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1920s Youth Culture at Queen’s University

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Résumé de l'article

Au Canada, dans les années 20, une culture spécifique, propre aux jeunes, s’est développée. Une des causes essentielles de ce développement fut l’émergence de la femme moderne : sa nouvelle manière de s’habiller, son attitude vis à vis de la sexualité, son parti-pris d’autonomie, poussèrent beaucoup à croire que les normes génériques traditionnelles étaient remises en question. L’université Queen de Kingston, une institution mixte, fut un des foyers de développement de cette nouvelle culture. Dans cet article, à partir de l’étude du cas particulier de Queen, nous étudierons les tensions qui résultèrent de la confrontation entre les idéaux traditionnels de la classe moyenne dans la société canadienne des années 20, et les nouvelles valeurs qui commencèrent à s’imposer parmi les jeunes, des jeunes qui, comme « la femme moderne », sont issus également de cette classe moyenne.

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"It is a Dancing and Frivolous Age"
1920s Youth Culture at Queen's University

BY ANNE WARNER

...to-day's youth is a product of the present era. It is an extravagant age that shakes off the trammels of by-gone convention, that takes short-cuts and lives at a pace never before possible in the history of the world...The 'flapper' and her boy companions...expect all the luxuries, ease and enjoyments that this wonderful age of invention produces so easily, and, like the lilies of the field, they toil not nor spin.[1]

The "roaring twenties" was a decade of experimentation, turmoil, and challenge to traditional norms. A social revolution occurred in which Victorian ideals, especially those related to the housebound middle-class Victorian lady, were being redefined. Central to this revolution was the emergence of a post-war youth culture characterized by an increased interest in socializing. Its focus on frivolity and individual enjoyment alarmed many because it actively challenged traditional attitudes and behaviour, creating a climate of tension between the past and the present. As a 1922 issue of the popular Canadian magazine *Maclean's* stated, "there is much criticism regarding the young girls and youths of today; they are said to be undisciplined, reckless, extravagant and frivolous, falling far below the standard set by the preceding generation."[2]

As part of this 1920s youth culture, a new modern woman emerged. Her clothing, hairstyle, sexuality, and autonomous attitude suggested that traditional gender norms were being dismantled. In the early twentieth century, women were increasingly active in the public sphere through their involvement in the Great War, the feminist movement, the labour force, and higher education. In light of these economic and political changes, women's social lives also needed to adjust. The social life that ensued convinced traditionalists that women were far too liberated and young people were out of control. Since the values of the new youth culture and modern woman stood in sharp contrast to the traditions of the past, the older generations feared for the future.[3]

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[1]Adelaide. N. Plumptre, "What Shall We do With "Our" Flapper," *Maclean's Magazine*, Jun. 1, 1922, 66.

[2] Plumptre, "What Shall We do," 64.

[3] Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 5-6.

Abstract

In the 1920s a distinct youth culture formed in Canada. A key to this culture was the emergence of a modern woman. Her clothing, views on sexuality, and autonomous attitude led many to believe that traditional gender norms were being dismantled. As a co-educational university, Queen's University of Kingston, Ontario, was an incubator for youth culture. This paper uses Queen's as a case study to explore the tension between traditional ideals of middle class Canadian society and the values that began to emerge among middle class youth in the 1920s, including those surrounding the emergent modern woman.

Résumé: *Au Canada, dans les années 20, une culture spécifique, propre aux jeunes, s'est développée. Une des causes essentielles de ce développement fut l'émergence de la femme moderne : sa nouvelle manière de s'habiller, son attitude vis à vis de la sexualité, son parti-pris d'autonomie, poussèrent beaucoup à croire que les normes génériques traditionnelles étaient remises en question. L'université Queen de Kingston, une institution mixte, fut un des foyers de développement de cette nouvelle culture. Dans cet article, à partir de l'étude du cas particulier de Queen, nous étudierons les tensions qui résultèrent de la confrontation entre les idéaux traditionnels de la classe moyenne dans la société canadienne des années 20, et les nouvelles valeurs qui commencèrent à s'imposer parmi les jeunes, des jeunes qui, comme 'la femme moderne', sont issus également de cette classe moyenne.*

As a co-educational university, Queen's University of Kingston, Ontario, was an incubator for 1920s youth culture. The co-ed socializing at Queen's concerned university administrators whose top priority was to create an environment in which students, men in particular, could learn in the most effective way. Using Queen's University in the 1920s as a case study and informed by sources in the Queen's University Archives, this paper explores the tension between traditional ideals of middle-class Canadian society and the values that began to emerge among middle-class youth in the 1920s, including those surrounding the emergent modern woman.[4]

Specifically, this paper will examine women's involvement in public life leading up to 1920; the ingredients that characterized the "roaring twenties" and the cultivation of the emergent youth culture; how this youth culture played out on Queen's campus and how Queen's administration responded to it; and finally, the reaction of Queen's women to the constraints placed upon them by the university administration that wanted to curb socializing and maintain women's morality.

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[4] Specifically, three sources in the QUA were integral to the writing of this paper. *The Principal's Report*, published at the end of each school year, illustrated the administration's view about campus activities, student issues, and university priorities during the twenties. In each report, the Principal addressed any concerns he had about student behaviour during the year. *The Queen's Journal*, Queen's biweekly student newspaper, gave a snapshot of 1920s student life revealing important issues facing students at the time. The Journal was written by both male and female students and was usually eight to ten pages in length with a section reserved for female students, which was, at most, three-quarters of a page. Finally, the interviews done as part of *Hidden Voices: The Life Experiences of Women who have Worked and Studied at Queen's*, an oral history project commissioned by the Dean of Women in the late 1970s, gave a first hand account of women's experiences at Queen's. Interviews were conducted with female graduates from various decades and, for this paper, all transcripts of interviews with those women graduating or working in the 1920s were read. Included in the interviews was Hilda Laird, the former Dean of Women from 1925 to 1934, whose insights were integral to understanding the social context experienced by 1920s Queen's women.

