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Chapter 8

“Prime Minister in the Home Department”:

Female Gendered Identity in Colonial Upper Canada¹

Rosie Spooner

About that time the idea of emigration to Canada had taken hold of young men in England and Scotland. Land ownership was the lure. ... It did not take long to convince immigrants of this type that an estate in Upper Canada was not the same sort of thing as an estate in England. Even those who realized that the value of the Canadian estate lay in the future felt little ground for satisfaction, for there was not much promise of prosperity in sight in Upper Canada.²

We went first to Blythe house which is, as you know, in a sad state of disrepair but we admired the butternut panelling of which Anne wrote so eloquently and which is still in excellent condition, and made our way with some trepidation up the shaky stairs to the second floor where we identified Anne’s bedroom and those of her mother and aunt. The wooden mantelpiece in Anne’s room still remains, so too do portions of the hand rail. ... The site of Blythe house was expertly chosen and the vista was indescribably beautiful.³

With limited infrastructure and transportation routes, pre-industrial working and living conditions and a climate that fluctuated between intense heat over the summer and severe cold during the winter, early-nineteenth-century rural Upper Canada was a challenging place in which to eke out a comfortable existence. An article published in the *Dublin Penny Journal* in 1834 for example, stressed that migrating from Britain to North America would not necessarily result in accruing wealth and stability: “It cannot be too strongly impressed on the minds of intending emigrants, that this is not a *Canaan* – that it is not a land flowing with milk and honey – that, emphatically, it is on the sweat of his brow [that] man must depend for livelihood.”⁴ In spite of such warnings, many Britons willingly immigrated to the region, which formed the southern portions of what is now the province of Ontario in eastern-central Canada.⁵ Early arrivals to the area included those who moved after the conclusion of the American Revolution, taking up the free land grants being offered north of the border to those who had fought on the British side during the conflict. The creation of Upper Canada was prompted by this influx of mainly English-speaking, Protestant settlers. Prior to this, the land along the St Lawrence River that Britain had acquired through the Treaty of Paris (1763) had remained a single province that functioned largely according to cultural, religious and legal practices established when the area had been under French colonial control. The arrival of these United Empire Loyalists, however, fundamentally altered the region’s social and cultural composition and created a demand for a separate anglophone colony. Thus, in 1791 the former Province of Québec was divided into Upper Canada in the west and Lower Canada in the east, with the Ottawa River serving as a dividing line between the two new provinces.

Although the War of 1812 curtailed the boost initiated by the re-settlement of United Empire Loyalists, Upper Canada continued to attract those who favoured the

province's anglophone character. In contrast to this earlier wave of settlers, a high proportion of people who came to Upper Canada in the decades immediately preceding the Confederation of Canada in 1867 were not once removed from Britain. Rather, they arrived directly from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Indeed, a confluence of factors including industrialisation, significant population growth, decreasing access to farmland and the economic decline caused by the Napoleonic Wars pushed many to leave Britain in this period. Factors that pulled emigrants specifically to Upper Canada included relative geographic proximity to Britain, the affordability and availability of land, and a shared sense of culture. Eager to re-settle segments of the metropolitan populace, the British government promoted these benefits. Migration across the Atlantic presented a means of alleviating perceived social strains caused by a growing population, while simultaneously bolstering the fledgling colony of Upper Canada, which was seen as especially susceptible to American invasion and yet was estimated to have the capacity to develop into a major supplier of wheat, and potentially other valuable natural resources, that could be exported back to Britain.

During the 1830s, over 600,000 people left Britain for North America, with more than half choosing British colonies as their final destination over the United States.⁶ While the majority were farmers, labourers, decommissioned soldiers or the very destitute, a notable portion of these newcomers came from wealthier backgrounds and belonged to the gentry class. Popularly conceived as an expansive and sparsely populated landscape with a rugged natural beauty, perhaps Upper Canada appeared especially attractive to those with a Romantic disposition? Alternatively, more pragmatic concerns may have been the driving force, with re-settlement seen as an opportunity to recoup land, income and savings lost during the

economic depression of the early-1800s. Likely some combination of these factors propelled these gentlemen and gentlewomen settlers. Describing what had led his grandfather Thomas Langton to make the move from the northwest of England in 1837, W.A. Langton wrote, “he seems to have been of an inventive, if not spectacular, disposition ... [and] burned to have a hand in the contrivance of life in the backwoods”.⁷ However, in his introduction to *Early Days in Upper Canada*, the published collection of letters written by his father John Langton (Thomas’s youngest son who had moved to Upper Canada in 1833), W.A. Langton makes clear that the circumstances in which these comparatively affluent settlers found themselves often fell short of their expectations. As is alluded to in the opening excerpts, migrating to rural Upper Canada in the first half of the nineteenth century was a difficult process that did not always result in permanent settlement. Indeed, the Langtons left the large home they had built and furnished, Blythe Farm, after ten years of living and making a go of things on Sturgeon Lake, a period bookended by the deaths of three family members. Thomas Langton passed away in May 1838, just nine months after arriving in North America with his wife (Ellen Langton), sister-in-law (Alice Currer) and daughter (Anne Langton). With the deaths of Ellen and Alice nine years later, both due to ague, “the tie that held [the family] to the farm was broken”.⁸ This prompted John and Anne, along with John’s wife Lydia (née Dunsford), to leave Blythe, initially recuperating in Peterborough and then travelling to Britain. Anne, who is this chapter’s primary focus, remained in England for three years before ultimately returning to Canada, living first in Peterborough, and latterly in Ottawa and Toronto with John, Lydia and their children.

