

# NEVER DONE



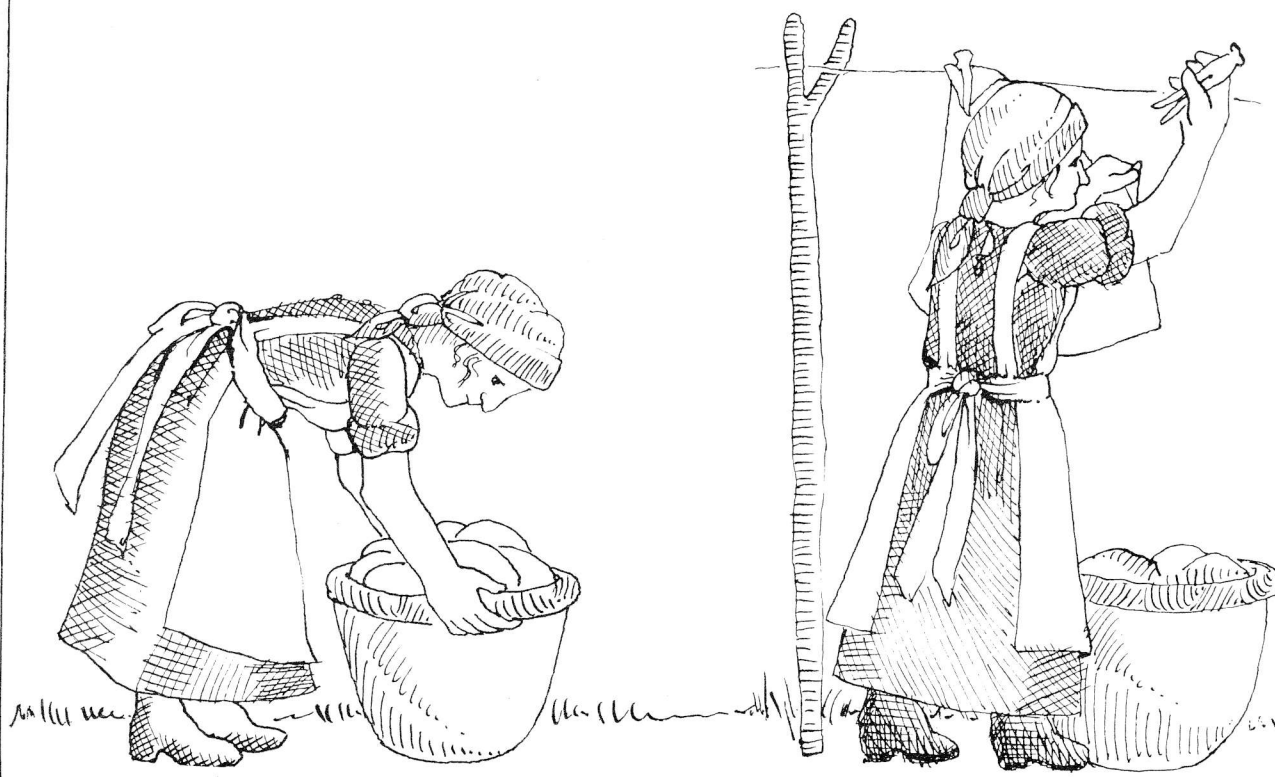
Three Centuries of Women's Work in Canada

Where to begin? When I decided to write a history of women in Canada, it all seemed pretty straightforward. I would go to the library and gather information until I understood what women had done in creating this country. It was a nice idea until I got to the library. Nothing! Well, the general histories did *mention* women. I know—because I looked in their indexes and found . . . Queen Victoria and Lake Louise.

Surely it was my mistake, I thought. Maybe if I read through the books . . . Well, yes, there were a few general references to women, as in “the women and children were . . . left at the fort, or drowned in the river, or starved in the winter, or abandoned on an ice floe.” I ached to see even one mention of “the men and children.”

So much for the general histories. It was clear that their authors were so preoccupied with wars, politics, and the machinations of railroad building that they had no thought for the people who actually did the work, particularly the women.

I was indignant and insulted. And worried, as I realized what a difficult task I had undertaken. It was useless to sit and sift through learned tomes. Instead, I went to the attic and began to rummage for pictures, old letters and family records. After I worked through the trunks in my attic, I moved on. I found snippets of information in family scrapbooks, town records and local histories, stories handed down from mother to daughter, novels written by women, royal com-



missions and a hundred other places. Now that I've discovered so much that the historians have completely ignored, I must find a way to begin—a way to run a thread through all these pieces and give you a whole cloth of women's lives in Canada.

Of course I must begin with the home, for the work women did there formed the core of their lives. Even the social historians, who purport to deal with the lives of ordinary people, reject women's work as insignificant. Can you imagine the gall! This country would never have existed without all the unheralded accomplishments of women.

And let me assure you, maintaining a home in early Canada was no pushover.

In a way, what women did seems obvious. To the woman fell the labour of bringing children into the world and the work of caring for them. To this was added the job of keeping her home: cleaning, cooking, preserving food and the hundreds of other tasks of the household; as well as work outside, particularly when money was short. Today, more and more women work for wages, but come the end of the week, women still say to themselves, "Oh lord, it's Friday already, and the laundry's not done."

So . . . women's world is still the work of the home. How can I write a history of something that doesn't appear to change? If you read a history book, each decade brings a new politician, a new war or some other sign of progress. But women's work is so much the same—over