The Pre 1920 Era

Prior to 1920, women's involvement in World War I, the labour force, higher education, and the feminist movement generally expanded women's opportunities. The war revamped the definition of appropriate roles for women. In the absence of men, women took over jobs traditionally allocated to men and were heavily involved in volunteer organizations. While the public and the press widely acknowledged the important role women played in maintaining the home front, when the war ended women were expected to return to their "proper sphere"—the home.[5] Despite this, women had demonstrated that they could participate in a man's world and this motivated progressive women to challenge long-held notions of appropriate gender roles. In a 1917 article, Adelaide Plumptre, a leader in the Canadian Red Cross Society, comments that

> the necessary emergence of women from the stuffy femininity of the drawing room into the human life of industry and business has been accelerated by the demands of war, and has disposed forever of the theory that there is no place for a woman outside her home.[6]

One of the first places that women emerged from the drawing room was in the political sphere. The suffrage movement in Canada began in the late 1870s and by the 1880s middle-class women led the fight for social reforms such as just property laws, improved working conditions, access to higher education, new divorce laws, and temperance. The ultimate goal of the movement was to gain a political voice through enfranchisement and to use the ballot box to push for political reforms that would improve women's status in society, and allow them more freedom in choosing their roles. As a result of the efforts of the first wave feminist movement, women achieved the right to vote in most provinces by 1916 and federally in 1918. By 1920, traditional beliefs about appropriate roles for women were being openly challenged and debated. Reformers, like Nellie McClung, believed that because women had been invaluable during the war and had won the vote, that the 1920s would be an era of social reform and advancement for women.[7] While Canadian women did not experience the reforms predicted by McClung, women's lives vastly changed during the twenties. The numbers of women who enrolled in colleges and universities increased and women joined the labour force in greater numbers than ever before.[8] In 1919, the

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[5] Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Wendy Mitchinson and Naomi Black, *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1988), 204; Veronica Strong-Boag, *"Janey Canuck": Women in Canada, 1919-1939* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1994), 2.

[6] Quoted by Adelaide Plumptre in Katherine M. Laubman, "A Historical-Ethnographic Account of a Canadian Woman in Sport, 1920-1938: The Story of Margaret (Bell) Gibson" (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1991), 58.

[7] Prentice et al., *Canadian Women,* 199-203, 218; Allan Levine, *The Devil in Babylon: Fear of Progress and the Birth of Modern Life* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd, 2005), 100.

[8] Bruce Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 95; Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1988), 43.

Conservative government passed the Adolescent School Attendance Act, which raised the age of school leaving to 16 in Ontario. As a result, the number of high school students quadrupled from 1918 to 1938, meaning that more girls received mandatory education that could translate into job opportunities. Girls with a high school education usually went straight into the job market or received more specialized training in normal or nursing schools. The more privileged minority went on to university.[9] All of these changes took women out of the private sphere and opened up doors to new possibilities.

Collectively these changes seemed to liberate women from conventional ties and obligations. Some women rejected Victorian concepts of domesticity and instead got involved in public activities previously deemed incompatible with proper womanhood. It is not surprising that in light of these changes many felt that traditional womanhood was being rapidly dismantled. Politicians and labour leaders debated how best to regulate female employment and restore the sexual division of labour. The concern about women reflected the general anxieties prevalent in the post-war era about social disorder, socio-economic change, and the collapse of moral and ideological doctrines.[10] These anxieties were most readily demonstrated by the controversy surrounding the 1920s flapper.

The Age of the Flapper

The novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald brought to the fore the lifestyle of rebellious American youth in the 1920s. His stories describe dancing, petting parties, alcohol, and jazz as central to American college life. Fitzgerald's words confirmed the older generation's fear that individual desire, impulse, and a resentment of authority was driving post-war youth culture.[11] While his books focus on American youth, similar activities were popular amongst Canadian youth, which prompted much criticism and concern. As a *Maclean's* author wrote,

> [it is] evident that undesirable things do occur, and in what are called our 'best' families. This is not an indictment of Canadian girls *en masse*. There are eccentric and indiscreet individuals in their late teens in Canada—but this must not be allowed to merge into vicious habits and promiscuous love-making.[12]

Concern about the broader societal impact of this peer-intensive youth culture created great anxiety. Historian Cynthia Comacchio suggests that a common reaction after times of great societal change is to examine youth and their amusements

[9] Cynthia R. Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of Modern Canada 1920-1950* (Waterloo: Waterloo University Press, 2006), 6, 100-101; Strong-Boag, *The New Day*, 6; Levine, *The Devil in Babylon,* 158; Cathering Gidney, *A Long Eclipse* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 6.

[10] Birgitte Soland, *Becoming Modern: Young Women and the Reconstruction of Womanhood in the 1920s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4, 5, 7.

[11] Fass, *Damned and the Beautiful,* 24-27.

[12] Gertrude E. S. Pringle, "Is the Flapper a Menace?" *Maclean's Magazine*, Jun. 15, 1922, 19.

closely.[13] After World War I, the future was uncertain and, when youth began to challenge pre-war traditions openly, moral panic ensued about the state of Canada's youth.

The flapper was one of the most prominent symbols and concerns of the "roaring twenties." She was a young woman who wore short skirts, favoured bobbed hair to long hair, drank alcohol, danced to jazz music, smoked in public, and drove in fast cars.[14] The boyish look of the flapper challenged established hallmarks of womanhood, like long dresses and long hair, and allowed for more ease of movement. This marked the first time that fashion became a way of defining modern youth.[15] Writer H.L. Mencken took note of this radical transformation from the full figured and corseted "Gibson Girl" of the 1890s and, as early as 1915 named the young women who adopted the new style "flappers."[16] The reality behind the flapper image was complex. Young women had to deal with a world that offered them new opportunity, but retained a firm resistance to any significant changes to women's roles.[17] As a result, shorter hemlines attracted much critical attention and many interpreted this change in style as signifying a blurring of gender roles.[18]

A number of urban, educated women adopted the new fashion, including Queen's women. Though the new style prompted critics to question women's intentions, to most young women bobbed hair was "just what you did, if you were young and wanted to be in style, that was definitely the look. Anybody who wanted to be up-to-date did that."[19] Florence May Mooney, a Queen's student who graduated in 1922, lamented that her mother would not allow her to bob her hair like the other Queen's women, so she was forced to wear her hair in buns.[20] Indeed, to some the bob expressed a commitment to modernity and rebellion against established gender norms, a change Mooney's mother did not support; but, for most, it was just what you did to be modern.[21] Men and women participated in this new youth culture, and both were criticized, but the obvious change in women's outward appearance was perceived by many as an open challenge to traditional ideals and thus women bore the brunt of the critiques.

