

**Zeitschrift:** Jahrbuch der Geographischen Gesellschaft Bern  
**Herausgeber:** Geographische Gesellschaft Bern  
**Band:** 66 (2018)

**Artikel:** Gender identities, class and colonialism in nineteenth century Western Canada  
**Autor:** Momsen, Janet  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-960460>

#### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

#### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

#### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 02.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# GENDER IDENTITIES, CLASS AND COLONIALISM IN NINETEENTH CENTURY WESTERN CANADA

Janet Momsen

*I have known Doris for at least thirty years. We first met at geography conferences in the United States and have continued to do so. Through these conferences, I was also able to meet her postgraduate students. Then in the 1990s, I started to work with Hungarian colleagues on gender and entrepreneurship along the Austro-Hungarian border. This overlapped with some of Doris' research and we have several research partners in common. In 2005, I published a book *Gender at the Border. Entrepreneurship in Rural Post-Socialist Hungary* (with Irén Kukorelli Szörényi and Judit Timár) in Doris' *Border Regions Series* for Ashgate. In 2006 while on a sabbatical term from the University of California, Davis, Doris asked me to teach a postgraduate course on Gender and Development at the University of Berne. This was a very exciting experience and gave me an opportunity to get to know Doris better. It culminated in a very enjoyable weekend trip by train and boat around Switzerland together. I am very happy to have been asked to contribute to this volume for a wonderful woman geographer whom I have known as a teacher, fellow researcher and administrator and above all as a friend.*

## INTRODUCTION

Research on settlement of the North American west has almost always drawn on documents written by male explorers, miners or settlers. Women migrants had been seen through male eyes as reluctant pioneers, mere genteel civilizers, who while their men were out taming the wilderness, gently and passively brought civilization to the frontier of settlement (Armitage and Jameson 1987). This paper, through its focus on the experiences of immigrant women during the late nineteenth century in western Canada, shows that women were not just passive participants but often active change agents. Not only did they influence frontier society, but the frontier environment also gave many immigrant women opportunities for self-expression in a new and more fluid society than that of Victorian England.

Nineteenth century migration to western Canada was unusual in that it generally involved movement from rural to

rural locations or from urban to rural locations. The Canadian government sought settlement of the empty Prairies by people with farming skills. Urban settlement was seen as secondary, with towns functioning mainly as service centres for the scattered agricultural population. At this time in western Canada, the distinction between urban and rural was fluid with many people combining urban and rural living. In the Begg survey of 340 wives of homesteaders in 1885, 22 percent of the respondents lived at least part of the year in urban areas.

Virtually the only people migrating as a group specifically to urban areas were the miners and their families who were recruited to exploit the newly discovered coal resources of western Canada. They moved across the ocean not to better themselves socially by becoming land owners like the homesteaders, but to practice their traditional skills in new mines on the frontier of settlement. Many of the men left Britain because they had fallen foul of local mine owners and so it is not surprising that they became radical leaders of both trade unions and government in the New World. In the mining towns, most women immigrants were there only because of their husbands and their situation, as isolated wives and mothers thrown together with people of many nationalities and races in a strange and often hostile frontier environment, was very demanding.

#### DATA SOURCES

It is particularly difficult to learn of the perceptions of working class women who migrated to Canada as they generally did not have the time nor education to write down their ideas and feelings. However, there are two main sources which do provide a viewpoint of female settlers of all classes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both are used in this chapter. The first consists of two oral history projects undertaken in former coal mining areas: the Coal Tyee project in Drumheller, southeastern Alberta (Coal Tyee Society

1978-1979) and one in the Crowsnest Pass on the border of Alberta and British Columbia (Schofield 1987). The second is made up of the 328 questionnaires completed by female settlers in 1885 for the Canadian Pacific Railway, out of 340 returned (Begg 1885).

The Begg questionnaires form a unique source of extensive baseline data on the attitudes of women immigrants to the Canadian prairies, mainly southern Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, over a century ago. However, interpretation must be tempered by an appreciation of the context of the survey. The Canadian Pacific Railway, having completed its transcontinental line, was looking for positive images which it could use to encourage further immigration to western Canada and so increase profits for the railway. The settlers were generally dependent on the railway and its branch lines to ship their produce and to import other goods so it was in their interests to respond in the requisite fashion. Furthermore, the patriarchal societal values of the period constrained women's freedom to express their true feelings in such official documents, especially where their attitudes differed from those of their husbands. Thus content analysis of the Begg data is fraught with ambiguities.

