The Worker*, the editor of "With Our Women," Anne Smith, offers the column's typical fare: a pattern for a suit "to brighten up the wardrobe," a recipe for potato soup, and tips for removing white rings on wooden furniture (4). Somewhat ironically, Beatrice Ferneyhough's contribution to this column on 16 May 1936 laments the lack of a socialist magazine for working-class, Canadian women who must content themselves with the "nauseous gushings" of mass-market

magazines (6); that Ferneyhough does not refer directly to the example set by *The Woman Worker* in the 1920s speaks to the marginal place that the CFWLL and its organ retained in the organizational memory of the CPC.

The Woman Worker demonstrates an entirely different conception of its female reader than one finds in either the mass-market women's magazines of the period or the women's columns of the leftist press. Custance made this clear in the first issue (July 1926), with her declaration that the periodical would "not contain fashions and patterns, and we are leaving recipes for cooking to the cook book" ("Success" 33). Like the WLLs themselves, which often formed book discussion groups and organized lectures, *The Woman Worker* took as its mission the education of its readers. Moreover, like Maurice Spector, the editor of the CPC paper *The Worker*, Custance was "prepared to acknowledge the promotion of literary culture as part of the paper's responsibilities," following the priority granted to the arts in post-revolutionary Russia, where a "dogmatic party line" concerning artistic production had not yet been drawn (Doyle 62-63). In each monthly issue, readers of *The Woman Worker* were treated to editorials by Custance; brief articles on labour and political topics; a short story, poem, or book review; and regular, frequently reader-authored features such as "Our Labor Leagues at Work," "Our Educational Page," "Notes and Happenings," "Questions We Are Asked," "Our Letter Box," and "Shop and Factory Life." Despite the fact that *The Woman Worker* declared itself, on the final page of every issue, in the service of "all working women, whether they work in the factory, at home, or in office," the Leagues themselves, where most of the periodical's readers were generated, "never brought in substantial numbers of wage-earning women" (Hobbs and Sangster 10). It is therefore striking that Custance chose not to repeat or adapt for working-class women the messages of the rapidly proliferating mass-circulation magazines that were aimed at North American housewives; rather, she offered a political alternative that emphasized above all else the importance of unionization to working-class women and their families.

"Rebel Woman" and "Little Woman"

Basic to the cultural politics of *The Woman Worker* is the division in early feminist thought that historians identify as the split between equal-rights feminism and maternal (or social) feminism. If the first "held that women were entitled by right of their common humanity to equal rights with men," the latter, which emerged from the late-nineteenth-century North

American reform movement, “held that women were fundamentally different from men, and thus deserved access to specific rights (such as the vote) because they had by nature and by training ‘maternal’ virtues such as compassion, self-control, nurturance, compromise, and moral purity” (Dean 59). As Misao Dean points out, this difference was not particularly visible in Canada’s first wave of feminism (because equal-rights feminism was associated with US-American republicanism and because of other conservative influences in English-Canadian thought) (119, n. 4); however, analysis of *The Woman Worker* demonstrates that equal-rights arguments strongly influenced WLL discourse. For example, references to the new forms of political, economic, and social equality of Russian women (the legalization of abortion, the acceptance of civil marriage, an amended family law code that established women’s equal status in marriage) are abundant in the pages of *The Woman Worker*.⁹ Somewhat paradoxically, these exaltations of equal rights are often articulated alongside the maternal-feminist arguments that the middle-class counterparts of the WLLs—the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the Young Women’s Christian Association, and the National Council of Women—embraced.

