

# Suitable Diversions

## Women, Gentility and Entertainment in an Imperial Outpost

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### Article abstract

What Upper Canadians in the first half of the nineteenth century thought of as entertainment was fundamentally shaped by their class and their gender. While for many, the local tavern was a natural site to socialize it held little appeal for the cultured gentlewoman. Whether living on a backwoods farm or presiding over a big house in town, the wives and daughters of prominent Upper Canadians and gentlemen farmers consciously embraced the genteel leisure of the domestic circle. They sought companionship from others of their rank and sensibilities; and they enjoyed those diversions that both reflected their personal tastes and interests, but also symbolized their essential identity—gentlewomen of the empire.

# Suitable Diversions

Women, Gentility and  
Entertainment  
in an Imperial Outpost

by Elizabeth Jane Errington

Katherine Jane Ellice, "Interior View  
of Drawing Room, Front Hall and  
Door at Beauharnois," LAC, C-  
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In June 1823, Frances Stewart told to a friend in Ireland that "my time is very completely filled up here so I have never felt the want of visitors, though I do not like giving up society too much."<sup>1</sup> A little more than a year earlier, Frances, her husband Thomas and their three children had been at home in County Antrim, Ireland, surrounded by family and friends. Thomas' business had been floundering, however, and the family had decided to emigrate to Upper Canada. After a lengthy but not particularly eventful Atlantic crossing, and a few months stay in Cobourg, in the early spring of 1823 Frances and the children had made their way to their new home in the as yet unsettled township of Douro. "We are very pleased with our new estate,"<sup>2</sup> Fran-

ces wrote soon after their arrival; but as she ruefully commented, their small log cabin was still "in a very unfinished state," the family had no near neighbours (other than the Reids who had emigrated with the Stewarts and lived about half a mile away), and the farm was really a small clearing in the bush.

It is not surprising that, initially at least, Frances did not miss the constant round of visitors—and visiting—that had been a significant part of her old life in Ireland. At the same time, she longed "to be able to pursue the former occupations and amusements to which my heart still clings," gardening, walking, reading, music and "even the more agreeable part of sewing."<sup>3</sup> In the early years, Frances also missed the comfort and stimulation

<sup>1</sup>E.S. Dunlop, ed., *Our Forest Home, Being Extracts from the Correspondence of the late Frances Stewart* (Montreal: Gazette Printing and Publishing, 1902), 38.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 5 April 1823, 30.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, July 1824, 60.

## Abstract

*What Upper Canadians in the first half of the nineteenth century thought of as entertainment was fundamentally shaped by their class and their gender. While for many, the local tavern was a natural site to socialize it held little appeal for the cultured gentlewoman. Whether living on a backwoods farm or presiding over a big house in town, the wives and daughters of prominent Upper Canadians and gentlemen farmers consciously embraced the genteel leisure of the domestic circle. They sought companionship from others of their rank and sensibilities; and they enjoyed those diversions that both reflected their personal tastes and interests, but also symbolized their essential identity—gentlewomen of the empire.*

**Résumé:** *Dans la première moitié du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, la conception que l'on avait des loisirs dans le Haut-Canada était surtout dictée par deux critères de base, le genre et la classe sociale. Pour beaucoup, la taverne locale était l'endroit naturel pour socialiser, mais celle-ci n'attirait guère les femmes cultivées qui appartenaient à la haute-société. Qu'elles vivent à l'écart dans une ferme isolée, ou qu'elles résident en ville, les femmes et les filles, membres de la bonne société du Haut-Canada, préféraient le loisir noble du cercle domestique. Elles cherchaient la société de ceux et de celles de leur rang social comme de leur sensibilité et mentalité; et elles prenaient plaisir à ces divertissements qui tout en reflétant leurs goûts et intérêts personnels, symbolisaient leur identité essentielle: des dames de la haute-société au sein de l'Empire.*

of women friends. "I have not see[n] a woman except those in our party for over five months and only three times in the shape of a companion,"<sup>4</sup> Frances lamented in 1823. The arrival of the Peter Rob-

inson settlers in 1825 "gives us some variety," she reported, but with the exception of the new doctor's wife, none offered the companionship that Frances sought and she continued to "feel the want of a friend beside me to talk to"<sup>5</sup> for some time. "My heart still clings to my native land and the elegance and comfort of the mode of living there," she wrote in 1826. Perhaps, she opined, "in time we may enjoy the same here."<sup>6</sup>

For someone brought up, as Frances' daughter later described, "in all the refinement of high cultivation,"<sup>7</sup> the transition from Irish gentlewoman to pioneer settler's wife was, at times, heart wrenching. Like many other half pay officers, businessmen and British gentlemen, Thomas had brought his family to the colonies in expectation that they would, after a period of adjustment, be able to regain those familiar patterns of life of the Georgian or early Victorian

gentry.<sup>8</sup> But as the Stewarts and other gentle emigrants soon realized, most of the markers of rank that were taken for granted at home—having a landed estate, or being well connected socially and po-

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, July 1823, 39.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1825, 85.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, March 1826, 96.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> For an evocative discussion of bourgeois women's lives during this period, see Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998).

litically, having disposable income and being able to pursue amusements that befitted persons of their rank—did not map at all well in this New World environment. As Nancy Christie has argued, “occupation or income alone did not confer social rank”<sup>9</sup> in Upper Canada. There was often little to distinguish the gentleman farmers and their families—in the house they lived in, by the work they performed, or by their income—from their more “common” labouring neighbours. Even in the colony’s growing villages and towns, a family’s rank or position in the social hierarchy was not always immediately apparent. Yet, Frances Stewart and others of her ilk—the wives and mothers of “gentle” immigrants, influential settlers and colonial officials—were not willing to jettison those cultural sensibilities that were such an integral part of their identities as British gentlewomen living in a British society. Even in the backwoods, Frances maintained, as best she could, the “appearances and manners”<sup>10</sup> of her class. This was particularly apparent in how and with whom she and others in similar circumstances sought

entertainment and “diversion” from their everyday work.