## COAL MINING

The discovery of coal in western Canada first occurred on Vancouver Island. Outcroppings of coal near Port Hardy at the north-eastern tip of the Island were revealed to an agent of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) by the Kwakiutl Indians in 1835. In 1859, a Nanaimo Indian, in return for a bottle of rum and the repair of his gun, showed James McKay of the Hudson's Bay Company where coal could be found in the Nanaimo area. The HBC began the first of its active recruitment drives for British miners in 1848 and in 1850. A recruitment agent, believing that Scottish miners were more accustomed to hard work, travelled to Edinburgh seeking both miners and a foreman. One of the men recruited was

Robert Dunsmuir who rose to eminence as the wealthiest coal miner on Vancouver Island. Nanaimo cemetery records and the testimony given at inquisitions on pit disasters indicates a steady influx of miners and their families from Northumberland and Durham. One of the last recruitment drives occurred in 1906 and 1907 when there was a sharp upswing in the demand for British Columbian coal. The Western Coal Company then «assisted some men to come out from the North of England where the mining conditions are very similar to here» (Gallacher 1979, p. 210).

Many of these immigrant miners came from a militant background, although it was suggested in British Columbia that the isolation of mining communities encouraged radical activities. Inland coal mines were developed as the expanding rail network made them accessible. When coal was discovered in the Kootenay Valley the Canadian Pacific Railway was determined to keep control of these coal-producing areas and so petitioned the federal government for a subsidy to extend the rail line over the Crowsnest Pass (elevation 1357m) into British Columbia. Mines in the Rocky Mountains opened in the 1880s and 1890s while the first mine in the Prairies to produce commercial coal started operations in 1912. Many of the miners in the inland mines worked in farming in the summer and there was a constant interchange of workers between the two occupations.

### **WOMEN IN MINING COMMUNITIES**

Within mining communities, women usually formed less than one third of the population and their roles have remained largely invisible. The mining towns were often ephemeral. Many sprang up along the line of rail to fuel the trains as the transcontinental railway cut through the Rockies. All that remains today, in many cases, is the occasional crumbling stone wall or rusty iron bar to mark yet another ghost town (personal fieldwork in Alberta 1987 and 1988). In the Alberta prairies, the expansion of branch rail lines made

it economic to open up coal mines in the Drumheller area in the early twentieth century. Now the mines of Drumheller are remembered only by tourist signs, and the few remaining people in the nearby old mining town of East Coulee have turned their no longer needed schoolhouse into a mining museum (Coal Tyee Society 1987). Around Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island, where British Columbia coal was first discovered, there is little evidence left of mining. Newcastle Island, in Nanaimo harbour, is now a provincial park with its abandoned coal shaft as a tourist attraction.

The population structure of these coal-mining towns was dominated by transient young male workers. Despite this pattern, which is typical of resource-based towns, Friesen sees them as the crucible of Canadian industrial capitalism (Friesen 1984, p. 29). For the capitalist mine owners and investors, who often owned much of the mining towns as well, it was essential that the miners should remain landless labourers for a long time after arriving in Canada. Work as a miner had status and was imbued with a set of values passed on from father to son. Despite the fact that many miners were also farmers part-time and often became landowners, mining towns had a special ethos and community spirit. Miners had a common identity and it was among miners that labour unions were first established, largely by immigrants, in western Canada. According to Palmer (1979), ethnic and occupational residential segregation was more pronounced in the mining communities than in the farming communities and labour solidarity and radicalism were more evident.

The lives of the miners' wives, struggling to raise families in the turbulent masculine society of nineteenth century Canadian mining towns, is little known. These frontier women were involved in both mining and agriculture. Neither occupation was exclusive nor was an individual fixed in a particular economic role. In the Alberta coalfields the first miners were homesteaders and many mines were worked part-time by the men, while their wives farmed. The first mine opened

in the Alberta prairies was financed by a woman shopkeeper and run by her son. There is even one remarkable woman who was recorded by the Coal Tyee project as farming and mining in her own right. *‘You know we were farming and mining at the same time. I never thought anything about a woman working. I liked working outside better than I did in. We tried everything you know, but that mining I really enjoyed’* (Mrs Dolly Gregory: Coal Tyee Society 1979). Mrs M.M. Drury moved from urban Surrey in southern England to homestead some 250 kilometres west of Winnipeg in southern Manitoba in 1880 and was very appreciative of both the aesthetic and material qualities of her new location.