Focusing on a particular group of British migrants, this chapter explores what it meant to settle in rural Upper Canada in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Specifically, it examines the interplay between gender ideologies that were becoming increasingly dominant in Euro-North American society and the everyday realities of women's lives in this colonial outpost. Those British gentlewomen who took up the pioneering life did so amidst shifting social conventions that increasingly emphasised gender segregation, with men and women attributed a different, but ostensibly complementary, set of skills, abilities and "natural" characteristics. As Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner explain, "the turn of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of separate spheres as an ideology, and throughout the century separate spheres were institutionalized as the culturally and socially hegemonic form of gender relations".⁹ Outlining the clear incongruity between this discourse and the practicalities of women's lives in this colonial milieu, it is suggested here that negotiating this conflict was a principal facet of the settlement process for British women who left the relative comforts that befitted their elevated social positions in Britain for the backwoods of Upper Canada.¹⁰ Consequently, it builds on Dianne Lawrence's work on the intersections between migration, gender and material culture that took shape in the experiences of women whose lives traversed spheres of empire. In *Genteel Women* Lawrence posits a helpful definition, outlining gentility as a "system of values" and a "highly nuanced form of knowledge" that directed not only how women conducted themselves in public, but the understandings of self they held within them.¹¹ Writing specifically about women in colonial Upper Canada, Elizabeth Jane Errington explains that understandings of femininity embodied in the ideology of separate spheres were at odds with the economic and social realities of most women's lives in Upper Canada, a dichotomy many would have found "striking and disconcerting".¹² Although both men's and women's day-to-day routines largely followed pre-industrial patterns, "the cult of true womanhood was nonetheless considered by

colonial leaders to be an important part of the ‘blue print’ of what the young colony of Upper Canada should eventually become”.¹³

Building on the work of Errington and others, this chapter analyses the divergence between lived realities and dominant gender discourses through a close consideration of the circumstances of a specific colonial settler.¹⁴ Its main argument emerges from looking at Anne Langton’s letters and diaries through the lens of material culture. Indeed, it is anchored by Thomas Schlereth’s evaluation that objects either made or modified by humans “reflect the belief patterns of [the] individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension, the belief patterns of the larger society of which they are a part”.¹⁵ Specifically, the present analysis draws on existing examinations of the relationship between women and the things they made, altered, collected, distributed, received and used.¹⁶ The reading of Langton’s diaries and letters offered here pays particular attention to her “gendered material practices” and efforts at “manipulating materiality”, concepts that foreground the processes through which women constructed bodies of knowledge and invested both themselves and the world around them with meaning.¹⁷ This genre of scholarship allows us to uncover the complexities of social reproduction, a tenet of recent feminist theory that seeks to understand the “activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships” that women have routinely undertaken, but which have nevertheless been overlooked despite the crucial role they have played “in the maintenance of life on a daily basis”.¹⁸

Beginning in May 1837, while en-route across the Atlantic, and running until September 1846, Anne regularly wrote letters and kept a diary, the stated purpose of which was to give an impression of what was “characteristic of the country”.¹⁹ The recipients of these journals, which relayed the experiences and activities, sights and

sounds that Anne felt typified her new lifestyle, were her older brother William and his wife Margaret, the only members of Anne's immediate family who chose to remain in Britain. Just two months after arriving on Sturgeon Lake, Anne began a letter to William by saying "I suspect I have not much original matter for you but shall most probably write on the two engrossing subjects of my thoughts, the progress of the house, and of the season, with my hopes concerning the one and my fears respecting the other."²⁰ These subjects are indicative of Anne's writings, the majority of which comprise descriptions of her material surroundings and accounts of her interactions with the new social and physical setting in which she found herself.

In Langton's account we see overlapping layers of material practices at work. In what follows, the primary focus is Langton's lengthy and frequent descriptions of the activities that gave rhythm to her daily routine. Reading her journals gives us access to the objects she made, manipulated and arranged. We can sense their textures, smells and colours in spite of the fact that the real things – the candles made of tallow, the curtains made of muslin, the bonnets made of cotton and calico, the loaves of baked bread, and the cuts of preserved meat, to name only a few – are no longer within physical reach. These varied activities can be seen as elements of a larger programme dedicated to deliberately bringing together a range of objects that served both practical and decorative functions, a manner of framing Langton's material practices that bears the influence of scholarship on the nature of collecting and its impact on the home. Of particular relevance is the notion that the "common denominator" amongst objects in personal collections is the "collecting *subject*, whose identity then binds these objects together in a sort of visual and material biography".²¹

In Langton's case, the act of putting pen to paper in order to purposefully narrate these undertakings constitutes an additional material practice, one that reveals added meaning since it signifies attributing value to the activities she chose to describe. As Fowkes Tobin and Daly Goggin remind us, "women's engagement with the material world, most obvious when a woman is making something – a doll, a sculpture, a cake – may be far less apparent, but no less productive, in cases such as writing a letter or bequeathing an heirloom".²² Consequently, it is suggested that for Anne the act of writing about her material practices, describing her role as a creator whose productions aligned with notions of gentility, helped manage the disruption to her identity that marked her early years in Upper Canada. This echoes Williams' assessment that an unstated reason for Anne keeping a journal was to create a written record that traces her "personal development as she adjusts to life in a new land".²³ As such, this chapter comprises a microhistory of one British woman's experience of moving between spheres of empire and negotiating the attendant impact on her concept of self, as glimpsed through descriptions of the things she made, the spaces she created and her personal reflections of such activities.