What Upper Canadians in the first half of the nineteenth century thought of as entertainment was fundamentally shaped by their class and their gender. For many in the colony, the local tavern or inn was a natural site to gather, to meet friends, to tell stories, to play cards and generally to socialize with the wider community. But as Julia Roberts has eloquently argued, tavern life and how patrons used this public space reflected both their class and quite rigid gendered norms.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, for someone like Francis Stewart, tavern culture held very little, if any, appeal. She and many other colonial gentlewomen had been brought up to emulate the manners and morals of polite British society. “The code of gentility” assumed that gentlewomen found most happiness “within the arena of the home and family.”<sup>12</sup> In addition to learning how to manage a household, and to secure the well being of their husbands and children, gentlemen’s daughters were schooled in the “accomplishments,” and were expected (and many did) to take

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Christie, “The Plague of Servants’: Female Household Labour and the Making of Classes in Upper Canada”: in *Transatlantic Subjects: Ideas, Institutions and Social Experiences in Post-Revolutionary British North America*, (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 85.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Christie, “The Plague of Servants’: Female Household Labour and the Making of Classes in Upper Canada”: in *Transatlantic Subjects: Ideas, Institutions and Social Experiences in Post-Revolutionary British North America*, (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 85.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Roberts *In Mixed Company: Taverns and Public Life in Upper Canada* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2009). See also Andrew Holman, *A Sense of Their Duty: Middle Class Formation in Victorian Ontario Towns* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), 17-18 for a brief discussion of class in the first half of the century.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Williams, ed., *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada: The Journals, Letters and Art of Anne Langton* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 11. See also Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Wives and Mothers, School Mistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada, 1790-1840* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995).

pleasure in what was often called “domestic recreations”—fancy needlework, singing, playing an instrument, reading, and conversing with friends. They also enjoyed the company of like minded friends and associates, giving and attending dinner parties and dances, attending public lectures, at homes and soirees, and going to other suitable public functions.<sup>13</sup>

Many of these activities were not available to women who lived in the colonial backwoods. Rough or non-existent roads restricted visitors or visiting; running a farm household and looking after growing numbers of children left little time for oneself; and “near” neighbours were most often rough and “common” settlers. Even for those like Mary Gapper O’Brien who arrived in the colony to visit her brothers living on a farm just outside York in 1828, and Anne Langton, who with her parents joined her brother John on a farm near Peterborough ten years later and were quickly integrated into social networks of family and friends nearby, the opportunities for entertainment that they would have considered suitable were limited.

Gentlewomen living in one of the colony’s growing towns and villages certainly had many advantages over their rural sisters. Frances Stewart had been charmed by Cobourg society during her initial six month stay in the bustling village. She had taken tea with the wives of navy captains, the local minister and colonial merchants; she had danced and gone on sleigh rides; and she had joined

the local book society.<sup>14</sup> After she moved to Douro, she had looked forward to those infrequent opportunities to visit friends who always “laid themselves out to give us as much variety as possible.”<sup>15</sup>

Living in the colonial capital, York, offered even greater opportunities for genteel diversions and sociability. From the beginning of European settlement at the end of the eighteenth century, imperial and colonial officials had fostered social and cultural practices and values that reflected Upper Canada’s membership in the Empire and its hierarchical political institutions. The wives, daughters and mothers of prominent merchants, politicians and government officials inhabited a world that consciously tried to emulate not just the genteel lifestyle of polite British society but also that of an imperial centre. In addition to enjoying the companionship of others of their rank, over tea or dinner or at other relatively informal social gatherings, elite colonial women engaged in the rituals of what one settler called the colonial “court.” They gave and attended dances, dinner parties and other formal gatherings during the annual social season; they acknowledged fine gradations of rank and respectability and often their entertainment had a decidedly ceremonial political agenda.

Yet, even the sociability of York society was shaped and often constrained by its New World, colonial environment. Maintaining the standards of polite society was often difficult in a young colony

<sup>13</sup> Vickery, *Gentleman’s Daughter*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Dunlop, ed., *Our Forest Home*, 1822, 24-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, October 1824, 65.



in which most residents were preoccupied with sustaining themselves and their families. Moreover, maintaining “appearances” made considerable demands on participants and particularly on the women. It was the women who were largely responsible for making sure that each social occasion—from tea to a formal ball—was appropriately staged and attendees were suitably entertained. Whether in the backwoods or in the colonial capital, gentlewomen were also mindful that even at play, they had to live up to a standard of behaviour that reflected their family’s rank and influence, and in some instances, promoted wider imperial interests. As Adele Perry has persuasively argued, in settler societies, white gentlewomen were active agents of empire and essential “boundary markers” between the races. In Upper Canada they were also essential markers of class.<sup>16</sup> And by upholding what Catherine Hall has termed “the culture of respectability,”<sup>17</sup> the wives of lieutenant governors and of the local gentry, whether living in the backwoods or in town, both reassured themselves of their own identity and proclaimed to their less well heeled neighbours their collective identities as British subjects in a British land.

The principal site for entertainment for colonial gentlewomen was in the home. Despite her isolation, the infre-

quency of visitors and the hard physical toil of pioneering life, Frances took considerable pleasure in her few odd moments of respite. As she remarked in an early letter to friends in Ireland, she was grateful that, as a child, she had developed “tastes which in a great measure make me independent of society.”<sup>18</sup> Frances was a voracious reader and like the Langtons, the Stewarts had brought a considerable number of books with them to the colony. In the early years, reading was Frances’ “greatest indulgence” and she tried each day “to devote half an hour to both a book or writing home so that my mind may be employed.”<sup>19</sup> For a time, Frances had few other diversions and could only look longingly at her “old music books ... piled in the corner” in hopes that one day soon she would be able to enjoy “this delightful amusement again.” When a piano safely arrived in Durro in 1826, she was immensely grateful to her cousin. “Delight and deep thankfulness filled my heart for your loving thought in sending to me the dear old piano upon which you and I together have played so much,” Frances wrote. “It will be to me most truly valuable. ... It will beguile many solitary hours” and “its sweet sound and touch will bring to my very sight .... so many dearly beloved friends, so many happy by gone hours.”<sup>20</sup>

Like other British migrants and colo-

<sup>16</sup> Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 175.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Hall, “Of Gender and Empires: Reflections on the Nineteenth-Century” in Philippa Levine, ed., *Gender and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 71.