Two figures who, in various guises, populate the pages of the periodical, illustrate perfectly the contradiction between equal-rights feminism and its maternal counterpart: the first, the “rebel woman,” is militant, unabashed in her demands for revolutionary change, a proponent of equal rights for men and women, and is almost never characterized as a mother; the second, a figure I call the “little woman,” is a suffering mother who either struggles to make ends meet on her husband’s wage or is forced into “wage slavery,” suffers from poor health due to poverty and frequent childbirth, and requires protection by the state. These two figures demonstrate the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory feminist politics of *The Woman Worker*—a politics that must be understood in relation to several key related contexts: the “peripheral status of the woman question within the Party” (Sangster 52); the diverse membership and relative local autonomy of the WLLs; and the “united front” strategy of the periodical, which frequently led to collaboration with middle-class women’s reform organizations (44-45). Although Custance was a staunch Communist supporter and important party member, not all of the local leagues or their members reflected her radical political commitments, and there remained, throughout the existence of the League, “some tension between the firm Communist leadership provided by the Women’s Department and a more politically eclectic

membership” (Hobbs and Sangster 9). For example, the ethnic diversity of the Leagues—there were Anglo-Canadian, Jewish, Finnish, and Ukrainian groups, among others—reflected the many traditions of leftist organizing that were activated under the name of the CFWLL, all of which brought their own views to bear on the “woman question.”

I take the phrase “rebel woman” from the April 1928 issue of *The Woman Worker*, in which Custance reminds readers that she is seeking an image for the cover page. She notes that “our Rebel Woman” sent in a submission that “shows a working woman dressed as a soldier—with gun in hand—ready for action.” Custance’s response is playful and approbatory: “But since we are not allowed to send pictures which depict violence through the mail, we shall be compelled to keep the picture in storage for the time being. It is far too good to be destroyed” (“This Would Kill” 5).¹⁰ Literally invisible to readers but evoked with a paradoxical mixture of humour and menace, the “rebel woman” was a militant, revolutionary figure who could not circulate easily in 1920s Canada; nevertheless, she had a crucial function in the periodical. The CPC and the CFWLL viewed *The Woman Worker* as an “important counterweight” to the influence of the capitalist press, and particularly those mass-circulation magazines aimed at housewives (Hobbs and Sangster 10); the “rebel woman” was perhaps the heaviest stone in this counterweight.

The figure of the “rebel woman” is particularly visible in the poetry that appeared in the pages of *The Woman Worker*. The ubiquity of this figure in the periodical’s poetry is not surprising, given the function poetry assumed in other leftist periodicals from the 1920s. Analyzing literary and cultural material in the CPC’s periodicals *The Worker* and *Young Worker* (1924-1936), Doyle observes that contributors in the 1920s “seemed to find poetry more suitable than fiction to the expression of the positive aspects of the revolutionary struggle” (72). Indeed, poetry appears more commonly than fiction in the pages of *The Woman Worker*, particularly after May 1927, when a new column, “Shop and Factory Life,” largely displaced short fiction with “true” tales from shop and factory floors. As in many Canadian socialist periodicals from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, creative content was often reprinted from US-American and British sources; moreover, “Canadian Communist writers in the 1920s . . . continued, like their radical predecessors, to owe more to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British, Canadian, and US traditions than to the Russian Revolution and its aesthetic reverberations,” largely because socialists in Canada had little access to the aesthetic debates of post-revolutionary Russia until the 1930s (Doyle 63-64).

Nonetheless, contributors to *The Woman Worker* had a rich “revolutionary chorus” of leftist songs and ballads from which to draw poetic inspiration.¹¹ One note in this chorus that seems especially important in the making of the “rebel woman” is US-American labour activist Joe Hill’s “The Rebel Girl” (1911), which was a key text in the interwar, leftist repertoire of song. Hill was a popular songwriter for the Industrial Workers of the World, and “The Rebel Girl” announces the importance of women to revolutionary action:

That’s the Rebel Girl, that’s the Rebel Girl!
To the working class she’s a precious pearl.
She brings courage, pride and joy
To the fighting Rebel Boy;
We’ve had girls before, but we need some more
In the Industrial Workers of the World,
For it’s great to fight for freedom
With a Rebel Girl. (293)

While Hill’s “Rebel Girl” becomes a *woman* in *The Woman Worker*’s invisible icon, this insistence is not followed through in the periodical’s poetry, which often leaves the rebel figure deliberately unmarked in terms of gender, a fact that suggests the discomfort with which WLL members attempted to adopt the leftist “revolutionary chorus” as their own.

