At the end of November 1827, Mrs Julianna Fierheller, the "eldest Daughter of the Reverend John D. Peterson," died. "Beloved by all those who knew her," George Gurnett, the editor of the Gore Gazette, stated, she had left behind "a deeply afflicted Husband, and infant Son, and a long train of mourning Relatives and Friends." Gurnett was sensitive to the fact that "the habit of eulogizing, indiscriminately, departed friends, for real or supposed virtues" was "all too common at the present day," and he reassured readers that "the present brief notice" was "not exaggerated." This obituary was merely a just tribute to a woman who, though only twenty-three years old, had nonetheless made a significant contribution to her community and whose "excellent and exemplary character as a Daughter, Sister, Wife, Mother, Christian, and Neighbour, will be long cherished." 1

Julianna Fierheller had undoubtedly never attracted such attention during her lifetime. Indeed, few women in Upper Canada ever did. Although between 1790 and 1840 almost half the population of Upper Canada was female, women's lives, their activities or their work were rarely chronicled in the public press. Only when a woman of influence, such as the wife of the presiding lieutenant-governor, stepped onto the public stage did local newspapers briefly divert their attention from international or local news. It is easy to overlook mention of women even in the short reports from the courts or the notices of Upper Canadians looking for work or advertising their businesses.

It was only in the obituary section of individual newspapers that women's names appeared almost as frequently as men's. But even
here, the highly stylized and almost ritualistic acknowledgments of a woman's death presented an incomplete and often distorted picture of her life. A woman deemed worthy of special notice – the wife of a local luminary or politician – was almost always characterized as having been a "virtuous and affectionate wife" and "kind and indulgent mother." She was portrayed as having been "so conspicuous in her social intercourse of life" that she had "never failed of securing, not only the most prominent attachment and respect of those who ranked in the circle of so desirable an acquaintance, but of all who can view with admiration the practice of the noblest virtues of our neighbours."² Kindness, simplicity of manners, Christian commitment, intelligence, industry, frugality, goodness, and generosity to the "distressed" – these were the qualities that leading Upper Canadians obviously cherished in their women.

Colonial contemporaries probably read such notices with a certain degree of scepticism, and perhaps some envy. The litany extolling prominent women's lives described a world and lifestyle unknown to "ordinary" women of Upper Canada. Mrs McGill, for example, who had apparently "possessed the benevolent and amiable qualities" of her sex in "an eminent degree," could afford to cultivate the "womanly" virtues.³ She had obviously lived in a big house and had probably had servants to do her bidding. But Upper Canadians would also have understood that in certain fundamental ways, Mrs McGill's life had been little different from their own. She too had been a daughter, wife, and mother; she had shared many of the delights and inevitable uncertainties that came with marriage; and she had had to cope with the same impediments that confronted all women in the colony. But no one would have denied that the very presence of such a eulogy set such women apart from most others in the colony. Julianna Fierheller and Mrs McGill were clearly more than just wives and mothers. And their deaths had provided colonial leaders with an opportunity to use their lives as object lessons to all Upper Canadians.

For encoded in the eulogy was a message about the "good woman" of Upper Canada. She lived and worked in the private world of her home; her life revolved around her husband and her children. It was only fitting, her admirers implied, that the lifetime work of such a good woman had been not "so much known abroad and in the bustle as [it had been] ... valued in private."⁴ According to the obituaries, being "a tender wife, an affectionate parent and a steady and sincere friend" was the most important contribution that a woman could make to her community.⁵ Julianna Fierheller, Mrs McGill, and others of their rank were important social and moral symbols of "true" womanhood; to colonial leaders, they represented one of the essential
components of the new society that was to be established in Upper Canada.

Historians have often dismissed the ritual obituary as artificial and facile. At the same time, somewhat ironically many seem to have accepted, if only unconsciously, that the image of Upper Canadian womanhood presented in the eulogies was the essential reality of all colonial women’s lives. As a result, not only have historians failed to break the code of the obituary but in many instances scholars have failed to realize that there was a code at all. Instead, such obituaries have been allowed to mask the complexity of colonial women’s (and I would argue men’s) daily and life experiences. And they permit historians to discount the very real contribution that women made to Upper Canadian development.