<sup>18</sup> Dunlop, ed., *Our Forest Home*, July 1823, 39.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, August 1823, 40.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 August 1826, 104.

nial farm wives, Frances Stewart made her own entertainment. She enjoyed working in her garden, gathering wildflowers, and playing with the children. She and Mary O'Brien and Ann Langton also made a point of celebrating high days and holidays that had been so much a part of their lives at home. In her celebrated account of life in the colony, Catherine Parr Traill commented that she had been surprised "at the cool indifference which most people showed in the observance of Christmas day." It was only, she continued, the "few residing English families" who decorated their homes and attended Church to give thanks to the Lord.<sup>21</sup> Certainly, Christmas was important to the Stewarts, the O'Briens and the Langtons. The Stewart household marked the day by going to church and then having a family dinner with their nearest and long time friends, the Reids.<sup>22</sup> The year after she arrived in the colony, Mary Gapper, her brothers and sister-in-laws, held their own Christmas service at home, and shared a "feast" with then bachelor Edward O'Brien.<sup>23</sup> Once married and living with her growing family on a bush farm on Lake Simcoe, Mary continued the family tradition as best she could. "Our Presbyterian population," who lived near

the O'Briens on Lake Simcoe "gives no sympathy in the associations of Christmas," she recorded in her journal. She nonetheless invited "the inhabitants of the shanties" and "two young men of our gentry neighbours" to dine with them anyway, to celebrate the day.<sup>24</sup> In her first year in the colony, Anne Langton too missed "the rounds and repetitions of dinner during the week" of Christmas that she had so enjoyed at home.<sup>25</sup> The family always celebrated the day, however—inviting John's bachelor friends for dinner, conversation and games. And within a few years, Anne had become attuned to colonial festivities. In 1845, she remarked "I am amused by the needless pity bestowed upon us by people here [Peterborough] who evidently think the seclusion of the woods something very dreadful." That year she and the family "had a gay and busy Christmas."<sup>26</sup>

As they had done at home in Great Britain, Frances and Mary also marked other special family occasions and when possible took the opportunity to declare a holiday from work. Each July, the Stewarts celebrated their departure from home with "a kind of festival"<sup>27</sup> and each December the couple marked their wedding anniversary with "a sort of jubilee."<sup>28</sup> After

<sup>21</sup> Catherine Parr Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836) (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), 227.

<sup>22</sup> Dunlop, ed., *Our Forest Home*, January 1828, 108-0; December 1834, 140.

<sup>23</sup> Archives of Ontario (AO), MS199, Journal of Mrs. E.G. O'Brien, 1828-38 (typescript). 25 December 1829. (Hereinafter O'Brien Journal.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 January 1835.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, ed., *A Gentlewoman*, 1 January 1839, 198.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 January 1845, 375.

<sup>27</sup> Dunlop, ed., *Our Forest Home*, 8 June 1836, 156.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, December 1851, 244. Frances noted that they celebrated each year.

she was married and had a family of her own, Mary O'Brien too took a "half holiday" on her wedding anniversary, if there was not too much work to be done on the farm. In 1833, she and Edward and their two children went for a row; in 1837, Mary was pleased that she and the children could don their "holiday suits" and "claim papa" and have a day of pleasure outdoors.<sup>29</sup> As Mary, Frances Stewart and others knew all too well, there were very few other occasions in which one could take a holiday from the farm. In 1834, with two children under foot, Mary wryly noted that she had "proclaimed" the day a holiday, in honour of her sister Lucy's birthday, and was using the occasion to write in her journal. "It is seldom I get a bona fide holiday," she explained, "and I am generally so confined to the house that my notion of holidays implies walking out if it be but to the cow ship."<sup>30</sup>

Genteel women took considerable enjoyment in such family based entertainments. They were both a welcome diversion from their daily chores and a reminder of their former lives in Britain. But Frances Stewart, at least, continued to miss being able to "pursue former occupations and amusements to which my heart still clings."<sup>31</sup> And there were times when she was "almost in despair about

being able to do anything" but nurse children and "fuss a little over housekeeping."<sup>32</sup> It was only after that "everlasting nursing business [was] over" that Frances felt that she could really begin to enjoy "her old tastes and enjoyments" even though by then (1836) they had become "somewhat moulding for want of brushing up and employment."<sup>33</sup>

Family and home were at the centre of gentlewomen's lives. But as Amanda Vickery and others have illustrated, these were not the limits of these women's horizons; they had been brought up and expected to take part in a cultural and social world that extended well beyond the home.<sup>34</sup> This was difficult and, as Frances Stewart discovered, sometimes impossible for those living in the colonial bush. Although Frances stated in 1823 that she did not miss visitors, she was often very lonely. The building of a church in 1827 was a welcome sign of civilization and Frances was pleased that over one hundred settlers attended Christmas service that year.<sup>35</sup> In the early 1830s, she reported that "after so long almost entirely deprived of society," that the region was finally beginning to be settled and some of the new arrivals were "very pleasing."<sup>36</sup> She regretted, however, there was "as yet no gentle people... In point of society

<sup>29</sup> O'Brien Journal, 13 May 1837, Mary noted that "so many wedding days have been disappointed holydays."

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, June 1834.

<sup>31</sup> Dunlop, ed., *Our Forest Home*, July 1824, 160.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 April 1828, 114.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 March 1836, 150.

<sup>34</sup> Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Dunlop, ed., *Our Forest Home*, January 1828, 108.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, February 1831.



we are not much better off than we were four years ago.”<sup>37</sup> Most of the time, it was only on those infrequent excursions away from home, to visit Mrs. Rubidge who lived about fifteen miles away, or to Cobourg, that Frances was able to enjoy the company of women of her own class.

Frances never lost her appreciation of and enjoyment in genteel sociability, however. In 1838, she, together with Thomas, and their eldest daughter attended a regatta at Fenelon Village. They stayed at Mr. Wallace’s, a gentleman neighbour of the Langtons, who lived in a large house, “very nicely furnished and everything in quite nice style.”<sup>38</sup> The regatta included boat races and “various amusements for the public;” the highlight for Frances was the ball held in the evening. Even though she was the oldest matron present, Frances was pleased that she did not have to be “mistress of ceremonies” as would have been expected at home. This allowed her to “keep quiet” and enjoy “the sweet music, songs and duets, then dancing” until dawn. The next day, Frances visited the Langtons. Anne’s parents and aunt “all are like some of my old people at home,” she wrote, and she thoroughly enjoyed tea and the conversation—social interaction that she had missed so many years before.