“A Rebel,” reprinted in *The Woman Worker* (January 1927) from the Glasgow *Forward* (“sent in by a reader of *The Woman Worker*”), offers a particularly good example of the optimistic, militant verse in the periodical that urged women to revolutionary action. Using the ballad stanza, which has deep roots in folk culture and masculine, working-class traditions of song, “A Rebel” exploits the well-known rhythm of alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter in order to render familiar the exhortation of its speaker, who urges his or her silent auditor to action:

The time is ripe for action, Bill,
Let’s stand together, true,
And move to take the wealth we make,
Shall we—me and you? (13)

The speaker of “A Rebel” may offer a verbal corollary to the image submitted to *The Woman Worker* by “our Rebel Woman,” but the speaker’s gender is unclear, which may be the reason the poem was reprinted in *The Woman Worker*, where its ambiguity strongly suggests a woman speaker apostrophizing her meek mate. The ballad form of “A Rebel,” however, was a staple of popular workers’ verse for centuries in western Europe and North America, and the poem’s gender ambiguity cannot eclipse the strong

male tradition it exists within. Transposing the ballad to Canadian contexts, versifiers such as T. Phillips Thompson (in his 1892 *Labor Reform Songster*) and, somewhat later, Dawn Fraser (whose pre-war ballads were collected in *Songs of Siberia and Rhymes of the Road*, probably published around 1919) were important figures in Canada's late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century tradition of workers' poetry. This was a resolutely male tradition, despite the presence of some female voices, such as that of Marie Joussaye.¹²

Other poems sent to the periodical by readers from the WLLs complement the revolutionary optimism of "A Rebel." "A May Day Tribute" (May 1928), for example, critiques the doctrine of Christian meekness and figures the inexorable coming of the revolution, again in the familiar rhythm of iambic tetrameter and with a dramatic nod to the international left in its concluding line:

It comes—O mighty, onward, surging force—
No earthly power can stay thy course
From that inevitable meeting place
Of uprising workers of every race—
All barriers shall be swept away
Or thrown aside to rot—decay
With Victory at last we'll Hail
THE WORKERS' INTERNATIONALE! (7-8)

The author of this poem, identified only as "M.C.," contributed other strident verse to *The Woman Worker*, such as "Courage" (September 1928), which insists on collective action through the first-person plural: "Till the tyrant is down and lies crushed at our feet" (8). The employment of the first-person plural as a metonym for the international left is a strategy common to the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century male tradition of workers' verse. The production of poems such as "A Rebel," "A May Day Tribute," and "Courage" in the pages of a periodical destined for women readers widens this collective "we" to include women, but the poems do not specifically apostrophize them. Contributors to *The Woman Worker* were clearly hesitant to employ verse as a form of protest specific to women's experiences, probably because of the weight of the male tradition of workers' poetry and song. Moreover, this tradition was amplified in its masculinism during what Ian McKay calls Canadian socialism's "second formation" (1917-1935), when a "tough-minded military language" and iconography permeated the leftist press (94).

However, the ballad form was turned occasionally to more explicitly feminist ends in the pages of *The Woman Worker*. "Prostitutes" a ballad submitted

by “A Reader” and published on the same page as “A Rebel,” lambastes the hypocrisy that calls her trade prostitution but allows other evils to flourish:

Your preachers preach a lie for gain,
Your statesmen war for loot,
But only I in all the world
Am called a prostitute. (13)

Given the frequent attention devoted in *The Woman Worker* to the exploitation of young working “girls” and the dangers of the “white slave trade” and prostitution generally, this ballad, which speaks in the voice of a prostitute who wants to know why she should not “live on their wealth / As price of their desire?” is remarkable. Further evidence of the fact that “Prostitutes” is pushing the limits of the speakable is the author’s means of self-identification; like many contributors to *The Woman Worker*, “A Reader” prefers to remain anonymous.