Beginnings

Anne Langton (b. 1804) was born into an aristocratic mercantile family in the northwest of England and was the second child and only daughter of Ellen and Thomas Langton. Although her father's fortunes would eventually plunge in the 1820s, Anne grew up in privileged circumstances, spending much of her childhood at the family's estate Blythe Hall in Lancashire and moving within social circles made up of cultured, wealthy and aristocratic friends. As was common for women of this

heightened financial and social position, Langton was well-educated and received private tutelage from an early age in a range of subjects. The intended outcome of this education was to secure a husband of an equal, or preferably higher, social rank, and to prepare women for the role they were expected to fulfil once married. These ideals are indicative of broad societal changes that were gaining traction in Britain in the early-nineteenth century, namely a move towards rigid gender segregation and the emergence of stricter definitions of female experience, discourses that stemmed from a belief that men and women possessed divergent emotional, spiritual, intellectual and moral capacities. Nevertheless, as an adolescent Anne received a somewhat unconventional education compared to her peers. At her father's instigation, between 1815 and 1820 the Langton family decamped from Blythe Hall to travel continental Europe. During this period she studied in Switzerland, learning from instructors affiliated with the radical educational reformer Johann Pestalozzi, and received extensive training in painting and drawing while in Italy and France, through which she became an accomplished draughtswoman and painter.

The family's European tour ended abruptly, however, as a result of some of Thomas Langton's large investments failing in the economic downturn that followed the Napoleonic Wars. Upon returning to Britain the family was forced to sell their estate and move to a small town just outside of Liverpool. As W.A. Langton explains, "there was no bankruptcy, but there was henceforth poverty".²⁴ Consequently, although Anne was at an age when marriage would normally have been pursued, her living in relative social isolation with her parents due to financial restrictions stalled such plans.²⁵ Whereas Anne's older brother William had married and gained employment as a bank manager in Manchester, her younger brother John decided to seek financial stability in Upper Canada, and left Britain in 1833 determined to

establish himself as an independent farmer and landowner. A mixture of financial reasons and a belief that the family would simply be of more use in Upper Canada than in Britain likely motivated the rest of the family to join him. Discussing their forthcoming move, John wrote to his father that he is “well aware how much better the farm would go on were there somebody about the place to act as viceroy”, and continues by saying “I do not know how I can promise you greater happiness here than you might have at home, only that it seems to be your wish to try the change.”²⁶

For the first eight years she was in Upper Canada Anne acted as a surrogate wife to her younger brother, undertaking the management of Blythe Farm. From her journals it is clear Anne took this role seriously, committing significant amounts of time and energy to every aspect of the household’s operations. Anne’s position within the family unit shifted following John’s marriage in 1845. Nevertheless, she adapted to this change by becoming an additional carer to her brother’s seven children, and chose to remain with the family as John developed a career as a politician and civil servant.²⁷ That Anne never married makes her an interesting example of a European settler. Her journals not only express the concerns of a woman, a voice often muted by the historical record, but also capture the experiences and personal reflections of an individual whose life did not follow the anticipated path for women of her social and cultural background.

Although the Langtons’ fortunes had declined in Britain they were still considered “settlers of means” and belonged to the “desirable” class of immigrants.²⁸ They arrived in Upper Canada with a certain amount of wealth, educational attainment and material possessions, and joined a number of other British settlers who similarly were members of the gentry class. Their relative affluence was immediately recognised by those in the community, a perception that soon became apparent to the

Langtons themselves. This interplay is revealed in one of Anne's earliest letters in which she admits that the family's new home, still under construction when they arrived, was "elegantly denominated" by surrounding residents as "the big house".²⁹ This spacious log dwelling would be the family's home for the whole time they lived on Sturgeon Lake, barring the first few months after their arrival, during which time all five members of the family camped out in a small temporary cabin. Designed by John, the Langtons' new home was situated in a clearing of land and displayed "comfortable and elegant proportions".³⁰ What is more, it was named after the estate in rural Lancashire they had previously owned, Blythe Hall, where Anne had spent much of her childhood and which had been the setting for the family's "almost paradisaical life together", thereby constituting their "ideal image of 'home'".³¹ Letters sent before the family's departure from Britain reveal John and Thomas Langton exchanging ideas on how best to plan the house and grapple with its surroundings. In one from February 1837 for example, John included a small sketch of Blythe's exterior elevation and a hand-drawn floor plan, alongside written descriptions detailing the layout of rooms and the placement of key elements like staircases, landings, fireplaces and stoves. Built with hired labour, Blythe was the first two-storey house in the area and was further distinguished by the inclusion of a large open verandah, Gothic-style windows and plastered interior walls.