In a *Maclean's* article about the flapper, the author claimed "it is no crime

[13] Comacchio, *Dominion of Youth,* 165.

[14] Nicole Neatby, "Women at Queen's in the 1920s: A Separate Sphere" (MA thesis, Queen's University, 1986), 24; Levine, *The Devil in Babylon,* 300; Strong-Boag, *The New Day*, 85-86.

[15] Comacchio, *Dominion of Youth,* 175, 178; Soland, *Becoming Modern,* 45, 48.

[16] Levine, *The Devil in Babylon,* 298-299.

[17] Strong-Boag, *"Janey Canuck,"* 3.

[18] Levine, *The Devil in Babylon,* 300.

[19] Soland, *Becoming Modern,* 31.

[20] Florence May Mooney, interview transcript, *Hidden Voices: The Life Experiences of Women who have Worked and Studied at Queen's* (Office of the Dean of Women: Queen's University, 1980).

[21] Soland, *Becoming Modern,* 45, 48.

Levana Dinner 1923 in which almost all Queens women sport bobbed hair. Courtesy of Queens Archives.

to be a flapper, and we have every belief that—in the majority of cases—our Canadian young women are wholesome and sound." Although "endless is the controversy as to the flapper and her ways," she did have her supporters. *Maclean's* noted the mixed perceptions of the flapper in Canadian culture, "while one writer will vehemently denounce the modern girl with her bobbed head and short skirts, another will rise up and valiantly defend her."[22] As in *Maclean's,* the flapper was also a contentious subject at Queen's. At a 1924 dinner, the Dean of Women, Mrs. McNeill, addressed a comment made by an arts professor who objected to co-education. She proclaimed that "only a small percentage of the girls were flappers...and there are as many flappers among men as there are among women."[23] The headline of a 1925 *Journal* article indicates that the flapper was regarded negatively: "Evil Triumphs over Good at Ladies Meeting: Law, Order and Uplifting Forces Decided to be Inferior to Jazz, Flappers and Bobbed Hair." The article refers to the women's inter-year debate, in which it was "resolved that in America at the present time, there are more evil influences than good on young people under seventeen." In addition, it argued that

> Jazz music, newspaper scandals and even modern parents proved targets for scathing criticism, and though the negative appealed by stressing the presence of law and order, educational and uplifting forces in the world to-day, this time evil [modern influences] triumphed over good.[24]

Although the debate portrayed flappers in a negative light, its members participated actively in the youth culture associated with the flapper. They bobbed their hair, listened to jazz and frequented dances, all part of being a young middle-class woman in the 1920s. They seemed to distinguish between embracing all aspects of being a flapper and just being a modern woman during the twenties.

[22] Pringle, "Is the Flapper a Menace?" 19.

[23] *Queen's Journal*, Mar. 4, 1924 (Queen's University Archives, hereafter QUA), 1,3.

[24] *Queen's Journal*, Jan. 16, 1925 (QUA), 1, 5.

The real issue about the flapper and youth culture was a perceived revolution in morals. However, the 1925 *Maclean's* article "Give Modern Youth a Hearing" pointed out,

> Are we really so much worse than our parents?... Were not "petting parties" carried on just as effectively in buggies as they are in motor cars today?... If we sometimes wear silk stockings in winter and furs in summer, and comparatively few of us really do, is this any more foolish than the tight corsets and tight shoes our mothers indulged in?[25]

Much like the youth of today are criticized for being idol and technologically obsessed, the youth of the 1920s were criticized for adopting activities and styles different from their parents' generation, especially excess, and unchaperoned socializing out of the home.

Mixing and Mingling

Industrialization changed traditional popular culture in that urbanization, technology, and the affordability of cars allowed more commercialized opportunity for fun. Thus, the shaping of modern youth culture was expressed through leisure activities in commercial venues removed from parents and chaperones. There was an abundance of diversions including cinemas, amusement parks, cafes, and dancehalls.[26] The cinema was very popular and set the standard for style and behaviour associated with youth. By the 1920s, Hollywood identified youth as a discernable market and focused several productions on young people and their amusements. Hollywood popularized fashion and the aesthetic ideal of physical beauty and style became a way of defining youth as separate from their parents' generation.[27] Film, radio, newspapers, and magazines all emphasized youth, fashion, and the importance of beauty.[28]

It is clear that a key feature of being young in the 1920s was socializing, and as A.B. McKillop argues, nothing shaped the experience of student life in Ontario universities after World War I more than the interaction between young men and women. This trend began prior to the war when young people started to get frustrated with the restrictions placed on co-ed interactions. By the 1910s, both men and women were showing resistance to the quasi-parental control of their social activities by university officials, so they pushed for more social contact, usually in the form of additional dances. In 1911, one of the major issues at Queen's was whether the senate would permit two dances per month.[29] By 1920, there were weekly dances in addition to the more fancy formals; classes were co-ed; and students were encouraged to show school spirit at intercollegiate sport competitions, especially football games. Danc-

[25] Marjorie Middleton, "Give Modern Youth a Hearing," *Maclean's Magazine*, Nov 15, 1925, 69.

[26] Comacchio, *Dominion of Youth,* 162-63, 166-67.

[27] Comacchio, *Dominion of Youth,* 170, 171, 178-180.

[28] Strong-Boag, *"Janey Canuck,"* 4.

[29] A.B. McKillop, *Matters of Mind: The University in Ontario, 1791-1951* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 251-252, 411, 414, 417.

Science Overflow (dance) sometime in the 1920s. Courtesy of Queen's University Archives.

ing to Jazz music was the most popular recreational activity among youth.[30] Jazz, born in New Orleans at the turn of the century, arrived in Canada on the vaudeville circuit in the mid-to late 1910s and gained popularity through radio and dance halls.[31] The popularity of dancing among young people attracted much controversy due to the close contact between men and women. The dance hall was an opportunity for youthful experimentation with the opposite sex and, as a result, the morality of youth and modesty of women was called into question.[32]

The youth of the 1920s, and women in particular, wanted more control over their social lives.[33] Some women who attended Queen's in the twenties suggested that socializing and dating were a central part of a woman's experience at university.