Much of the time, however, Frances’ ability to maintain those markers of gentility that were so central to her identity were circumscribed by the family’s isola-

tion from a colonial centre, and by her responsibilities as a mother. By the time she met Anne Langton in 1838, Frances had ten children and she felt “the responsibility of [her] situation as a parent” very much. Frances was increasingly concerned that the children were “sadly deficient in education”<sup>39</sup> and missing “a great deal from not seeing more of their fellow creatures.” As she wrote to a friend, “young people require to mix with others to enlarge their views and power of judging human nature.”<sup>40</sup> Yet, when friends offered in 1834 to have one of the Stewart girls visit them in Montreal, Frances refused. The couple were not accustomed to children, she explained, and sending “an innocent” girl who was “ignorant of the world and its ways straight from her little cabin in retirement to a great gay city” was not to be considered. Moreover, Frances feared that “so much society, and at such a distance...might make her discontented afterwards with her poor little home.”<sup>41</sup> Frances never really resolved this dilemma nor was she able to completely reconcile her identity as a gentlewoman with that of a settler’s wife. By 1843, she was able to declare, however, that “the only time I really feel happy is in our own family circle or with a few intimate friends.”<sup>42</sup>

Not all genteel rural women’s activities were so limited. Although they too lived in the backwoods, Mary Gapper O’Brien and Anne Langton had rela-

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 November 1830, 120-21.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 September 1838, 159.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, March 1837, 152.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 June 1843, 192.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 December 1834, 141.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 June 1843, 191.

tively active social lives. Part of this was because they were both single when they arrived in Upper Canada and were not solely responsible for maintaining the household or looking after children. Each of them also had the advantage that they were joining family already settled in the colony and were quickly integrated into already established communities of like minded individuals and families.

"Mrs. Parsons called on us," Mary recorded, shortly after she and her mother arrived on the farm just north of York in 1828. Mary and her family returned the visit of this "very pleasing gentle woman"<sup>43</sup> three days later and Mary discovered that even in the backwoods there were houses "conducted and appointed much in the stile usual among country-town gentry in England."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, she reported to family at home, "we are not as wild here as some of our friends imagine."<sup>45</sup> Over the next two years (before her marriage to Edward O'Brien), Mary took tea with neighbours, helped her sister-in-law host an "at home," and went to "dinner parties" that were reminiscent of her life in Britain. Mary also very much enjoyed times at home with her family, playing the piano, talking, and sometimes having intense philosophical debates with her

brothers and Edward O'Brien, debates that in her imagination, carried her "back to the lawyers & Trinity men with whom I have conversed"<sup>46</sup> at home.

Mary seemed to delight in the relative social informality that accompanied living in the bush. Periodically, she and her family would go "in search of enjoyment." One evening in 1829, they visited a number of friends in Thornhill "and made ourselves as merry as we could."<sup>47</sup> Most near neighbours were settler families, however, and Mary was acutely aware that there were only a few "who make society desirable."<sup>48</sup> She and her sister-in-law often visited new arrivals to offer what assistance they could; but in her diary Mary made the distinction between visiting friends of her own class, and visiting neighbours. "Neighbourly duty" often included extending help.<sup>49</sup> Social calls, on the other hand, were usually accompanied by some form of refreshment and one hoped, "good" conversation. And with the arrival of a growing number of respectable settlers to the Thornhill area, in the summer of 1829 Mary remarked that they even might be in danger of having "too much society" and "it would soon be necessary and practicable to select" who would be

<sup>43</sup> O'Brien Journal, 16 Oct 1828.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 October 1828.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 June 1829.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 July 1829.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 December 1829. Mary remarked that at one home "I have not seen a supper more nicely set out than was to-night prepared for us, to be sure we purchased I with the expense of half an hour or so of the society of the mistress - should have done as well without - but I suppose it pleased her & hers & we were contented to do it justice."

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 April 1829.

<sup>49</sup> O'Brien Diary, 21 October 1832.

members of her family's social circle.<sup>50</sup>

Anne Langton did not have to worry about having "too much society." During her first year in her new home, Anne, like Frances Stewart, saw very few ladies other than her mother and aunt; most of her immediate neighbours were either bachelor friends of her brother, John's, or labouring families. Anne feared that "we live so much to ourselves and mix so exclusively with one community" that she would become "selfish and narrow minded."<sup>51</sup> As she explained to her brother William in Manchester, "it is not only that individuals are few, but the degrees and classes we come in contact with are still more limited." Local deficiencies in "society" did not absolve Anne from performing the most basic social rituals, however. As Barbara Williams notes, Anne's behaviour was profoundly influenced by her upbringing as a daughter of the British gentry.<sup>52</sup> While waiting for their new home to be completed, she and her mother made and received "calls" to and from the "gentlemen and ladies" in Peterborough. After she and her family moved into their new house, Anne frequently "paid respects" to newcomers and received visitors. Anne sometimes chaffed at the demands of polite social intercourse. When the new minister's family arrived in 1839, Anne complained that she now "had to make morning visits

etc., and I suppose I am growing savage, alias selfish, and unaccustomed to such form of society."<sup>53</sup>

Like Mary O'Brien, Anne Langton distinguished between formal "calling" and "home based" hospitality.<sup>54</sup> She and the family frequently entertained John's bachelor friends for tea or dinner. She missed female companionships, however, and considered the visit of Mr. and Mrs. Fraser in the summer of 1839 a delight "after seeing nothing but young men for so long...to converse with a middle aged one." As she explained to her brother in Manchester, "we want decidedly a mixture of ages, as well as of sexes, to render our society what it should be." Without this the "variety in the general run of conversation" suffered and to her regret, the "amusements enjoyed at home belong more and more to a remote past."<sup>55</sup> Anne did what she could to alleviate the situation. Sometimes the Langtons formally invited guests to dinner. In the early spring of 1840, for example, Anne and the family hosted "a party" during which everyone, the cooks (herself and her mother and aunt), the waiter, (the Langton's girl) and the guests "performed well, doing justice to the entertainment and laughing very merrily." Anne appreciated the incongruity of event. As she wryly wrote home, "when we who worked in sight of each other all day...dressed ourselves like

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 June 1829.

<sup>51</sup> Williams, ed., *A Gentlewoman*, 13 October 1838, 183.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 December 1839, 257.

<sup>54</sup> Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, 195.

<sup>55</sup> Williams, ed., *A Gentlewoman*, 28 July 1839, 250.



*The Family Party at Blythe in 1840. By Anne Langton, in W.A. Langton, ed., Early days in Upper Canada (1926), xv. Library and Archives Canada, C-005963.*

ladies and gentleman's at home...I was reminded of children playing at a feast."<sup>56</sup>

Family and friends at home in Great Britain were undoubtedly startled by Anne's descriptions of her new life. And those reading Frances Stewart's letters would have been dismayed by her situation. Despite assertions of colonial promoters, at emigrant meetings or in some of the settlers' guides, that Upper Canada was really just like home and, if willing to work hard, gentlemen's families could flourish,<sup>57</sup> the colony clearly lacked many of the basic requirements of civilized, respectable society. Yet, Frances Stewart,

Anne Langton, Mary O'Brien and others of their circumstances never lost themselves or their identities as British gentlewomen. Despite the often-hostile environment, these women continued to maintain through their manners, their actions, and in the ways in which they entertained themselves an awareness of being part of the British gentility.