Labours

Despite the Langtons' relative wealth and social status, the nature of the Upper Canadian settler lifestyle made it necessary that every member of the family contribute to the work that was required to make the rural settlement a success.

Devising a system for the efficient division of labour was integral to this, a fact John highlighted in a letter written to his father prior to the family's departure from Britain:

I should assign you each a separate office. My father of course would be my adviser and in my absence the *alter ego*; to [mother] should be exclusively left the duties of beautifying the house and garden, no sinecure on a new farm; Anne must be Prime Minister in the Home department; and Aunt Alice ... shall reign paramount in the pigstye, poultry yard, etc., and shall be my Master of the Wardrobe.³²

Evidently, at the Langtons' new home tasks and responsibilities were allocated in a gendered fashion with the family's three women being responsible for all domestic matters, an arrangement not dissimilar to how the family would have operated in Britain. Although somewhat vague compared to the specific tasks allocated to her mother and aunt, Anne's designation as "Prime Minister in the Home Department" likely meant overseeing everything related to the day-to-day operations of the home. She would have thus assumed the role of "trusted household manager", which Amanda Vickery asserts was "indispensable to genteel and middling men for their dignity, their comfort and their convenience".³³ Indeed, in a journal entry written about 18 months after arriving in Upper Canada Anne identified herself as "housekeeper-in-chief", thereby reinforcing this idea.³⁴

Crucially, in Upper Canada the household was a substantially larger and more varied entity, encompassing not just the house and its related affairs such as cleaning, cooking and decorating, but a number of exterior spaces including the garden and animal yards. Furthermore, engaging staff on a consistent, long-term basis was

unusual because the labour pool was comparatively small and servants were generally felt to be less experienced relative to those that could be employed in Britain. Writing in the autumn of 1838 for example, Anne recounts her surprise at learning that a housemaid had recently announced she would be returning home for the winter, and had never intended on boarding with the Langtons for more than three months. Although evidently annoyed by the development, which she sees as “one of the troubles of the backwoods”, Anne admits that “it is not such a calamity to be left without as it would be at home”, largely because it was recognised that Upper Canadian households were more fluid. In order to illustrate this key difference to her brother and sister-in-law, she then explains that the family had willingly given leave to a previous housemaid because of needing to free up a bedroom for company who had come to stay during the sugar-making season. “How strangely one’s ideas accommodate themselves to the ways and necessities of the country one is in!” Anne observes, after noting that Mr Savage had “come into the kitchen and helped me to set a pan upon the fire”.³⁵ Receiving help from Mr Savage would have been a transgression in Britain, contravening both the expectation that gentlewomen should not be required to work in the kitchen, and the belief that visitors should not enter so private a space, particularly male ones. In the settler society of Upper Canada, however, this type of interaction was accepted as commonplace. Anne’s account of this episode is indicative of the fact that the majority of British gentlewomen who moved to rural Upper Canada both managed and actively undertook a diverse list of chores, duties and responsibilities, which left them with minimal spare time, especially compared to their counterparts in Britain. They were responsible for childcare; planting, tending to and harvesting the garden; looking after and butchering the family’s animals; preserving meat, fruit and vegetables; cleaning, cooking and

baking; and managing stores of candles, fuel, soap and other essentials. After almost ten years of living in rural Upper Canada, by which point she was an experienced settler, Anne wrote of how “it is much more difficult to let women’s work stand still than men’s work. John has made up his mind that nothing could be done on the farm, but no bread! no butter! no clean clothes! – this is another matter.”³⁶ Indeed, for men and women settlers of all classes in Upper Canada “theirs was clearly a world of work”, and one that bore few resemblances to contemporary British society, which was becoming increasingly urban, industrial and mechanised.³⁷

In her journals Langton reveals a mixture of feelings about these additional domestic responsibilities. After spending a day cleaning John’s cottage she displays a sense of confidence in her specifically feminine skills and is happy when they can be applied to easing the settlement process. “I came back”, she writes “with a strengthened conviction of the importance of woman and congratulating myself, that though I might be an old maid I never could be an old bachelor.”³⁸ Yet, the social beliefs Langton and other gentlewomen left Britain with, which were informed by contemporary notions of womanhood that emphasised women’s gentle, thoughtful and civilising natures, were not always so easily applicable to the settler lifestyle. In the above statement Anne seems to have successfully reconciled this conflict, but at times her displays of composure are permeated by insecurities regarding her female identity and the place this affords her within Upper Canada’s settler society. In one journal entry she calls on her brother to not “be alarmed” when reading her accounts of steering boats and handling the ropes while sailing. She assures him that despite undertaking masculine tasks such as these and being surrounded by male companionship her “feminine manners” and “woman’s avocations will always ... more than counterbalance them”. Just a few sentences later, however, she seems to

contradict this, admitting “I have caught myself wishing an old long-forgotten wish that I had been born of the rougher sex.”³⁹ This is because she believes she has become more selfish, a change in character which she sees as a particularly female affliction and one brought on by the nature of the existence in Upper Canada:

Women are very dependent here, and give a great deal of trouble; we feel our weakness more than anywhere else ... The greatest danger, I think, we all run from our peculiar mode of life is that of becoming selfish and narrow-minded. We live so much to ourselves and mix so exclusively with one community.⁴⁰

Anne returns to this topic of selfishness when noting the arrival of more women on Sturgeon Lake. She credits her dislike of the prospect of having to pay morning visits to the fact that she is “growing savage, *alias* selfish, and unaccustomed to make sacrifice to society”.⁴¹

Arranging the Genteel Self

In rural Upper Canada women’s roles as heads of households came with far more essential, hands-on duties than it did for genteel women in Britain. Indeed, the rigorous routine of daily life centred on activities that were very much focused on addressing explicitly practical needs, which left the majority of women with little time to foster and maintain this crucial part of their identity. That said, Anne utilised a number of activities, particularly those connected to furnishing and arranging individual rooms, to express her desired social and gendered identity. While it was

laborious sewing heavy curtains by hand, unpacking boxes, moving furniture, overseeing carpenters and even doing the odd bit of plastering, these types of activities also presented opportunities for Anne to exercise her skills in making and decorating.

For the first few months after their arrival, when Blythe Farm was still under construction, all the family lived in John's two-room cabin or shanty, conditions Anne described as "very snug".⁴² This rudimentary home contained a bed, some carpets and a hammock that was set up every night for Thomas Langton to sleep in. Although Anne was aware of how different her new lifestyle was, she seemed confident that the initial shock would subside as the family's living conditions improved and they became more acclimatised:

When I mention any of these primitive ways of doing things it is with the desire of making you more exactly conceive the precise style of civilization to which we have attained, not at all in the spirit of grumbling, indeed it would be absurd to make grievances of such things; and after fastening your window with a string or round a nail, or shading it with a boat flag for a month, you are very apt to forget that there is any other sort of hasp or blind.⁴³

This extract reveals how familiarity with material surroundings played a large part in Langton's overall sense of comfort. In the same letter, she describes a recent contribution to endowing the house with a greater degree of order, an action that both required and reinforced her gendered sense of self. "I have been well occupied ... diving into the depths of the storeroom, where the traces of womankind may now be seen amongst the possessions of the bachelor."⁴⁴ Writing three months later, she

enthusiastically promises to send William “a plan of our dwelling when we are settled, with the situation of all our pieces of furniture”. Although this was to allow her brother to “form something of a picture of our interior”, Langton may also have wanted to demonstrate the fruits of her leisurely and gentle labour, in order to stress to her brother that her feminine gentility was not being compromised by the roughness of her new surroundings.⁴⁵

In Victorian society, it fell to women to be the “arrangers of the domestic interior, purchasing decorative objects and materials to recontextualize them in their own homes”.⁴⁶ The woman of the household was expected to fashion the family home in such a way that visitors could read the interiors as signs of the woman’s gentility and the family’s social status. This convention was transplanted to Upper Canadian settler society and resulted in dwellings that reflected a distinctly British sense of taste. However, there were few stores where one could buy home furnishings in rural Upper Canada and these were only located in larger towns. If one lived outside of more developed areas, which the Langtons did, buying furniture was expensive and transportation of these goods was tedious. As a result, most homes would have been sparsely furnished in comparison to ones in Britain. Nonetheless, women still sought to project their family’s British heritage through material possessions, and it seems to have been desirable to mask as much as possible the fact that on the exterior of the meticulously decorated house lay the backwoods of Upper Canada.

While less wealthy than they had been, the Langtons could nonetheless afford to ship most of their possessions from Britain to Canada. Arriving almost six months after the family’s departure, their shipment consisted of large pieces of furniture such as beds, chairs, chests of drawers and a sofa, as well as smaller items like textiles, glassware and even eggcups. In her journals Langton eagerly conveys instances when

she employed her expertise in arrangement, and is keen to detail her successes. In one letter she exclaims to her brother “I fancy we have more English elegancies about us than most of our neighbours.” In the same entry she asserts that once their “striped green print” is mounted, the family will “feel as grand as Queen Victoria amidst the damask hangings at Buckingham Palace”.⁴⁷ Anne reiterates the presentation of this English fashion just ten days later when recounting the occasion of having five nearby residents for dinner, remarking “our room looked exceedingly snug and English, with its Turkey carpet, its crimson curtains, and its ceiling, even notwithstanding its log walls”.⁴⁸ She makes a similar comment a few months later following a dinner held at Blythe over the holiday season, an occasion that afforded her the opportunity to detail her efforts at creating an attractive space in which to entertain guests. Describing the furnishings in the drawing room, Anne reveals a sense of satisfaction with the results:

The carpet looks uncommonly well, and it happens that the new hearth-rug we brought out suits it as if it had been made to correspond. We have had book-shelves put up on each side of the window, which come down to the ground, and without taking much from the size of the room they give us a very snug appearance. John’s books as well as our own now adorn the room. The other bookcases we had a little lowered to admit of the busts being place upon them. The *tout ensemble* gives great satisfaction.⁴⁹