Of course, the gender ambiguity of initials makes it impossible to know if poems such as “Courage” were actually authored by female readers. Indeed, the most frequent contributor of poetry to *The Woman Worker* was a man who did not belong to a local WLL—Robert Whitaker, the well-known British-American socialist, writer, and Baptist minister from La Crescenta, California. Unlike many of the contributions to *The Woman Worker*, Whitaker’s work is signed with his full name and his place of residence. Only one of Whitaker’s eight poems echoes the discourse of the “Rebel Woman”: like “Prostitutes,” “The First Stone” (February 1929) employs a first-person, female speaker who condemns the hypocrisy of those male clerics and lawyers who “sell” their “brains” but condemn her work as illegal (8). Almost all of Whitaker’s other poems rely on male speakers and the figure of universal brotherhood in order to communicate a desire for worldwide socialism. Whitaker’s dominant presence in *The Woman Worker* suggests its editor’s desire to connect the publication to a more international socialist community, the editor’s and perhaps readers’ identification of the male voice with verse as a form of protest, and the possibility that the periodical had difficulty attracting poetic contributions from Canadian WLL members. Indeed, the regular column “Our Labor Leagues at Work” never cites the writing of fiction and poetry as one of the regular undertakings of the local WLLs.

The “rebel woman,” despite her powerful presence in *The Woman Worker*, was not alone. The most immediate evidence of this fact is the cover image, which first appeared on the July-August 1928 issue. Although Custance obviously preferred the “rebel woman,” she chose WLL member Aileen

Hautamaki's considerably tamer submission, which features a short-haired woman holding a book—symbolizing “KNOWLEDGE”—in her right hand, and a flaming torch—representative of “ENLIGHTENMENT”—in her left hand (“Readers—Please Take Notice” 10). This woman is reminiscent of the ancient figure of “Lady Justice,” who is often depicted holding a sword in her right hand and the scales of justice in her left. There is nothing weak about Hautamaki's woman, but she is a far cry from her gun-toting counterpart. Custance's compromise speaks to her desire to communicate with a broad spectrum of women—it is significant that the upheld book is not identified—as well as her intention to stay within the limits of legality. This tamer icon of womanhood was accompanied *within* the pages of the periodical by the “little woman”—a figure who constantly shadows her rebellious counterpart. The epithet comes from A. D. A.'s story “Modern Values Struggle” (December 1926), which follows the travails of a “little woman,” a “poor little victim” of child labour who moves from the factories of England to an unnamed Canadian city where the prospects for a young, working-class family are dim indeed. The figure of the “little woman” is consistent in *The Woman Worker*: as in this story, she is hardworking, morally respectable, and thrifty but physically exhausted from excessive—often waged—labour. Indeed, her entry into waged labour is invariably the catalyst for greater troubles; the waged work of married women and mothers, in particular, is construed as harmful to family life and “an unfortunate burden, not a right” (Hobbs and Sangster 39). In keeping with this message regarding the need to safeguard women as mothers or as potential mothers, the final page of each issue of *The Woman Worker* (until June 1928) announces the periodical's commitment to the “protection of womanhood,” the “care of motherhood,” and “co-operation in place of competition.”

While the “Rebel Woman” is prominent in the poetry published in *The Woman Worker*, the “little woman” more often finds her home in its short fiction. As was the case with the poetry of protest in the 1920s, leftist writers of short fiction in Canada, lacking access to cultural debates from Soviet Russia, tended to look to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century US-American and British models for inspiration (Doyle 63-64). The variegated strains of the nineteenth-century, Anglo-American print culture of social reform exercised considerable influence on contributors to *The Woman Worker*. Narratives of reform were strongly identified with Anglo-American writing throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and had the added advantage of already being associated with women's

writing, even if they were likely tainted, in the eyes of some WLLers, by their frequently overt Christian mission. In their portrayal of endangered working women, many of the stories in *The Woman Worker* owe a debt to narratives of social reform such as Harold Begbie's *A London Girl* (1925), which was positively reviewed in the second issue (August 1926) as a novel that encourages the reader to revile "those who set themselves to destroy the lives and beautiful bodies of young girls" (10). Other stories, such as the anonymously authored "The Story of Ellen Kenealey (A True Story from Life)" (July 1926), depend on the didactic melodrama of some reform narratives in order to lend urgency and appeal to their messages concerning the dangers of working life for women in cities. In "The Story of Ellen Kenealey," the eponymous protagonist is out of work, unmarried, aging, and utterly alone. Ellen's private worries are communicated via an internally focalized narrator: "Who was there to give her shelter or assistance when her last cent was gone? No one. What would she be in the eyes of the law? A vagrant"(12). Desperate, Ellen commits suicide by swallowing carbolic acid.