And Mary O'Brien, at least, was quick to point out in her letters that Upper Canada did have a recognizable "society" that, in many ways mirrored that at home. For her first few years in the colony, Mary and other members of her fam-

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 June 1840, 284.

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Emigrant Worlds and Transatlantic Communities*, (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007) especially chapter 1.

ily quite regularly made day visits to the colonial capital, York, to shop, to see the doctor, or to visit new friends. And each time she went, Mary made “devoir calls” to prominent colonial households.<sup>58</sup> The practice of “calling” was often more formal in major colonial centres than it was in rural communities. Not only was it a way for new arrivals to introduce themselves to members of the colonial elite, it was also an important confirmation of one’s membership and rank in this select community.<sup>59</sup> Receiving and returning calls could be tiresome and time consuming. When Harriet Cartwright arrived in Kingston as the new bride of the Anglican minister, she ceremoniously offered “cake and wine to those who made their calls” even before moving into her own home.<sup>60</sup> During her first visit to York a few months later, Harriet stayed at Arch Deacon Strachan’s and in the absence of Mrs. Strachan was the *de facto* mistress. “It would have saved much trouble,” if the Arch Deacon’s and Robert’s friends “had been a few days in discovering our arrival and a few more days longer in calling on us,” Harriet wrote. “As it was ... half our time was occupied in paying and receiving visits which generally speaking [is] a very profitless occupation.” Harriet conceded that there might be some benefit to the protocol. “I do not say that [it] is

always or necessarily” a waste of time, she wrote; “but few people possess either the ability or inclination of turning conversation to good account and redeeming the time devoted to the intercourse of society and interchanges of civility, perhaps fewer still make the endeavor.”<sup>61</sup>

If the women were compatible, calling could be fun, however. Mary O’Brien enjoyed meeting new people, good conversation, and the accompanying refreshments. On her first visit to York, Mary made the rounds of formal calls. After that, she, like many other gentlewomen, did not always “differentiate between ceremonious and friendly visits.”<sup>62</sup> Mary was particularly gratified that on her first visit, Lady Colborne, the lieutenant governor’s wife, received her “with all graciousness.”<sup>63</sup> Mary was encouraged to return for tea a number of times, and was pleased when the Colbornes admired the children. The Hagermans (an old and very influential colonial family) became quite close friends and Mary made a point of visiting them every time she was in town. Mary was acutely aware of the gradations of rank among her new friends. She was also not loath to pass judgement on the amenities or accouterments of various households or the character of her hostess. She valued good conversation, women who were well informed and lady like, good humoured

<sup>58</sup> O’Brien Journal, 21 February 1829; 3 February 1829; 3 February 1830.

<sup>59</sup> Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Society Etiquette and The Season* (London: Croom Helm, 1973), 43. See also Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter*, 205.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Errington, *Wives and Mothers*, 162.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>62</sup> Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter*, 205.

<sup>63</sup> O’Brien Journal, 21 December 1830 and Mary judged that she was a most “conversable woman.” March and April 1832.



gentlemen, and when the opportunity arose, visiting a “well appointed home and dinner served in what it was when I left England genteel stile.”<sup>64</sup>

Mary thoroughly enjoyed her periodic taste of “society.” Such activities were a delightful diversion from her life on her brother’s or, after 1830, her own farm. Her excursions to York also allowed her to bridge two worlds—that of a colonial settler and of a British gentlewoman. For Mrs Colbourne and the wives of other influential Upper Canadians, the select community of colonial “society” was their everyday world. As society matrons and hostesses, they embraced the day to day sociability and rituals of “polite” British society—visiting and taking tea with others of their circle, entertaining their husbands’ associates and friends, giving and attending formal dinners and sometimes appearing at public events. Such activities and entertainment were central to their personal identities; their participation in this world also reflected and reinforced both their families’ place in the social and political hierarchy and the colony’s place in the Empire.

Since the beginning of European settlement at the end of the eighteenth century, women has been central to furthering the new colonial project in Upper Canada. As soon as she arrived in the colony, Elizabeth Simcoe, the wife of the first Lieutenant Governor began to re-

ceive and take tea with a select group of ladies, she hosted gentlemen for dinner, and she “led” the first families in celebrating various special occasions. In 1793, for example, the Simcoe’s hosted a levy in honour of the King’s birthday that was followed in the evening by a very “splendid ball,” to which “about twenty well dressed and handsome ladies and about three times the number of gentlemen” attended. A year later, the Simcoe’s marked the new Queen’s birthday with a dance at which “the ladies [were] much dressed.” As Katherine McKenna notes, the Simcoe’s entertained lavishly despite the difficulties of not having appropriate venues, only a limited selection of food and drink, and without a domestic entourage usually required to prepare for such occasions.<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Simcoe and her successors clearly appreciated the importance of what Bruce Curtis has called “the pageantry of Empire.”<sup>66</sup> The “performances of grandeur” inherent in a lieutenant governor’s ball or in formal public functions served to instill and reinforce the social and through this the political structures and sensibilities of hierarchy and authority that many considered central to governing this imperial outpost; they also made a public pronouncement of Upper Canada’s links to the “home” and the empire.

In 1843, Marcus Child, member of the legislature of the new united prov-

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 December 1830.

<sup>65</sup> All quoted from Katherine McKenna, *A Life of Propriety: Ann Murray Powell and Her Family, 1755-1849* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), 61, 62.

<sup>66</sup> Bruce Curtis, “The ‘Most Splendid Pageant Ever Seen’: Grandeur, the Domestic and Condescension in Lord Durham’s Political Theatre,” *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol 89, No. 1, March 2008, 55-88.

ince of Canada wrote to his wife that he wished she could have been in the gathering at “the Provincial Court”<sup>67</sup> held that year in Kingston, the new capital. “The House has been crowded in the extreme, by Lords and Ladies,” he wrote, all watching with keen interest the debate on the bill concerning relocating the seat of government. Child welcomed the “Ladies” who had “invaded” the back seats of the gallery. “Their presence modifies the rancour of party feeling,” he explained; moreover, they were “handsome and dignified” and “the appearance would grace any assembly.” Marcus hoped that in the next session (which he expected would be in Montreal) he would be able to look up and see his wife, Lydia, and his daughter Elizabeth.<sup>68</sup>