Marjorie Bates was a social butterfly who "never miss[ed] anything, year

[30] Soland, *Becoming Modern,* 79, 81, 93, 174-75; Jean O'Grady, *Margaret Addison: A Biography* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 193.

[31] Comacchio, *Dominion of Youth,* 174; Levine, *The Devil in Babylon,* 296, 297.

[32] Comacchio, *Dominion of Youth,* 175; Carolyn Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City 1880-1930* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1995), 128.

[33] McKillop, *Matters of Mind,* 251.

dance or anything." Bates

> had four steadies because, if they [the men] weren't going with you as a steady, they would bring a girl from home and that was frowned on of course. So, we had to have a steady in Meds and Arts & Science, and Science too, because we had to go to the Science Overflow.[34]

Although Olive David, "wasn't one of the belles of the university," like Bates, she participated in social activities. "There was no question about that but there were some girls who, you know, had a much...greater...social life than I had at Queen's."[35] Despite the fact that Florence May Mooney's mother kept a very tight rein on her and did not approve of her dating, Mooney felt that "you couldn't live the life of a hermit, oh no. So I began to go out with men and that was the beginning of my social life."[36] Frequent dances gave women the opportunity to experiment with a variety of partners. Bates and her gang used to go to dances

> with everybody and didn't dance a straight program [with one person]. We wanted to dance with somebody different every dance. So, we got to know a great many people... we weren't a very serious bunch, at all, we judged our escorts by their looks and whether they were good dancers.[37]

By 1920, the university campus had become a place of heterosexual play with increased locations to socialize.[38] Young women gained more autonomous social lives by going out, socializing in mixed groups, and dating a variety of people.[39] While pursuing these social freedoms they challenged the boundary of appropriate womanhood.

Socializing put university administrators in a conflicted position. On the one hand, they wanted to offer students a place where they could explore, stretch their minds, grow and be inspired; but, on the other hand, the university had to ensure that societal and parental concerns about the negative consequences associated with youth culture were addressed.

Tensions at Queen's

In its early history, Queen's prided itself on being a close-knit welcoming community where students received individual attention from professors. The Reverend Robert Bruce Taylor, principal of Queen's from 1917 to 1930, boasted that "Queen's University has the great advantage from the academic point of view of being situated in a small city where the interest of the student is centred upon the institution to which he belongs."[40] However, there was great concern that even in this small community there was

[34] Marjorie Bates, interview transcript, *Hidden Voices: The Life Experiences of Women who have Worked and Studied at Queen's* (Office of the Dean of Women: Queen's University, 1980).

[35] Olive David, interview transcript, *Hidden Voices: The Life Experiences of Women who have Worked and Studied at Queen's* (Office of the Dean of Women: Queen's University, 1980).

[36] Mooney Interview.

[37] Bates Interview.

[38] McKillop, *Matters of Mind,* 251-52, 411, 414, 417.

[39] Soland, *Becoming Modern,* 173-74.

[40] *Principal's Report* 1923-1924 (QUA), 3.

too much socializing, resulting in wasted time and loss of focus on studies. In the 1921-1922 *Principal's Report*, Taylor states

> Queen's has been suffering, as some other Universities, from the intrusion of social activities upon study...Evidence is not lacking of the fact that students themselves realize that their social activities are becoming stereotyped and comparatively confined in their range.[41]

Four years later, Taylor had similar concerns and argued that students were given so much freedom at university away from parental constraint that they were unable to focus on their studies. He declared that:

> It may be taken for granted that under any state of things a good deal of time will be wasted by the students of the University. They come, many of them, from rigid homes where their every hour has been under direction, or from schools where they have been accustomed to having knowledge put into them by a process of educational drill. On reaching the University, they find that to a large extent they are masters of their own time: the day of reckoning seems a long way off; they make new intimate friendships. They discover that instead of being told what they must remember they have to find things out for themselves. Here it is that many completely fail. They have no method of work...hundreds find their way into universities who have no real student interest, who are destined only to waste their own time, the time of their friends, and the time if their instructors. In every University in the land these questions are being asked just now. It is a dancing and frivolous age.[42]

Clearly, Principal Taylor was frustrated with the situation at Queen's and had to find ways to motivate students whom he perceived to be more interested in wasting time than getting an education.

At Queen's students formed new clubs and societies and, while some had an academic focus like the English Club, many were of a purely social character. Some professors and administrators considered these extracurricular activities to be a serious distraction from study. A constant issue for the Queen's senate throughout the twenties was the number of dances per year, the hours in which they were held, and the decorations used. Every Friday night a dance was held in Grant Hall from 7:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. Members of sports teams had to miss much of the dance because they had practice at 5:00 p.m. and then had to go home, shower, eat, and change. As a result, students urged the senate to change the start time to 8:00 p.m. and end the dance at midnight. The senate did not budge on the issue until the end of the decade resulting in much tension between it and the students.[43]

Students took a counter position to that of the concerned authorities. In a rebuttal to the festering concern about students' lack of seriousness and social activities, one student stated in the *Journal*:

[41] *Principal's Report* 1921-1922 (QUA), 11.

[42] *Principal's Report* 1926-1927 (QUA), 6.

[43] Frederick W. Gibson, *Queen's University Volume II 1917-1961* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), 70, 75.

> There is something radically wrong with the modern student. So, at any rate prophets, priests and periodicals constantly assure us. Yet it can scarcely be denied that in a great many ways we're better than we used to be... Now the hilarious go to a movie, the truly forsaken to a dance, and the more moderate permit themselves to do an hour's less work... There is no doubt that in may ways we are a vast improvement on our College ancestors. We don't drink; we seldom start riots; we work hard; we are certainly respectable.[44]

Interviews with Alumnae confirm that most students did not drink. Even the social butterfly, Marjory Bates asserts that she "went through college life at the right time when there was no dope, no alcohol, no nothing like that."[45] The contrasting views appear to be a matter of perspective. While the principal's comments suggest that students were not able to balance studies and socializing, the students believed that they were managing quite well in both spheres of their lives.