Yet the short fiction published in *The Woman Worker* was not all sensational formula and didactic narrative intervention: in their daring foray into social realism and analyses of structural ills, they are striking examples of the realist fiction that was beginning to emerge in 1920s Canada. Contributors of short stories were, like Jessie Georgina Sime, writing a new Canadian fiction of working-class women's urban experiences. As Carole Gerson contends, these experiences were, with a few exceptions, invisible in Canadian writing prior to the First World War (*A Purer Taste* 140). Much earlier than in Canada, according to Amanda Claybaugh, British and US-American reform narratives expanded the domain of artistic representation to include such previously invisible experiences, places, and persons as "poverty, drunkenness, and disease; prisons, factories, slums, and madhouses; prostitutes, laborers, servants, and slaves" (6). Such a widened view was clearly valued by contributors to *The Woman Worker*. A. D. A., for example, lauds Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) in the April 1927 issue for its realistic portrayal of the "lives of industrial workers" ("Mary Barton" 10). A Victorian novel of social reform with a decidedly nineteenth-century interventionist narrative style, *Mary Barton* is also a pioneering example of realism for its topographical accuracy; its evocation of the texture of daily, working-class life; and its attention to the "regional specificity" of the Lancashire dialect (Foster xii). A comparable realism that employs Canadian settings and idiomatic language appears in *The Woman Worker*

in stories such as “A Price for Bread” (February 1927), “Something Wrong Somewhere” (March 1927), “The Spectre Named—Poverty” (May 1928), and “Compliments of the Season” (December 1928). These portray the everyday trials of working-class women without heavy-handed intervention from the narrator and without resorting to the improbable, sensational, or idealistic resolutions typical of the romance tendencies of many nineteenth-century reform narratives, particularly as these flowed from the pens of Canadian women writers such as Agnes Maule Machar.¹³

Often the stories in *The Women Worker* are detached narrations of the everyday troubles of working women; at other times, recalling the intrusive narrative didacticism of the earlier novel of reform, the narrators are distinctly interventionist, appraising structural problems underlying workplace misery, offering direct political commentary on the injustices the stories depict, and calling for legislative change. However, the didactic stories in *The Woman Worker* reject the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century emphasis on noblesse oblige and voluntary middle-class benevolence that is so often at the centre of what Claybaugh calls “one of the most common scenes in reformist writing: the investigative visit” (7).¹⁴ For example, despite its invocation of the suffering “little woman,” A. D. A.’s “Modern Values Struggle” (December 1926) does not, like so many of the reform narratives that precede it, call in a middle-class savior; instead, the protagonist abandons her ungrateful family for work on a western farm and a relationship of “comradship” with one of the farm’s male labourers. More commonly, the stories supplant the resolution proffered by a benevolent employer with calls for an active, interventionist state. In A. D. A.’s short story “The Shack Builder” (September 1926), a working-class housewife, Mary, is left without any means of support when her husband unexpectedly dies and she is denied Mothers’ Allowance because of her ownership of a meagre “shack.” The same author’s “A Modern Virgin” (January 1927) is a story that warns the reader of the sexual danger inherent in domestic work and advocates legislative solutions to the predatory tendencies of male employers. A. D. A.’s contributions to “Shop and Factory Life,” a column that contained “true tales” from the world of waged work, similarly promote government and legislative reform as a means of protecting women. In the June 1927 column, for example, the author tells the story of “Esther,” a recent Polish immigrant whose employers systematically underpay her. A. D. A. helps Esther file a complaint at the Minimum Wage Board and, although the author recognizes that unionization is a surer means of protection, she shows

readers how to navigate the legal bodies that are ostensibly meant to guarantee certain standards in the workplace (“Shop and Factory Life” 5-7). It is in such advocacy of protective measures that one finds *The Woman Worker* engaged in the project of beckoning forth a strong welfare state.¹⁵