To Marcus Child and his contemporaries, the presence of “the ladies” in such a public forum was not particularly unusual. Despite the rhetoric of true womanhood that dictated that a gentle woman’s place was in her home, the wives and daughters of the colonial gentry were frequently seen (and active) in the public sphere.<sup>69</sup> Earlier in 1843, the lieutenant governor and his wife and entourage, together with “a great multitude of gayly

dressed people—military and civil” had come out to the wharf at Kingston for the launch of the *Cherokee*. Child and other gentlemen and ladies had watched from their appointed place, set off from the crowd, as the Lieutenant Governor’s wife, Mrs Bagot, had christened the ship while a military band had played and “thousands of human voices” had cheered.<sup>70</sup> The “ladies” were also always present at the opening and closing of the colonial assembly. Shortly after she arrived in the colony in 1836, Anna Jameson, the wife of the then Attorney General had “the honour of assisting, as the French say, in that important occasion,” the proroguing of the provincial parliament.<sup>71</sup> On the appointed day, everyone of consequence—from the lieutenant governor to the judges and the law officers to the members of the legislature, and of course their consorts—took their appointed places. “My place,” Jameson wrote, “was on the right ... among the aristocracy of Toronto.”<sup>72</sup> Other than trying to make conversation with the ladies around her, Anna’s duty was to be there. She seems to have enjoyed the novelty of the occasion. It was certainly an intriguing diversion during her first winter in the colony.

<sup>67</sup> J.I. Little, ed., *The Child Letters: Public and Private Life in a Canadian Merchant-Politician Family, 1841-1854* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), Marcus Child to Lydia, 4 October 1843, 61.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 October 1843. On 28 October 1843, he noted that the ladies were always together and were most attentive.

<sup>69</sup> Errington, *Wives and Mothers*, especially Chapter 7.

<sup>70</sup> Little, ed., *Child Letters.*, 21 September 1843, 44-5. Child assured his wife that one of his female companions had taken note of the ladies’ dresses and he would send it on.

<sup>71</sup> Anna Jameson, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles* (1838) (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1965), 63.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

As Bruce Curtis has pointed out, Lord Durham's wife and daughters and other members of his entourage played a prominent part in his performances of empire in the Canadas in 1840. Official public spectacles were carefully choreographed, and the ladies, "strategically placed in the public gaze"<sup>73</sup> were an integral part of the play. Earlier lieutenant governors staged similar if not so lavish performances at which the presence of their womenfolk helped to mark the importance of the particular occasion. Although they had no lines, the wives of imperial and colonial officials were not "passive in these matters."<sup>74</sup> By their dress and their deportment, they embodied to those around them that "culture of respectability" so essential to British gentility. They also symbolized the colony's essential British nature and their presence on the stage helped to advance the story.

There were other state affairs to which invitations were coveted. Each year, the lieutenant governor hosted a formal ball.

In early November 1843, Marcus Child told his wife that that evening he had to attend a party at Government House hosted by the lieutenant governor, at which "I expect to see the greatest display of female beauty and dress that will be seen, to be sure, during the season." He was not particularly eager to go, but as a member of the legislature, he had little choice. "I shall go ... to contribute my mite to the general sum of admiration that is expected from us on such occasions."<sup>75</sup> He reported that "the splendidly lighted & gilded rooms of Government House" had been thronged with "the perfumed mass of upwards of four hundred happy men & women."<sup>76</sup> Marcus seemed pleased that "no distinctions could be seen, only such as beauty—ease

and grace—and dress could give—Rank and honourable status to be sure were conspicuous, but all were made perfectly easy and delighted with the soft strains of music—and when the waltzing struck up ... it is not surprising that sober country people" one assumes like himself,



"The First Waltz," *The Canadian Illustrated News*, 13 August 1870. *Library and Archives Canada*, C-050359.

<sup>73</sup> Curtis, "The 'Most Splendid Pageant Ever Seen'", 70.

<sup>74</sup> Curtis, "The 'Most Splendid Pageant Ever Seen'", 71.

<sup>75</sup> Little, ed., *The Child Letters*, 9 November 1843, 101.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 November 1843, 103.

“should have been not a little amused with the whole scene.” For all his reluctance, Marcus seems to have enjoyed the event, although he only stayed for a little more than an hour. As he later described to his daughter, the event had been carefully scripted. After being received by “Orderlies” who had taken his coat, Marcus had been formally “announced by name” and introduced to His Excellency, the Lieutenant Governor. After that, Marcus had found himself “in the mass” and had to take “good care to commit no trespass on any silk or lace trimmings or staring rudely upon any of the ‘blushing beauties.’” Women of all ages and descriptions had attended the dance. “The young ladies” were particularly notable for their pretty and in some instances “elegant” dresses, their facility on the dance floor, and their gentility. There were women adorned with diamonds and then there were others “too staid, and somber in their dresses, to add much to the gracefulness of this scene.”<sup>77</sup>

What to Marcus Child was an amusing diversion was to many who danced, and ate ice cream, and flirted, the highlight of the social season—not only in Kingston, but for all the first families of the colony. For a few hours, the wives and daughters of the colonial elite could forget their domestic worries and responsibilities—the difficulties of stretching their family income to meet household expenses and the inevitable and ongoing problem with their servants—and enjoy what Child had earlier described as “the gaieties of a Provincial Court.”<sup>78</sup> One of the elements that colonial

women invited to such formal affairs enjoyed was that it was so outside their daily experiences. Although particularly for the women, attendance required considerable thought (and financial where-with-all) as to what to wear, how to style one’s hair and an appreciation of the sometimes-elaborate protocol of society, it was recognition of their status that was particularly gratifying. This was true whether it was a gala dance at Government House or in a log cabin in the bush.

In 1826, Lieutenant Governor Maitland and “his suite” visited the Peterborough area to, among other things, tour the new Peter Robinson settlement. Thomas Stewart and Doctor Read (who had accompanied the party of immigrants) were put in charge of making all the arrangements, including ensuring that Maitland’s accommodation was adequate. To her surprise, the Lieutenant Governor invited Frances Stewart to dine with his party at Government House, a large log cabin near Doctor Read’s. “You can imagine what a fine fuss this put me into,” she wrote to her friend, Mrs. Kirkpatrick. Frances’ first thought was her dress. “I knew none of the company would expect me to be fine, living as we do here,” so she decided on donning “a very pretty [and new] Irish tabinet.” She and Thomas assembled at Dr. Read’s, and in the company of Mr. and Mrs. Rubidge, “We all laughed and talked for an hour.” Then the men withdrew from the parlour and the ladies, “spent one good hour in dressing our beautiful persons.”

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 November 1843,

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 October 1842, 52.