Anne enthusiastically notes how happy the family is with the room, which was completed just in time for Christmas Day, and does not hesitate to add “no doubt [the guests] did admire”.⁵⁰ The following excerpt makes expressly clear the connection

between Anne Langton's attempts at furnishing and decorating the house and the expectation of how it will be received or read by others:

The two elder ladies [Ellen Langton and Alice Curren] were still very busy upholstering. I do not think any ladies on the lake have better fitting garments than our two arm-chairs. As the fine season approaches we begin to think of the entertainments we must give to the newcomers.⁵¹

Here we see Anne, her mother and her aunt consumed with getting the house in order by the early summer, which is when regular visits between residents on Sturgeon Lake would resume, meaning their house had be ready to accept visitors. Anne's comparison between the furnishings in her home and those in the houses of other women cannot but be interpreted as a pronouncement on her own expertise and, by association, her feminine gentility since, in order to make such a comparison, Anne must have carefully noted others' interiors. Just as Langton displays a sensitivity to the visitor's gaze and assessments of her own decorative efforts, she participates in the same process when in the opposite position.

Indeed, writing in the spring of 1839, Anne details a recent visit to a neighbour's home and remarks to William how "in Mrs. Dobbs' little drawing-room, which was very neatly set out with books, handsome work-boxes, and alabaster ornaments, there hung also a saddle".⁵² The presence of books and alabaster ornaments suggest Mrs Dobbs's cultivated social status is on par with that of Anne's. The presence of multiple workboxes is particularly noteworthy because they were signs of the owner's relative affluence and, crucially, her gentility. As Young explains, the workbox "indicated a degree of elegance above mere mundane work,

and thus reflected the owner's femininity and class".⁵³ This was because workboxes contained the materials and tools used in fancy sewing, such as embroidery and appliqué, as opposed to regular sewing boxes, which were used for more utilitarian projects like clothes-making and upholstery. Embroidery carried particularly potent associations. Parker, for instance, argues that this genre of needlework represented the bourgeois family's ideal identity and embodied femininity. For British women "the family's [social] position was ensured and protected through the constant exercise and reinforcement of femininity embodied in embroidery".⁵⁴ Anne prefaces her description of Mrs Dobbs's home by stating that it exemplifies how after a certain amount of time in the backwoods "the inconsistencies and incompleteness' of residents" collections of material possessions and the manner in which these are displayed "become too familiar to be observed".⁵⁵ Having lived in Upper Canada for about two years Langton does not regard herself as a newcomer and maintains that as a result she no longer notices certain elements of domestic presentation in the way she once did. The act of mentioning Mrs Dobbs's interior and then proceeding to list key items that embodied a particular feminine identity, however, clearly demonstrates that Anne does indeed still recognise those signs that serve to indicate a woman's feminine refinement and, by extension, her family's social status. She has perhaps grown more accustomed to the appearance of certain items that would be regarded as inappropriate in British society, but her ability to read the language of consumption and visual culture has not diminished or faded.

Conclusion

As the “Prime Minister” of a rather different type of household than the one she was accustomed to in Britain, Langton negotiated new duties and responsibilities that at times conflicted with her existing sense of self, one rooted in the dominant societal code of genteel conduct. Immigrating to and settling in rural Upper Canada in the 1830s compelled Langton to develop new understandings of her gendered identity and to question a woman’s role within private and public spheres, the boundaries of which were far more blurred in Upper Canada than in Britain. This was a complicated process of adaptation given the contemporary recognition that for a woman to be a “capital help-mate” in Upper Canada, it was necessary for her to be able to “do the work of a man, as well as her own domestic duties”.⁵⁶ As has been discussed, a concern that runs through Anne Langton’s journals is furnishing and decorating the family’s new home in a manner that approximated, as much as possible, what would have been found in homes maintained by peers in Britain. Just one element of the array of chores both inside and outside the home that fell to Langton, this area of activity took on particular significance because it enabled the domestic interior to act as a clear marker of her own feminine gentility. Anne’s letters to her brother and sister-in-law contain detailed descriptions of the improvements being made by her and the other female members of the family in the area of interior decoration, with Anne repeatedly highlighting her attempts at effecting décor that adhered to contemporary middle-class and aristocratic notions of taste, style and arrangement. Endowing the family’s new home with as much comfort and familiarity as possible was evidently a priority to Anne. Yielding practical results, her efforts helped create a domestic space that was welcoming and liveable, which allowed the family feel more settled. Furthermore, on a personal level, this task offered Anne the opportunity to exercise what was conceived as a distinctly female skill-set, one that reflected the refined taste

and civilised values of the woman who executed it along with the financial and social status of her family. It can therefore be concluded that Anne immersed herself in decorating and arranging the family's new home according to notions of civility and comfort as a means of negotiating the conflict between notions of domesticity and genteel womanhood, and the daily routine of her new life which was largely at odds with such discourses and, by extension, her existing sense of self. Consequently, Anne's descriptions of her material practices, not to mention her reflections on what she perceived as the successes and failures of these endeavours, reinforce Lawrence's conclusion that "for genteel women their response to the shock of the new and the resultant refashioning of their identities were to find expression through their material culture and its associated practices".⁵⁷ Such an analysis also reiterates Loren's argument that individuals' personal beliefs, daily practices and larger socio-political discourses intersected in complex and troubling ways in colonial societies. As Langton's journals and letters attest, addressing the fissures between dominant gender ideologies that informed her sense of self, and the activities and responsibilities that structured her daily life was a challenging task. Furthermore, the above analysis argues that for women gentry settlers in Upper Canada notions of gentility and decency were often confined to being ideological values, and no longer existed as a uniform material standard.