In some cases, contributors of prose merged the “little woman” with her more militant counterpart, and stories like this are powerful demonstrations of the competing ideologies that shaped *The Woman Worker*. A. D. A.’s “We Visit the Mountain” (October 1926) offers an account of a woman (the first-person narrator) canvassing her neighbourhood in Ontario on behalf of a labour candidate. After encountering various disappointing types, the narrator finally meets the woman she calls “my rebel woman” (9-10). This “rebel” immediately declares that, unlike those who precede her, she will cast her vote for “the man who can help the workers” (10). She finishes her denunciation of capitalist oppression with a flourish:

In Russia the workers were compelled to take drastic action. I tell you, that is what will happen in Canada one of these days, and it may not be so very far off. Do not misunderstand me. I love Canada. I am not unpatriotic. I have heard that you people in the Labor Movement want to destroy our country, that you have no use for it. (10-11)

The narrator receives this speech with enthusiasm; this “real rebel,” she affirms, “was figuring things out pretty correctly” (11). The narrator then hastens to offer one correction: “we in the Labor Movement liked Canada so much that we wanted Canada for the only useful people, the workers and the farmers, the producers of life’s necessities” (11). Other elements in the story echo this apparent coexistence of the discourses of revolutionary socialism and parliamentary legality: while the narrator champions the “courageous” Agnes Macphail (Canada’s first woman MP and a member of the Progressive Party), she concludes with a militant apostrophe that urges women readers to remove “the chains of bondage” and to turn their “mountain of ignorance” into a “seething volcano of working class activity and consciousness” (11). “We Visit the Mountain” thus merges the periodical’s familiar language of state protection with a didactic call for class struggle that anticipates the politics and aesthetics of the socialist realism that emerged out of Soviet Russia in the early 1930s.

It is important to emphasize that the protective legislation and social welfare measures advocated through the “little woman” were treated in the pages of *The Woman Worker* as short-term compromises that would precede the working-class rule gestured to in the figure of the “Rebel Woman.” Yet

understanding CPC-affiliated organizations such as the WLLs of the 1920s as historical exceptions rather than as contributors to a discourse of state reform that was ultimately absorbed in the postwar “passive revolution” does these groups and their political and cultural labours a historical disservice.¹⁶ Feminist literary and labour historians in Canada have for several decades emphasized the contributions of white, middle-class women to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century discourses of reform¹⁷; less well-known is the fact that ostensibly radical women’s groups in this same period were employing literary discourse drawn from a diverse leftist-progressive spectrum as a means of articulating ideas that ultimately influenced welfare-state thinking. In so doing, these women were also rewriting the *fin de siècle* narrative of noblesse oblige and attempting to write the new forms of realism that so dramatically altered Canadian fiction in the modern period. Moreover, this analysis of the cultural material in *The Woman Worker* offers evidence of the fact that equal-rights feminism did, albeit hesitantly, find articulation in interwar Canada; inspired by examples of women’s emancipation in post-revolutionary Russia that were trickling into the Canadian Communist press in this period, creative contributors to *The Woman Worker* attempted to voice equal-rights arguments, but their dependence on masculinist traditions of workers’ poetry made this undertaking a fraught one. Lacking ideological and ethnic homogeneity and struggling to assert a message rooted in class and gender identification, the diverse women of Canada’s WLLs nonetheless left a significant creative print culture of dissent that reminds us of the politically eclectic heritage of the welfare state, the convoluted emergence of women’s leftist writing via nineteenth-century forms, and of the contested nature of the “woman question” in 1920s Canada.

NOTES

- 1 This article cites the extant copy of *The Woman Worker* that is housed at the National Library in Ottawa. Margaret Hobbs’ and Joan Sangster’s study of *The Woman Worker*, which reprints the first issue of the periodical in its entirety, may be downloaded from the website of Athabasca University Press.
- 2 Prior to the “crisis” between 1928 and 1931 in the CPC, which was provoked by the Trotskyist-Stalinist split, the party pursued open collaboration with diverse elements of the labour movement, even the conservative Trades and Labor Congress (Angus 131-43, 199-200).
- 3 The role of the political left, particularly social democrats, vis-à-vis the development of the welfare state has been well documented, but the ways in which leftist organizations

employed periodicals as a means of calling the welfare state into being require further examination. This is especially true of Communist periodicals because CPC organizations have not often been considered in relation to the history of the welfare state or of social democracy in Canada (McKay 74).