*It is certainly a great change to those leaving town life but the beauty of the scenery, bright sunshine, variety of birds and animals added to the prospect of a home you can call your own form a pleasing novelty. I have gone through all the phases of pioneer life in a tent, both in the heat of summer and early snow in the fall, yet have gained health and strength, never meeting with any interruption from either human being or animal, although often left with only my two young children, no house nearer than one and a half miles. There is much a woman can do when the male portion is at work in the fields; gardening is pleasant and profitable work, also saving money (Begg 1885).*

Many women were less positive complaining of isolation and long, cold winters in primitive housing and high levels of maternal and infant mortality. This underlines the diversity of western experiences for women and the different patterns of their lives. The conditions in which most miners and their families were expected to live were very poor. Mine owners provided small frame shacks without indoor plumbing. Out-houses were allowed to foul drinking water and consequently typhoid, cholera and other diseases related to poor hygiene were common. On the other hand, the isolated homesteaders in the Prairies found the environment very healthy as this isolation in itself protected them from infectious and water-borne diseases (Begg 1885). In the mining towns, compa-

ny stores often sold supplies at very high prices, food in the bunkhouses of single miners was poor and schools for miner's children were sometimes non-existent. For homesteaders schools often closed in winter as snow and cold made it impossible for children to attend. The daily burden of coping with such a situation fell largely on the wives of settlers.

The mining towns of Vancouver Island differed from the later coal-mining settlements of the mountains and plains because they were established before the railway reached the west. In 1862, it was said of Nanaimo that

*several shiploads of British coalminers and their families comprised the inhabitants of the town – the miners imported for their expertise, the families for their stabilizing influence. For this was an adventure of immense proportions to men reared in the narrow confines of British coal towns and it was feared that they would quickly become discouraged when faced with the isolation, the climate and the working conditions on the rain-soaked island so far away from anywhere. A wife and children could offer much comfort and were also difficult to relocate should a man become dissatisfied with his lot (Bowen 1982, p. 21).*

Many of the miner's wives felt alien and isolated in these New World mining towns to which they had followed their menfolk.

*It was the end of the world to me. When you come from a city in England to an old mining camp and all you see around you are a bunch of stumps and rocks, it's like the end of the world (quoted in Bowen 1982, p. 24).*

The women who emigrated left their homes and family networks reluctantly. They were forced to follow their husbands by nineteenth century patriarchal roles, which prevented women playing an overt role in family decision-making and made a refusal to comply with a husband's wish almost unheard of. For young men the voyage to the New World was an adventure. For women it was undertaken at a time in their

lives when they were in the vulnerable years of child-bearing and child-rearing and the positive aspects of migration were tempered by family responsibilities.

The inadequate shacks provided for miners in Nanaimo and the Crowsnest Pass towns such as Coleman and Fernie were especially vulnerable to fire, and the Newcastle district of Drumheller, where most of the local miners lived, suffered regularly from flooding. Schofield's interviews in 1987 with retired immigrant miners and their wives in Fernie in the Crowsnest Pass area revealed that

*the company houses were so thin that by morning your blankets were covered in ice and the contents of your chamber pot were frozen. Further, the houses were so close together that nothing, really nothing was private. You'd say, poor old Mr Smith's having trouble with his bowels again, he's been so long in the privy. Or if you were in the privy you'd recognize the footsteps of the passerby and shout out a good-day, or a message because you also knew where they were going.*

(Mrs Lerner, Schofield 1987).

Above all, the severe cold and heavy snowfalls of the Canadian winter brought new problems for the British miner's wives. One miner's daughter interviewed by Ann Schofield (1987) revealed that her mother had to keep the water pump working outside their cottage by knocking the ice off with an axe every two hours – day and night. A miner's widow said that emptying a chamber pot in winter was a nightmare and quite a ritual developed within the community involving breaking the ice on the river in order to empty the pots into the fast-running water underneath. All the women interviewed in Fernie were able to build a house, or part of it. They also had experience of supplementing the family food supply by hunting and fishing and gathering plants and berries.