The reality was that some students may not have been able to afford endless socializing and drinking. Queen's was a "poor man's university" as characterized by Hilda Laird, the Dean of Women from 1925 to1934.[46] In the *Principal's Report* of 1920-1921, Principal Taylor admits that the lack of money at Queen's, in comparison to the much richer University of Toronto (U of T) and McGill, makes it difficult to "maintain the high standards of teaching within the university." The Arts salaries for professors at the University of Toronto and McGill were fifty percent higher than the salaries paid at Queen's.[47] Perhaps the more affluent families would have been more attracted to the U of T or McGill instead of Queen's. Records of fathers' occupation for the 1920 to 1921 first year class indicate that 20.9 percent of fathers were farmers and 21.5 percent were manual labourers.[48] It is possible that some families were unable to provide their children with the disposable income necessary for drinking. Olive David, a Queen's student who grew up on a farm, said that her parents had not had the same educational opportunities as she did, and therefore her attendance at Queen's was "one of their big desires, that their children should get an educational advantage."[49] However, considering the minor proportion of people that actually went to university at this time,[50] all families sending their children to university had to have some means despite parental occupations. Olive David, who received her B.A. in 1926, confirmed that only a small number went to university: "If I look back at the people with whom I

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[44] *Queen's Journal*, Nov. 25, 1924 (QUA), 2.

[45] Bates Interview.

[46] Hilda Laird, interview transcript, *Hidden Voices: The Life Experiences of Women who have Worked and Studied at Queen's* (Office of the Dean of Women: Queen's University, 1980).

[47] *Principal's Report* 1920-1921 (QUA), 13, 16.

[48] Gibson, *Queen's University,* 448.

[49] David Interview.

[50] Strong-Boag, *The New Day*, 23.

was at upper school...a good many...went on to university...At that time, I suppose probably it was a bit unique because so many people did not continue on."[51]

While it may have been true that most students did not drink, or could not afford to do so, the behaviour of some students became intolerable for Principal Taylor and tensions erupted in 1928. During this year, Taylor dealt with a number of student infractions, including the hospitalization of two male students after a challenge involving drinking a full bottle of rum. Much to the chagrin of the administration, this incident attracted outside attention and the *Toronto Star* published a story entitled "Bottles Empty, Contestants 'Tight' When Queen's Lads Stage Rum Fight." The university senate, in a frustrated attempt to stop students acting out, responded sternly by suspending the offending two students without a hearing from the Alma Mater Society (AMS), the Queen's student government. The student body was aggravated by the senate's action because this was a private matter taking place in the home of one of the students they felt that the university had no right to interfere.[52]

Principal Taylor faced enormous pressure to maintain the high ideals of the university, assuage parental concern, and mollify the senate. At the end of the 1920s, Taylor told the Queen's board of trustees that the twenties were full of desire and triviality. He exclaimed that the decade "requires apparatus, whether it be an automobile or a dancing floor, or a hired orchestra...or a taxicab to take a maiden across the street from Ban Righ to Grant Hall."[53] Support for Taylor among the university's board of trustees was weak. He completely lost their confidence when students decided to strike in March of 1928. The strike was provoked by the senate wanting to end the Frolic, an annual musical review followed by a dance, on the ground that rehearsals interfered with study and the dance lent itself to irresponsible behaviour. The AMS compromised with the senate and the post-Frolic dance was restricted to cast members and the Frolic committee only. As a way to skirt this restriction, three students decided to host a post-Frolic dance downtown at the Venetian Gardens. When the senate heard about this plan they considered it to be a breach of faith and the students involved were suspended for two weeks. After looking into the matter, the AMS concluded that there were no grounds to punish the students since this was a private affair. Students were outraged by the senate's decision. The accumulation of perceived unjust action by the senate led to a student strike pending the reinstatement of the three suspended students.

The 1928 strike signified a climax of several years of tension between residual Victorian traditions and youth who sought freedom from such constraint. The senate's priority was to protect the reputation of the university and so its fo-

[51] David Interview.

[52] Gibson, *Queen's University,* 76.

[53] Neatby, "Women at Queen's," 72.

cus was regulating student behaviour. The AMS was constantly and strongly urged by the senate to regulate student excesses; however, the AMS had little power to do so resulting in conflict and frustration.[54] The strike attracted wide publicity outside of Kingston, both in support of the administration and the students. While the three students had to satisfy their suspension, it was decreased to one week, and post-strike relations between the senate and the AMS improved. After nearly a decade of prodding, the senate agreed to push back the Friday night dance in Grant Hall to 8:00 p.m. so athletes could get to the dance after practice.

Several trustees saw Principal Taylor directly responsible for the strike and general mismanagement of the school. Under pressure from the board's chairman, Taylor resigned at the end of the decade.[55] Tensions at Queen's between the rising youth culture and the administration illustrate broader societal concerns about the perceived breakdown in tradition post-war. Concern was for both men and women, but Queen's women were treated much differently than the male students, demonstrating the gender hierarchy and the specific expectations for women during this era.

Queen's Women

Queen's was established as a Scottish Presbyterian college in 1841 and it was nearly forty years later, in 1880, when it opened its doors to women.[56] Queen's was the second Ontario university to admit women—the first being Victoria University in Cobourg in 1877.[57] The first Canadian university to do so was Mount Allison University, in Sackville, New Brunswick in 1872.[58] Other Ontario universities were more guarded about admitting women into higher education. At the same time that Queen's was taking steps to integrate women fully, University College at the University of Toronto would not even allow women to attend lectures. In 1883, eleven women applied for admission to lectures at the U of T and all were denied. It was not until 1884 that women were granted admission into University College.[59]

As more economically stable middle-class parents came to view education as socially enhancing for their daughters, women's enrolment at university increased.[60] By 1919, women made up fourteen percent of all college and uni-

[54] Gibson, *Queen's University,* 66, 75, 77.

[55] Neatby, "Women at Queen's," 74; Gibson *Queen's University,* 80-81.