- 4 For the work of literary critics, see, for example: Doyle, Irr, Irvine, Rifkind, and Rimstead.
- 5 The CPC initially operated through a legal front, the Workers Party of Canada, but, as the result of a Comintern directive in 1924, began identifying itself as the Communist Party of Canada (Angus 91-102).
- 6 For further discussion of the circumstances motivating the formation of the periodical, see Hobbs and Sangster, 7-13. As the editorial of the October 1928 issue tells us, the October-December 1928 issues of *The Woman Worker* were edited by the Toronto WLL because Custance was seriously ill ("Important Notice" 3-4). Custance's "Important Notice" in the January 1929 issue indicates that she was editing once again in the new year (14), but this was short-lived: the last issue of the periodical appeared in April of 1929, and Custance died in July of that same year (Hobbs and Sangster 12).
- 7 In the first issue, Custance relates that *The Woman Worker* first existed as a "feeble" mimeographed publication; she is clearly proud of the professionally printed magazine that appeared in 1926 ("Success" 32). The first issue boasts a dark green cover of cardstock with black type; all subsequent issues bear a lighter green cover of thinner, slightly glossier paper.
- 8 See Mary North's letter in the October 1926 issue. Although, according to the October 1927 issue, WLLs continued to multiply during the 1920s (ten in 1924 and thirty-seven in 1927) ("Federation News" 15), attracting readers was a constant challenge. If one estimates that each League represented ten subscribers, the circulation of the periodical probably never exceeded five hundred copies per month, given that the leagues continued to grow after 1927. The left-leaning *Canadian Forum* had approximately 1,900 subscribers in 1929 and the mass-circulation women's magazine *Chatelaine* boasted 180,000 subscribers by 1933 (Djwa 8; Bruusgaard; des Rivières, Gerson, and Saint-Jacques 248-51).
- 9 Many articles in *The Woman Worker* are reports on contemporary life in Soviet Russia, and all of them mention women's emancipation. See, for one example among many: Beatrice Green, "Women's Freedom in Soviet Russia" (January 1927).
- 10 In referring to the laws that controlled the content of printed matter that circulated through the post, Custance is alluding to regulations that imposed real limits on the expression of socialist thought in this period. In the April 1927 "Notes and Happenings" section, Custance decries the fact that the Customs Department had banned the importation of the socialist periodical *New Masses* from the United States ("War Is Declared" 5).
- 11 I take the concept of "revolutionary chorus" from Cary Nelson's study of the poetry of the US-American left, *Revolutionary Memory*.
- 12 Joussaye is perhaps best known for her poem "Only a Working Girl," which appeared in her first book *The Songs That Quinte Sang* (1895). See Gerson, "Marie Joussaye's 'Labor's Greeting.'"
- 13 For a discussion of the novel of social reform in nineteenth-century Canada, see Gerson, *A Purer Taste and Canadian Women in Print*, Vipond, and Watt.
- 14 Gerson discusses the role of noblesse oblige (the belief that employers could be relied upon to institute reforms in order to improve the lives of their employees) in the work of both Machar and Joussaye in chapter 8 of *Canadian Women in Print*. See also Watt (461) and Vipond (40-41).
- 15 Hobbs and Sangster observe that, despite the ultimate preference in *The Woman Worker* for worker-driven unionization, government benevolence was frequently accepted

as a short-term solution (77). Indeed, the pages of *The Woman Worker* are filled with editorials, articles, short fiction, and letters that urge the state to adopt and enforce labour laws and social welfare measures such as minimum wages, mothers' allowances, old-age pensions, workmen's compensation (even for women working in the home!), and unemployment insurance.

- 16 The term "passive revolution" comes from the work of Antonio Gramsci, who employs it to describe modern welfare-state formation in his essay "Americanism and Fordism" (in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*).
- 17 See, for example, Bacchi, Devereux, Fiamengo, Gerson (*Canadian Women in Print*), Mitchinson, and Valverde.

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