Although all the other ladies “had been introduced” to the Lieutenant Governor before, the formalities were maintained. Each guest was presented by Mr. Robinson; each lady curtsied and then retired. “When my turn came, he came forward and spoke to me for some time,” Frances later reported. Mr. Robinson took the opportunity to introduce her to his brother, the Attorney General, and to Colonel Talbot. In the end, the Lieutenant Governor decided that Frances took precedence over the other ladies; she therefore sat between the him and Mr. Robinson at dinner and she thoroughly enjoyed the subsequent conversation.<sup>79</sup>

For a few hours, Frances was transported out of her backwoods cabin to a world that at least in form and protocol was like that of home. She, as did all in polite colonial society, recognized the fine gradations of rank and privilege. Peter Robinson, she judged, was “a most gentleman-like man,” and “a good acquisition” to their local society. His birth (born in Upper Canada), his occupation (an agent of the government) and his manner, meant that he was not a gentleman of the standards of Colonel Talbot or even his brother the Attorney General or of course the Lieutenant Governor. He was nonetheless a member of her class. Moreover, Frances graciously appreciated the recognition that her own rank was afforded at dinner.

Not all women were so entertained or charmed by the state of colonial society. When Anna Jameson arrived in the colony in December 1836 to join her husband Robert, she was frankly appalled by what she discovered. The weather was cold and miserable, her new home (a temporary residence) was drafty and “comfortless,” and the town was “melancholy.”<sup>80</sup> “With regard to the society,” she was initially not at all sure. Anna was a well-educated and well-connected woman used to the literary parlours of Europe. Returning those first ceremonial calls from “all the official gentlemen and all the ladies” did provide her with the opportunity to learn “something of the geography of the town.” And by February she had hosted the annual New Year’s levee, attended a number of balls in York’s “season of festivity”<sup>81</sup> and become acquainted with some of her neighbours. “I really do not know what I expected,” she wrote but “I did not expect to find here in the new capital of a new country” in the midst “the boundless forest... concentrated as it were the worst evils of our old and most artificial social system at home.”<sup>82</sup> She was struck by the pretentiousness of “the self-style aristocracy” that was so unlike “the large and liberal society” she had left behind. “The people here want cultivation, want polish,” she concluded; instead, they embrace “conventionalism in its worse most oppressive and ridiculous forms.”<sup>83</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Dunlop, ed., *Our Forest Home*, 1826, 89.

<sup>80</sup> Jameson, *Winter Studies*, 21-22.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.



Some others, including the wives of imperial officials, apparently shared Jameson's judgment. "'There is no society in Toronto' is what I hear repeated all around me—even by those who compose the only society we have,"<sup>84</sup> Anna wrote in her journal. The colonial social scene could not compare with that in London or British provincial centres. It was, nonetheless, as its participants well knew, one of the crucial symbols of civilized society. And what it lacked in substance, at least as viewed by visitors and British officials, it gained in the earnestness and seriousness of its participants. As Katherine McKenna has evocatively illustrated, particularly in the early years of the nineteenth century the "many parties, dinners, and balls were not mere diversions but battlegrounds upon which fights over social position" of various families and inadvertently political positions of civilized gentlemen "were won and lost."<sup>85</sup>

The wife of the Lieutenant Governor is "the head of our female society,"<sup>86</sup> one member of the colonial council, John Macaulay remarked in 1837, and she set the tone for the social events of the "season." Between December and early spring each year, colonial gentlemen and ladies were fully occupied attending public state affairs and balls, formal dinners, teas, and "at homes." Sometimes, the la-

dies were not invited or present. Marcus Child told his wife about a dinner hosted by the speaker of the house in October 1843. The assembled guests enjoyed a lavish meal and then sang songs. "A more joyful set of folks is scarcely to be found," Child remarked.<sup>87</sup> More often, the first lady presided over the table at Government House or the wives of senior politicians hosted dinners in their homes. These women were both the pivot and the exemplar of sociability and culture. The success of these social occasions depended on the ability of the hostess to provide a suitable venue for the event, to organize and present often-elaborate refreshments that were well served, and frequently to engage musicians to entertain the guests. The hostess (together with her husband) also set the tone for each affair, ensuring that appropriate protocol was maintained and upheld. At least once or twice a week, the Simcoes and forty years later, the Durhams entertained anywhere from ten to twenty dinner guests and such affairs could be, as Lady Durham remarked, "long and tedious."<sup>88</sup> Elizabeth Simcoe seemed to enjoy these diversions. But it is not surprising that she also carefully noted in her diary when she and John dined alone as, without "business to attend," the family could enjoy "a half holiday amazingly."<sup>89</sup>

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>85</sup> McKenna, *A Life of Propriety*, 62.

<sup>86</sup> AO, Macaulay Papers, John to Ann, 17 February 1837.

<sup>87</sup> Little, ed., *The Child Letters* 28 October 1842, 52.

<sup>88</sup> Patricia Godsell, ed., *Letters & Diaries of Lady Durham*, (Toronto: Oberon Press, 1979), 18 July 1838, 55.

<sup>89</sup> Mary Quayle Innis, ed., *Mrs Simcoe's Diary*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965), 27 June 1793, 96.

Most of the entertainments that punctuated the annual social “season” in Upper Canada were not elaborate state functions. But they were taken no less seriously. The wives, sisters and if old enough daughters of provincial gentlemen regularly received invitations to an evening of music, an “intimate” dinner of twenty, a ball, or “tea.” In late January 1840, John Macaulay told his mother that “here the Governor General dined with Hagerman on Monday; on Tuesday there was musical event of Lady Arthur’s. On Wednesday evening the Governor General had a ladies party. This evening Colonel Foster was hosting a large evening party to which we were invited but have not gone.”<sup>90</sup> Helen, John’s wife, undoubtedly viewed such invitations with a mixture of eager anticipation and resignation. By upbringing and by marriage, she knew what protocols needed to be observed. Unlike Anna Jameson, she was also familiar with the intricacies of York “society” and she knew and was friends with many of the women who would be in attendance. Going out to dinner could be pleasurable; it was also in many ways a duty for it was difficult to refuse invitation from one’s husband’s colleagues or the lieutenant governor. But as John had explained to his mother earlier, he and Helen had no choice this particular season. Helen was five months pregnant and she “cannot at present think of every amusement, but must take care of herself.” This was

not the only reason that the couple had curtailed some of their entertaining. John was conscious that his salary would not support it “and I shall not run into the follies of some of my neighbours.”<sup>91</sup> The Macaulays had nonetheless hosted two formal dinner parties in the previous three weeks.