[56] Maureen McCallum Garvie, and Jennifer J. Johnson, *Their Leaven of Influence: Deans of Women at Queen's University 1916-1996* (Kingston: Queen's Alumni Association Committee on Women's Affairs, 1999), 5-6.

[57] O'Grady, *Margaret Addison,* 34; , Johanna M. Selles, *Methodists and Women's Education in Ontario 1836-1925* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 163

[58] Prentice et al., *Canadian Women,* 158.

[59] McKillop, *Matters of Mind,* 129; Martin L. Friedland, *The University of Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 91.

[60] McCallum Garvie and Johnson, *Their Leaven of Influence,* 11.

versity students in Canada and in the same year the Canadian Federation of University Women was established.[61] Women's numbers at Queen's steadily increased from 1880. At the turn of the century, there were 110 women and, by 1929, women made up a quarter of the 1,600 students.[62] Hilda Laird, the Dean of Women from 1925 to 1934, explained that this was the beginning of legitimacy for women as a group at the university as "this was the first time there was a large concentration of women in one place."[63]

Societal norms in the 1920s suggested that men and women were educated for different purposes. When women were first accepted into the university, education for women was not regarded as a necessity. Conversely, university education prepared men for lifelong careers and was thus integral to their status and ability to provide for their families.[64] There are indications in the archival material that women were blamed for distracting men from their studies and the lack of seriousness on campus. Principal Taylor admitted that "many of the men students are idle," but, he suggests, "it may be questioned whether co-education does not help the tendency where it already exists." Further, he implies that there had been a change in focus for women as in "the early years, when women first came to Queen's the very fact that they sought a university education indicated purpose and ability." However, in the twenties, "where attendance at a University has... become a matter of convention, there is an idle element among the women as among the men." Principal Taylor did not deny the advantages of co-education but, he suggested, "one main disadvantage is that where there is a lack of seriousness, whether in men or women, it is apt to be accentuated by the opportunities which co-education gives."[65]

When women first made an appearance at Queen's, the strategy for dealing with the new arrivals was to keep them as separate as possible from the men. When women were excluded from voting rights in the AMS, they established their own governing body in 1888 called Levana. The name Levana is derived from the Latin word to raise aloft and is named for the Roman Goddess known for her kindness.[66] Levana's purpose was to create a bond of union among all female students and facilitate communication between society members and the school senate.[67] The society organized sports, clubs, and social events for all women at Queen's.[68]

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[61] Prentice et al., *Canadian Women,* 162.

[62] D.D. Calvin, *Queen's University at Kingston* (Toronto: Hunter Rose Co. Ltd., 1941), 239-240; Gibson, *Queen's University,* 74.

[63] Laird Interview.

[64] Prentice et al., *Canadian Women,* 160

[65] *Principal's Report* 1926-1927 (QUA), 8.

[66] *Queen's Journal,* Mar. 4, 1924 (QUA), 1,2.

[67] *Queen's Journal,* Dec. 1, 1917 (QUA), 3.

[68] Neatby, "Women at Queen's," 44.

Levana Executive 1928. Dean Hilda Laird is pictured in the front row centre. Courtesy of Queen's University Archives.

Dean Laird explained that "the Levana Society was the women's society and they were terribly proud of it...it meant a great deal to the girls. I don't think there was any thought or desire of belonging to the AMS..."[69] Not only did women have their own governing body illustrating their separateness, but they were also thought of as a faculty. In the *Tricolor*, the Queen's yearbook, all pictures of female graduates were put in the section of the yearbook allocated to Levana, while the pictures of male graduates were placed according to the faculty in which they had studied.[70] In the *Journal,* both the male and female authors refer to the Queen's women as Levana. Like other faculties, Levana held a yearly dinner and dance and wrote a special number of the *Journal*.[71] Ultimately, it was up to women to accommodate themselves to the culture of the university whose primary historical function had been to educate men, and to a social climate in which women's education was not seen as necessary.[72]

There was much questioning of the motives of women who chose to attend university. Caroline Mitchell, who graduated from Queen's in 1926, explained "Some of the Professors said that most of the girls only went to Queen's anyway to get a beau and get married."[73] A psychology professor went so far as to issue this warning in the *Journal:* "Young men beware! Nine out of every ten co-eds on campus have designs to lead you to the altar. Which all goes to prove that college

[69] Laird Interview.

[70] *Tricolor* (Kingston: Hanson, Crozier & Edgar Ltd., 1928-1929).

[71] *Queen's Journal,* Mar. 4, 1924 (QUA), 1

[72] Lee Stewart, *It's Up To You: Women at UBC in the Early Years* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990), 91.

[73] Caroline Mitchell, interview transcript, *Hidden Voices: The Life Experiences of Women who have Worked and Studied at Queen's* (Office of the Dean of Women: Queen's University, 1980).

is the greatest matrimonial bureau on earth."[74] Although these comments portray women as frivolous and non-academic, they are particularly ironic considering the high ideals Levana set for the female population. Florence May Mooney explains "Levana...kept a very strict eye on us." In contrast to some prevailing beliefs, Queen's women did not spend all of their time cavorting and looking for husbands. In fact, "Levana frowned on students going down[town]... to a city dance," and Levana only encouraged women to go to Queen's dances.[75] In the *Journal* the following poem entitled "Our Duty to the Past" appeared which reinforces the ideals of hard work and disparages frivolity:

> Be strong
> We are not here to play, to dream, to drift.
> We have hard work to do and loads to lift.
> Shun not the struggle, face it, 'tis God's gift.
> Be Strong.[76]

Levana challenged women to self scrutinize: "Levana of Queen's, are you living up to your highest name? Are you intent upon your mission in College life, to point the way to the stars?"[77]

A Levana writer effectively addressed the issue of marriage in the 1926 number of the *Journal*, where she argued "that a college education is not an asset, but rather a handicap in the matrimonial race. By raising a girl's standards, it narrows her choice of a husband; by increasing her earning power, it lessons her need of one." By the end of college life, women hoped to have attained "greater knowledge, broader culture, a more refined sense of pleasure in things, and that most important, most material advantage increased earning power."[78] Women may have presented their case well, but society viewed women differently than men, and this distinction had an impact on every facet of their university experience. This is especially evident in the story about the building of Ban Righ Hall, the first residence for women at Queen's.