To a large extent Langton was a "quintessential gentlewoman" whose gendered identity was informed by the "societal code of genteel conduct".⁵⁸ The concept of gentility stressed women's domestic and feminine natures, and as such conflicted with the patterns and requirements of her new life in Upper Canada. This echoes Lawrence's assertion that that for many who settled in colonial frontiers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, performing as genteel women "was essential for

their psychological well-being”.⁵⁹ Thus, any erosion of their gentility rendered them adrift in landscapes that were socially and geographically alien. Above all, gentility stressed a woman’s capacity to control her body and personal space, behaviours that were indicative of an ability to regulate her inner passions and desires.⁶⁰ Upon moving to Upper Canada in 1837, Langton’s daily life became tiring, laborious and physically demanding and ceased to be based around rigid separations between public and private spheres, or between men’s and women’s spaces. Indeed, butchering animals, laundering in full view of neighbours and going off to explore the surrounding woods on one’s own – all activities Langton details in her letters and diaries – can hardly be said to conform to the notions of restraint that underpinned feminine gentility. Consequently, the values, forms of conduct and understanding of social relations Langton brought with her, what can be conceived as the “gentle immigrants’ cultural baggage”, were not always compatible with the nature of colonial society, a tension that challenged her gendered self of sense.⁶¹ As has been argued, not only did Langton seek to resolve the conflict between her existing gendered identity and the realities of colonial life by immersing herself in the task of creating a suitable domestic interior, but the detailing of her efforts in letters that were destined to be read was fundamental to this process. The structure and content of her journals suggest that ensuring others knew of her commitment to these endeavours was just as important as carrying them out in the first place. Consequently, when it came to projecting her desired identity, the act of writing was as crucial as physically undertaking the activities that were central to dominant notions of female identity. Whether through making and arranging material goods or documenting her progress at these tasks, Langton’s account reveals her working through a shifting sense of self through overlapping

material practices, an instability that was brought on by leaving Britain and re-settling in the colonial frontier of rural Upper Canada.

¹ John Langton to Thomas Langton, 28 July 1834, as cited in Anne Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, ed. Hugh Hornby Langton (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company Ltd., 1964), 5.

² John Langton, *Early Days in Upper Canada: Letters of John Langton from the Backwoods of Upper Canada and the Audit Office of the Province of Canada*, ed. William Alexander Langton (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1926), xxi. All citations refer to unbound copy held at the Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO) as part of the Langton Family Collection, F-1077-5, MU 1694.

³ AO, Langton Family Collection, R.W.W. Robertson to H.H. Langton, 26 May 1949, F-1077-1, MU 1690.

⁴ 'Interesting and Important to Persons Intending to Emigrate to British America,' *Dublin Penny Journal* 3, no.116 (20 September 1834): 95-96.

⁵ For a general history see Gerald Craig, *Upper Canada: The Formative Years, 1784-1841* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1963).

⁶ Elizabeth Jane Errington, 'British Migration and British America, 1783-1867,' in *Canada and the British Empire*, ed. Phillip Buckner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 141.

⁷ W.A. Langton, 'Biographical Sketch,' in *Early Days in Upper Canada*, xiii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁹ Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner, 'Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives,' *Annual Review of Sociology* 15 (1989): 386.

¹⁰ There is a developed literature written by British women who either travelled through or settled in Upper Canada. Wives of colonial officials, 'company men' (high-ranking fur trade employees) and military officers who produced accounts include Elizabeth Simcoe, Anna Jameson, Frances Anne Hopkins and Lady Dufferin. Perhaps the most well-known texts are those written by Susanna Moodie and her sister Catharine Parr Traill (both née Strickland), gentlewomen who emigrated with their Scottish husbands to Upper Canada in 1832. Published during their lifetimes, the sisters' works tapped

into a popular fascination in Britain with frontier life in the Canadas, and brought these women a degree of fame and notoriety. See for example Susanna Moodie's immigration trilogy *Roughing it in the Bush; or, Forest Life in Canada* (first published 1852), *Life in the Clearings* (first published 1853) and *Flora Lyndsay; or, Passages of an Eventful Life* (first published 1854). Unlike these works, Anne Langton's diaries and letters were not published until after her death, and it is unlikely she desired or envisaged her writing would be distributed beyond its original, intended audience of her older brother William and his wife Margaret.

¹¹ Dianne Lawrence, *Genteel Women: Empire and Domestic Material Culture, 1840-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 3.

¹² Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Wives and Mothers, School Mistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada, 1790-1840* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 22.

¹³ Errington, *Wives and Mothers*, 22.