Washing clothes was an especially heavy chore both winter and summer for miner's wives. The men's pit clothes had to be washed after every shift and many families had several

members working down the mine. One informant reported that in the Crowsnest Pass towns of Natal and Michel the women would talk endlessly about the weather because of the ever-present possibility that the wind would change direction blowing coal dust from the coke ovens onto the clean clothes drying on the line, making it necessary to rewash them. Clearly, within the domestic sphere women were faced with many unexpected circumstances and had to devise new ways of coping in an alien environment far from the support of friends and relatives.

In addition, strikes and accidents were even more common than they had been in England and the consequences more severe because of the loneliness felt by many immigrant women. Wives and children could lose their homes if the right to live in company houses was withdrawn because the miner was no longer working. Yet women in the community gave great support to their menfolk during strikes. When an accident occurred, neighbours would assist the affected families for the common occupation in these settlements gave company towns a strong community solidarity at times of crisis.

Nanaimo cemetery records show that among miners from northern England, the average age at death over the period 1877 to 1909 was only thirty-nine years, with many killed in major mine disasters in 1879, 1887 and 1909. Widows and children left alone experienced great difficulties. Sometimes women were just abandoned as the men moved on to new mines, leaving family encumbrances behind, as occurred in Nanaimo in 1855 with the first British coalminers brought to Canada (Bowen 1987, p. 83).

Widows and single mothers had to become adept at supporting their children on their own, usually through an extension of their domestic skills to the public sphere as washerwomen, storekeepers, seamstresses or boarding house landladies. One informant in Fernie remembered her mother selling furniture in order to buy a sewing machine so that she

could make money dressmaking. According to several of the Fernie interviewees, widows had little choice but to marry again quickly, often with disastrous results. Remarriage was an easy option in some ways because the ratio of women to men was so low in western mining towns: in Nanaimo in 1881 there were only 56 women per 100 men. Even when their husbands were present, and especially during strikes, women were often expected to contribute to the family income by hunting and fishing, gathering berries, raising chickens and growing vegetables. Thus these immigrant women, although town dwellers, had to learn how to utilize the resources of the surrounding wilderness as did the homesteaders.

### CLASS AND ETHNICITY

In Canada, miners and their families had to live and work side by side with other cultures and ethnicities including Chinese and Indians (First Nations people). According to Palmer (1979), an informal and unstructured caste system existed in the mines of whites and foreigners which was instituted and reinforced by government policies on immigration and on mine safety. Apparently Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians and French-Canadians belonged to the former group, and Slavs, Italians and *Orientals* to the latter, with English miners preferred above all others. This was codified in Rule 43 of the first Coal Mines Ordinance of 1893 which stated that «no person unable to speak and read English shall be appointed to or shall hold any position of trust or responsibility» (Palmer 1979, p. 18). Chinese workers were paid less than Europeans and were not allowed to take skilled jobs. Thus divisions between men in the workplace were very rigid but the social divisions between the women of the different immigrant groups were often much less marked. There is evidence that at times of crisis, such as mine accidents, all the women in the community would unite, ignoring divisions based on nationality.

At first, on Vancouver Island, local Indian women were used as beasts of burden to load the coal. Later Chinese men

took over many of the unskilled mining jobs. Chinese workers were most numerous in the mines of Vancouver Island, but even in the town of Anthracite in Alberta they formed the second largest national group after the English in 1901 (Palmer 1979). White women were not expected to work in the mines, as they had earlier in Britain, and even at the end of the century, many immigrant miner's wives remembered working on the surface at British pits sorting the rocks from the coal. In Canada, other racial groups replaced women at the bottom of the mining hierarchy and this change was seen as a social benefit by immigrants (Bill Crawshaw: Coal Tyee Society 1979). Canada was part of the British Empire and English was the language of their new country so British immigrants automatically had status based on language and ethnicity. Thus although they had come to Canada as working class immigrants, with wages and living conditions little better if not worse than at home, the women in particular felt their situation had improved.