Ban Righ Hall

Concern about where women lived was an issue since women first stepped foot onto Queen's campus. Before Ban Righ Hall was built in 1925, many women lived in boarding houses. In 1911, a rule was enacted by the university prohibiting any female student from rooming in a house where men were lodging. In addition, their accommodations had to be selected from a list of houses approved by the university. In contrast, men were left to find their own accommodation without interference from the university. As one former graduate declared, "[Queen's] felt [the men] could go to Hell in their own way."[79] By the 1920s, it became evident that Queen's needed a women's residence to appease several groups. Some parents were discouraged from sending their daughters away to

[74] *Queen's Journal*, Oct. 13, 1925 (QUA), 3.
[75] Mooney Interview.
[76] *Queen's Journal*, Mar. 2, 1926 (QUA), 8.
[77] *Queen's Journal*, Mar 4, 1924 (QUA), 2.
[78] *Queen's Journal*, Mar. 2, 1926 (QUA), 6.
[79] Neatby, "Women at Queen's," 24, 31, 37.

Queen's because there was no residence. In 1900, a small group of women, led by Dr. Elizabeth Smith Shortt, decided to meet regularly to "discuss the advisability of a woman's residence."[80] The group became known as the Queen's University Alumnae Association (QUAA) and began raising money for a residence fund by canvassing the alumni, the alumnae, and wealthy Kingstonians.[81] In 1901, the QUAA corresponded with Principal Grant who approved of the residence and offered $100 for initial expenses. In a letter dated 14 November 1901, he stated that the alumnae "have managed the affair with such prudence and success that I would like now to see it expanded and made permanent." However, in despair he wrote that there are no wealthy men in Kingston and those with moderate means have already been exhausted. He contends that if the women could raise $20,000 he "would bring the matter before the University Council and ask it to establish the residence."[82]

What followed Principal Grant's offer is unclear, but the QUAA continued raising money. In 1902, they established an annex for women at 174 Earl Street, affectionately named the "Hencoop" by the male students. There was room for sixteen women and "grubbers," who lived elsewhere but had their meals at the Hencoop. Other than Principal Grant's donation, the university made no contribution for rent or furniture. [83] In 1911, the QUAA appointed a residence committee to raise $50,000 and a second attempt was made to pressure Queen's to build a residence for women. The university did not consider this project to be a priority because of the high cost involved; however, the trustees did sanction the QUAA to raise money for a residence on the corner of University Avenue and Alice Street (now Queen's Crescent).[84] The QUAA continued canvassing for money and in the meantime established another women's annex in 1917 at 207 William Street called the "Avonmore." There was space for twenty-two women plus those who took their meals there.[85] The trustees gave $1000 for furniture and paid rent for the space during the summer, when students did not need rooms.[86]

It was not until 1919 that the board of trustees finally authorized the "Finance and Estates Committee to spend

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[80] "Queen's University Alumnae Association, Initial Notice, 2 April 1900" (QUAA fonds, QUA); "Notes for the History of the Queen's University Alumni Association" (QUAA fonds, QUA).

[81] *Queen's Journal*, Nov 6, 1911 (QUA), 1.

[82] Correspondence, Principal Grant, 14 Nov 1901 (QUAA fonds, QUA).

[83] Gwen Gauley Sellar, "The Residence, 1916-1920," in *A Generous Loyalty*, ed. Mary Chown, Melva Eagleson and Thelma Boucher (Kingston: Queen's University Alumni Association, 1962), 11.

[84] *Queen's Journal*, Mar. 4, 1924 (QUA), 3; "History of Residence Movement" (QUAA fonds, QUA).

[85] Annie Campbell Macgillivray, "Old Residences," in *A Generous Loyalty*, ed. Mary Chown, Melva Eagleson and Thelma Boucher (Kingston: Queen's University Alumni Association, 1962), 3; Wilhelmina Gordon, "History of the Avonmore," in *A Generous Loyalty*, ed. Mary Chown, Melva Eagleson and Thelma Boucher (Kingston: Queen's University Alumni Association, 1962), 15.

[86] "Notes for History of QUAA" (QUAA fonds, QUA).

such moneys as may be necessary in conjunction with the Alumnae Association to enable the erection and equipment of a residence." They appointed Toronto architects to submit plans to a joint committee of the trustees and alumnae.[87] The architects informed the QUAA that they needed $160,000 to build Ban Righ Hall. The trustees made a deal with the QUAA that if it raised $80,000, the school would match it.[88] And they did just that. Finally, after years of struggle, Ban Righ Hall was finished in 1925 and was considered at the time to be one of the most up-to-date residences in the country. Two houses across the street from Ban Righ were also used to house students, bringing the total number of residence spaces to ninety. The Alumnae planned it so that "in the future when the Levana Society grows in numbers, and funds are available wings may be added to the building, thus the time is not so far distant when Queen's girls in boarding houses will be a thing of the past."[89]

The QUAA hoped that "with a larger number of girls in Ban Righ Hall and the annex, there will be a stricter observance of all the customs and laws, and a further development of our heritage..."[90] Not only did the new residence promote a sense of community among Queen's women, but, as Dean Laird wrote in his 1925-26 *Principal's Report*, Ban Righ "will bring a larger number of young girls to Queen's, for many parents who have been unwilling to entrust their daughters to the haphazard life of a boarding house are now writing that, because of the Residence, they are sending them to Queen's."[91] According to the 1928-1929 *Principal's Report*, out of 404 women at Queen's 329 were from outside of Kingston, an indication that Ban Righ did, in fact, attract non-local students.[92]

At this time, women were interested in socializing in spaces out of the view of chaperones and parents. In unsupervised, peer-oriented activities women could do as they wished and this alarmed many people.[93] Thus, in order to ease parental concern, strict rules were imposed on the women of Ban Righ Hall. In 1916, Queen's hired a dean of women to help women integrate into university life and she reported to the male dean of the university. From the point of view of Queen's administrators and parents, having a womanly influence on the female students would ensure that students did not overstep the boundaries of appropriate feminine behaviour.[94] Although the university had little to do with the years of work that brought Ban Righ