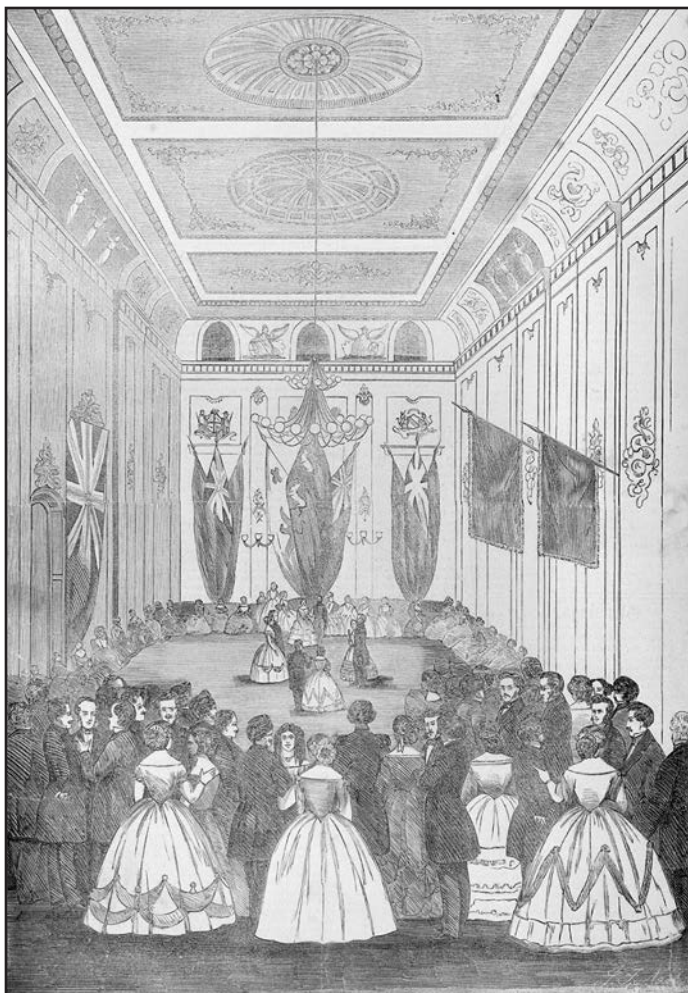
Hosting even a “private” dinner party required considerable skill. Being a guest was much less onerous. When Elizabeth Simcoe visited Quebec in 1794-95, she seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed the round of visiting, dinners and balls that filled many of her days. Lady Dorchester, the then Governor General’s wife, was a good hostess “and a sensible pleasant woman,” Elizabeth Simcoe remarked, “and she liked, the parties at the chateau excessively.”<sup>92</sup> Without any responsibility for ensuring the success of the occasion, Elizabeth found it “very amusing to walk about the Room and have something to say to everybody, without a long conversation with any.” Forty years later, Ann Macaulay, sister-in-law of the Attorney General recounted her pleasure attending a ball hosted by Sheriff and Mrs. Jarvis. There was a large crowd “who mingled through the receiving room, two dancing rooms, a card room and a supper room.”<sup>93</sup> For Ann, the wife of a Church of England minister in the village of Picton, it must have been gratifying to even be invited. In a life that was usually marked by fulfilling the duties of a minister’s wife in a small

<sup>90</sup> A.O Macaulay Papers, 30 January 1840.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 January 1840.

<sup>92</sup> Innis, ed., *Simcoe Diaries*, 6 December 1794, 145.

<sup>93</sup> A.O. Macaulay Papers, Anne Macaulay to her mother-in-law, 31 January 1839.



Edward Roper, "Citizen's Ball, given in honor of the Governor General's visit to Upper Canada, in St Lawrence Hall, Toronto," *The Canadian Illustrated News*, 22 November 1862. Library and Archives Canada, C-134281.

town, the invitation was an opportunity to dress in her best, and for a few hours, to enjoy the company of Upper Canada's first families. It was also an indication to her friends and neighbours back home of her membership in that select community of colonial gentry.

Whether hostess or guest, the season offered gentle women and men oppor-

tunities to renew friendships, to gossip, to catch up on news from across the colony and the wider world, and to meet visitors and new additions to their ranks, including the daughters of "good" families who were being formally "presented" for the first time.<sup>94</sup> Anna Jameson's initial objections to York society arose in part because she did not know any of the participants and although all in York respected her rank, after four months in the colony she still found that "although all the ladies showed a disposition

to be polite and amiable" she was still "a stranger" and could not "join in the conversation."<sup>95</sup> Her views had changed somewhat by the end of her time in the colonial capital. Having become well integrated into society, Anna commented as she prepared to leave Upper Canada that "I have lived in friendly communion with so many excellent people, that

<sup>94</sup> O'Brien Journal, noted the Miss Stewart came to York "for her debut." 5 February 1831.

<sup>95</sup> Jameson, *Winter Studies*, 66.



William James Topley, "The Governor-General's Fancy Dress Ball" Canada. Patent and Copyright Office, Library and Archives Canada, C-006865.

my departure from Toronto is not what I anticipated." Although she would not miss York itself, she would miss her new friends.<sup>96</sup>

The annual colonial social season provided participants and spectators (the majority of the Upper Canadian population) with the most public and opulent symbols of the community's ties to the empire. They were also intended in various ways to be a living example of British manners, and a cultural exemplar of imperial cultural and by extension those political and social values of civilized society. Moreover, in a settler society in which, as Nancy Christie and others have argued, "the confusion of class position in the absence of traditional markers of identity was a major preoccupation of genteel immigrants and residents,"<sup>97</sup> hosting and going to select social functions offered clear and undisputed evidence of participants' rank. The season only lasted

three or four months of each year, however, and only those who lived in town or in the immediate area could expect to take part. Frances Stewart was delighted and gratified when "society" came to the backwoods; and she appreciated that although the venue of Maitland's dinner was so seemingly inappropriate for such an event, the formalities and protocol—the vital essence of the occasion—were honoured.

It was perhaps in her daily life and particularly in how she chose to entertain herself and be entertained that Frances Stewart and other gentlewomen best exemplified their determination to transplant the culture of respectability to this outpost of empire. Whether living on a backwoods farm or presiding over a big house in town, the wives and daughters of prominent Upper Canadians and gentlemen farmers consciously embraced the genteel leisure of the domestic circle.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>97</sup> Christie, "The Plague of Servants," 81.

They sought companionship from others of their rank and sensibilities; and they enjoyed those diversions that both reflected their personal tastes and interests, but also symbolized their essential identity—gentlewomen of the empire.

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