Among those who moved to the Prairies as homesteaders, class differences were also apparent. In the Begg survey some nine Ontarians regretted leaving home with comments like 'Ontario is a more comfortable place for a woman in good circumstances'. Some respondents made this class effect even more specific: 'Only come if belong to farm labourers' and 'It is good for the working class' (Begg 1885). On the other hand, many coming from poor backgrounds did see the benefit for their children of being able to own their own homes and land. During this period in Canada, the position of the woman in the family was fundamental to the attainment of middle-class status. The occupation of the male head of household was less significant to being middle class than the presence of a woman following a genteel life with no paid work outside the home. In addition, as David Gagan (1988) has suggested, in Canada the Victorian cult of true womanhood allowed women, through their nurturing skills, to train the working class to behave like the middle class.

Yet it was from the ranks of immigrant miners' wives that provincial and national leaders arose. The freedoms and opportunities offered by the new frontier allowed women to find new identities not possible for working class women in England. Mary Ellen Smith, (1863-1933), daughter of a coalminer, moved from Northumberland with her miner husband Ralph to Nanaimo in 1891. He had been a strong union supporter in England and in 1894 became an elected union organizer in Nanaimo. He was elected a member of the provincial legislature in 1900 and became a Liberal Member of Parliament in the federal government until the defeat of the Laurier government in 1911. In 1916 Ralph was re-elected to the provincial legislature and was made Finance Minister. British Columbia held a referendum on the issue of the female franchise and women won the vote in April 1917, a year after the Prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

When a by-election was held in 1918, following Ralph Smith's death, Mary Ellen Smith won by a wide margin. She was British Columbia's first female member of the provincial legislature but was not fully accepted in Vancouver's upper class social circles. She became the first woman Cabinet Minister in the British Empire and is given sole credit for the passage of the first Mother's Pensions and Female Minimum Wage Bill which led to shorter hours and higher wages for women and girls and also the requirement that employers should give maternity leave. Mary Ellen Smith was re-elected in 1920 and 1924 as a Liberal. In the 1920s, British Columbia led Canada in social legislation and much of the credit must go to Mary Ellen Smith, an immigrant coal miner's wife.

## CONCLUSION

Women were often reluctant pioneers for good reason, as migration to the frontier demanded much more of them than nineteenth century social mores prescribed. It is perhaps not surprising that among those women who had often been responsible for introducing the civilizing influence of the urban

community to the wildest parts of Canada, should be some who led the demand for female suffrage in their new homeland. The importance of women's role in the western Canadian pioneer family led many men to support votes for women earlier than in other parts of the world. Success in overcoming the constraints of the unfamiliar Canadian environment enabled female immigrants from both the agricultural and mining communities to enjoy its democratizing effect.

#### REFERENCES

Armitage, S., Jameson, E. (eds.) (1987). *The Women's West*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press.

Begg, A. (1885). Completed Questionnaires (Female Settlers), box II, vol.III, (Victoria, BC: Provincial Archives of British Columbia 39604 (1897, RG76, vol.157, file 39604 (1897), microfilm reel C-7303).

Bowen, L. (1982). *Boss Whistle. The Coalminers of Vancouver Island Remember*. Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan Books.

Coal Tyee Society (1978-9). Oral History Project, the East Coulee Story. *Mss in British Columbia Public Archives*: Victoria, B.C.

Friesen, G. (1984). *The Canadian Prairies: A History*, Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press.

Gagan, D. (1988). Social Class in Canadian Historiography. Paper presented at a Seminar of the Social Policy forum of the British association for Canadian Studies held at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Gallacher, D. T. (1979). Men, money, machines: studies comparing colliery operations and factors of production in British Columbia's coal to 1891, Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia.

Palmer, H. (1979). *Aspects of Ethnicity in Southern Alberta Coalmining Camps, 1880-1920*. Calgary: Glenbow Museum Archives.

Schofield, A. (1987). Oral histories of miners and their wives in Fernie, BC. *Mss. Canadian Studies Centre*, University of Newcastle.

#### AUTHOR

**Janet Momsen** is Emerita Professor of Geography, University of California, Davis, Senior Research Fellow School of Geography and the Environment at University of Oxford. She is also Research Fellow in International Gender Studies, Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. From 1988 to 1996 she is a founding member and Chair of the International Geographical Union Gender Commission. Her research focuses on gender and development, especially in rural areas. Her main research areas are the Caribbean and East and Central Europe.