[87] "History of Residence Movement" (QUAA fonds, QUA).
[88] "Notes for History of the Queen's University Athletic Association" (QUAA fonds, QUA).
[89] *Queen's Journal*, Feb. 26, 1924 (QUA), 5.
[90] "Alumnae News," Nov. 1924 (QUAA fonds, QUA).
[91] *Principal's Report* 1925-1926 (QUA), 62.
[92] *Principal's Report* 1928-1929 (QUA), 33.
[93] Soland, *Becoming Modern,* 75.
[94] McCallum, Garvie and Johnson, *Their Leaven of Influence,* 12; Gidney, *A Long Eclipse*, 33.

into fruition, Queen's wanted to have a say in the choice of dean of women and the rules she enforced. These rules would maintain morality and protect women from the negative effects of youth culture, including raucous behaviour and overt sexuality. In addition, the university had a vested interest in reducing the opportunities for women to distract men from their studies, and the rules served this purpose.[95] Dean Laird commented that the curfews were "quite complicated and somebody had to be there to lock up at 11:00 o'clock you see, and chase the boys out. So, yes things were very strict in those days." There were late leaves permitted only twice a month, one at 12:30 a.m. and one at 2:30 a.m. Dean Laird, herself, had to conform to the ideals of the university as "they were very strict about no smoking. I had smoked in Geneva, and I had to stop smoking when I got to Ban Righ you see. I remember one of the senior staff saying 'If the girls want to smoke they can go to the University of Toronto.'"[96]

These new rules constrained women's ability to socialize outside of Ban Righ walls, which several women found frustrating. The seniors living in Ban Righ who had previously lived in boarding houses or the annexes "were not very cooperative with the Dean because the rules just seemed so unreasonable," remembered Sybil MacLachlan, a former resident of the Avonmore. In the Avonmore, MacLachlan had a housemother who had no rules other than having a curfew on Saturday and Sunday nights. They had an 'in' and 'out' board where people signed their names and the last person to come home locked the door. Dean Laird "used to plead for some cooperation" from the seniors and MacLachlan "felt very guilty when I came back to Kingston to live, and I would see Miss Laird." The distance from downtown also proved to be an issue for MacLachlan who said, "you couldn't go to a movie. From where we were on William street [at the Avonmore], you know, just two streets over from Princess [we could]...But down at Ban Righ, it was out of the way."[97]

The response of some Ban Righ residents indicates that women were not passive and did not just accept rules that limited their social lives. One Ban Righ resident declared

> it is absolutely unreasonable to suppose that Queen's girls accustomed to the justice usually administered within the college, should ever become reconciled to the rules now in existence. They are a reflection on our ability to look after ourselves in Kingston and even on our personal decency.[98]

Marjorie Bates explained that women in Ban Righ found a way to enjoy the style of social life they had had in the annexes despite the strict rules. They "didn't let it cramp anything, we just went on anyway

[95] Laird Interview; Friedland, *The University of Toronto*, 94.

[96] Laird Interview.

[97] Sybil MacLachlan, interview transcript, *Hidden Voices: The Life Experiences of Women who have Worked and Studied at Queen's* (Office of the Dean of Women: Queen's University, 1980).

[98] *Queen's Journal*, Oct. 16, 1927 (QUA), 192, 1.

and waited around outside until someone with a key came in, and we would go in with them and then dive behind the grandfather clock and wait until everything was quiet and then run upstairs." Men also played a hand in helping women sneak back into Ban Righ after a late night out. According to Bates "there was a little narrow window on that side entrance at Ban Righ" and the women would take off their fur coats and

> stand on the man's shoulders and climb in and then [the men] would throw the coat in. You see, that was in the big years of rugby, so we were very closely affiliated with the team, and there were always rugby players that were heaving us up through the windows.[99]

Queen's women's response to the constraint imposed on them is an example of the Ontario college "girl" of the 1920s as characterized by Marion Wood, a graduate of Havergal College: "One sees in the modern girl much less readiness to accept things on trust. She wants to get to the bottom of things. She questions everything...She prefers to experience for herself rather than to accept the experience of those who have gone before."[100] The events at Ban Righ illustrate both the differential treatment of Queen's women compared to men, and Queen's attempt to curb the negative effects of youth culture by constraining women's social lives. Despite strict rules and constraint, women found ways to pursue the autonomous social lives they sought. Though subtle, these actions were no less liberating than those of the suffragettes. While pursuing these freedoms, women updated the sexual hierarchy and challenged restrictions to their social lives and, thereby, pushed the boundaries of appropriate womanhood.[101]

Conclusion

After World War I, youth threw off the shackles of wartime constraint and immersed themselves in the consumptive pleasures of the 1920s. What emerged was an identifiable culture of youth with its own style, trends, and social interests. Since then, each generation of youth has maintained its separateness, conformed to the changing times, and been criticized by older generations for its divergence from tradition. The 1920s stands out as the first decade in which this youth culture became widely recognized. It was also in this decade that a different, more modern woman surfaced—a product of the political, economic, and social changes to women's lives during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While she was not overtly fighting for her rights like the suffragettes, she made her presence known in the public sphere and challenged traditional femininity through her autonomous attitude, fashion, and social activities.

There is no doubt that Principal Taylor's characterization of the twenties as a "dancing and frivolous age" is correct.

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[99] Bates Interview.

[100] Quoted by Wood in McKillop, *Matters of Mind,* 420.

[101] Soland, *Becoming Modern,* 173-76.

Traditional ideals were challenged head on and the morals of past and present conflicted, resulting in confusion and tension between old and young. This did not mean that youth were any less responsible or moral than their parents; it meant that times were changing. It would be naïve to assume that in a post-war era, amid the transformations brought on by industrialization and urbanization, that life would remain the same. Toward the end of the decade, concerns about the flapper and the emergence of the modern woman decreased. People began to recognize that a change in fashion did not equate to an abandonment of morality and, most importantly, that young women were not plotting to dismantle the gender hierarchy. The ominous predictions about the impact of youth culture and the modern woman did not come to pass. Slowly, concern eased and the lifestyle of youth was more or less accepted, or tolerated, as society too adapted to modern changes.[102]

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[102] McKillop, *Matters of Mind,* 411.