¹⁴ See also Jane Mattison, 'The Journey through Selfhood in *The Journals of Mary O'Brien 1828-1838* and *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada: The Journals of Anne Langton*,' *Prose Studies* 25, no. 2 (2002): 51-78; Cecilia Morgan, 'Gender, Loyalty and Virtue in a Colonial Context: The War of 1812 and its Aftermath in Upper Canada,' in *Gender, War and Politics: Transatlantic Perspectives, 1775-1839*, ed. Karen Hagemann, Gisela Mettele and Jane Rendall (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). For a discussion of the relationship between women's work, imperialism and Canadian national identity in the later nineteenth century see Katie Pickles, *Female Imperialism and National Identity: Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Thomas J. Schlereth, *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville, TN: Rowman Altamira, 1982), 3.

¹⁶ See for example the series of four volumes on women and material culture edited by Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin and published by Ashgate between 2009 and 2013.

¹⁷ Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, 'Introduction: Materializing Women,' in *Women and Things, 1750-1950: Gendered Material Strategies*, ed. Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 2-3.

¹⁸ Laslett and Brenner, 'Gender and Social Reproduction,' 382.

¹⁹ Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, 115. [Anne Langton Journal, March 1840]

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- ²⁰ Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, 42. [Anne Langton Journal, 8 November 1837]
- ²¹ John Potvin and Alla Myzelev, 'Introduction: The Material of Visual Cultures,' in *Material Cultures, 1740-1920: The Meanings of Pleasures of Collecting*, ed. John Potvin and Alla Myzelev (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 2. Italics in original.
- ²² Potvin and Myzelev, 'Introduction', 2.
- ²³ Barbara Williams, 'Introduction,' in Barbara Williams (ed.), *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada: The Journals, Letters, and Art of Anne Langton* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 45.
- ²⁴ W.A. Langton, 'Biographical Sketch,' in *Early Days in Upper Canada*, xiv.
- ²⁵ 'Anne Langton,' *Maryboro Lodge – The Fenelon Museum* <<http://www.maryboro.ca/LangHis.html>> [accessed 19 April 2016].
- ²⁶ Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, 4. [John Langton to Thomas Langton, 28 July 1834]
- ²⁷ John Langton first became involved in politics and the civil service in 1841 when he was elected to the newly-created district council for the Fenelon Township. In the 1850s he gained a seat in the provincial legislature as the Conservative party representative for the Peterborough area. In 1855, John A. Macdonald appointed Langton chairman of the new Board of Audit, which prompted a move to Toronto. Soon afterwards, he was appointed to the senate of the University of Toronto and served as vice-chancellor from 1856–60. He moved to Ottawa in 1866 during the lead-up to Confederation, apportioning debt and laying the groundwork for the new Dominion's accounts. Increased responsibilities followed Confederation, after which Langton became a member of the Civil Service Commission, secretary to the Treasury Board and deputy minister of finance in 1870. He retired from politics in 1878, but remained involved in public life, serving as president of the Canadian Institute from 1880-82.
- ²⁸ Williams, 'Introduction', 31.
- ²⁹ Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, 31. [Anne Langton to Margaret Langton, 22 August 1837]
- ³⁰ Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, 31. [Anne Langton to Margaret Langton, 22 August 1837]
- ³¹ Williams, 'Introduction', 5.
- ³² Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, 5. [John Langton to Thomas Langton, 28 July 1837] Italics in original text.

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- ³³ Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 10.
- ³⁴ Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, 92. [Anne Langton Journal, 30 April 1839]
- ³⁵ Ibid.,
- ³⁶ Ibid., 194. [Anne Langton to William Langton, 19 September 1846]
- ³⁷ David Gagan, “‘The Prose of Life’”: Literary Reflections of the Family, Individual Experience and Social Structure in Nineteenth-Century Canada,’ *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 3 (1976): 367-370.
- ³⁸ Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, 82. [Anne Langton Journal, 25 January 1839]
- ³⁹ Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, 60. [Anne Langton Journal, 13 October 1838]
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 107. [Anne Langton Journal, 3 December 1839] Italics in original text.
- ⁴² Ibid., 31. [Anne Langton to Margaret Langton, 22 August 1837].
- ⁴³ Ibid., 35. [Anne Langton to William and Margaret Langton, September 1837].
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 32. [Anne Langton to Margaret Langton, 22 August 1837].
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 42. [Anne Langton to William Langton, 8 November 1837].
- ⁴⁶ Patrizia Di Bello, *Women’s Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2007), 3.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 59. [Anne Langton Journal, 11 October 1838]
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 66. [Anne Langton Journal, 21 October 1838]
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 70-71. [Anne Langton to William Langton, 1 January 1839] Italics in original.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 88. [Anne Langton Journal, 13 April 1839]
- ⁵² Ibid., 90. [Anne Langton Journal, 18 April 1839]
- ⁵³ Young, ‘Material Life in South Australia’, 81.
- ⁵⁴ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women’s Press, 1984), 159.
- ⁵⁵ Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, 90. [Anne Langton Journal, 18 April 1839]
- ⁵⁶ Thomas Langton, ‘Account of the settlers in the townships of Fenelon and Verulam, 1838,’ in Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, 49.
- ⁵⁷ Lawrence, *Genteel Women*, 1.

⁵⁸ Williams, 'Introduction,' xiii-xv.

⁵⁹ Lawrence, *Genteel Women*, 234.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 3.

⁶¹ Errington, *Wives and Mothers, School Mistresses and Scullery Maids*, 22.