Women are markedly absent from most accounts of Upper Canadian life and development. This is perhaps not surprising given the priorities and interests of most Canadian historians. Until recently, many scholars have considered the history of Upper Canada only as it relates to the development of the industrial, democratic nation-state of Canada of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Studies of the colony have therefore tended to concentrate on its “great” men and momentous events, on the broad economic and social developments of the pre-Confederation period, or on how the “inevitable” coming of industrialization affected workers’, and almost always men’s, lives. As colonial women did not vote, take any part in politics, help to build the canals, regularly work on the shop floor, or usually engage in other “productive” activities, some scholars seem to have concluded that by default they must have lived in quite a “separate” world from men. Indeed, at times, the reader is often left to wonder if there were really any women in the colony at all.

A related, although I would argue, more significant factor in our lack of consideration of the lives of Upper Canadian women is the unspoken belief of some that, then as now, what has traditionally been considered “women’s work” had little or no redeeming social or economic value. Women were, after all, dependent on their husbands for their homes, their positions in society, and in some cases, their very survival. Their absence from many modern histories of the period confirms the view that being a wife, a mother, a neighbour, and a Christian did not materially aid the development of the colony. Moreover, it is implicitly asserted that women were merely fulfilling their biological destiny when they became wives and mothers. Their labour in this realm was therefore not really work but rather, a “natural” activity that required no special skill and (many seem to presume) took little effort.
The following study explicitely challenges such assumptions. It attempts to break the code of the ritualized eulogies and to begin a discussion about the lives of women in Upper Canada between 1790 and 1840 by examining the work they performed. It presumes that in order to do this, we must first consider Upper Canada in its own terms and as those who lived there viewed it. Further, this study accepts that the virtues and the work that colonial eulogies extolled were valued in the pre-industrial society of Upper Canada. Residents knew that being a wife, a mother, and a good neighbour was important work. The following discussion also recognizes that women's lives and the work they performed included a wide range of activities that varied, often considerably, depending on their financial, social, and marital status.

To do this, we must first make invisible women visible. We must accept that by their very presence the female half of the population helped to give shape and substance to their communities. Perhaps most importantly, we must try to hear the voices of the women themselves, which sometimes in harmony, but often in counterpoint, echoed the complexity of life and experience shared by all in the colony.

A few historians have already begun this task. Recent biographies of Elizabeth Simcoe, Anne Powell, Catharine Parr Traill, and Susanna Moodie have added immeasurably to our understanding of the experiences of a few of the "important" women of the colony. Such work is to be encouraged and must continue. But what has sometimes been termed "compensatory" history can and does create its own problems. Like the histories of "great" men, stories of prominent women often present a distorted view of their subjects and where they lived. Not only were such women usually exceptional but many biographers have, inadvertantly or by design, concentrated on aspects of their lives that set them apart from their colonial sisters. Only a few have attempted to write a biography that reflects the totality of these women's experiences and tries to place them in their own time and place.

The preference for writing about prominent women arises in part because of the "problem of sources." Most women in Upper Canada did not have either the ability or the time to keep a journal or maintain an extensive correspondence. Those manuscript records that have survived tend to have been written by relatively affluent, exceptional individuals, or, like those of Traill and Moodie, were from the beginning written for publication. The sources traditionally relied on by social and economic historians - land records, tax rolls, census data, and the like - also do not appear to chronicle women's lives. Most women did not own land, pay taxes, or run successful
businesses. In short, Upper Canadian women seem to have no voice.

The apparent problem of sources is compounded by the historical profession’s rather traditional definition of “work.” The writing about women’s work in Canada and elsewhere has been driven to a large degree by contemporary concerns of and about women in the modern workforce. Not surprisingly, scholars have concentrated on women’s experiences in what is often termed “productive” labour, or that work for which women, and of course men, received a wage or other tangible goods. But as Angela John points out, such terms of reference hide more than they illuminate. “Many of the categories used to define and describe employment ... are inadequate, inappropriate and sometimes misleading when applied to women’s experiences.” Women in Upper Canada, like their sisters in Great Britain and the United States, “frequently slipped in and out of” what is usually accepted as “productive” work and their wage work was often invisible. Certainly, there were women in the colony in the first half of the nineteenth century who, at some time in their lives, went “out to work” for wages, produced goods for the marketplace, or ran shops and small businesses. Their numbers are, however, relatively small (although they were undoubtedly greater than has been previously assumed). More to the point, such women and such work cannot be said to be representative of the majority of Upper Canadian women or to reflect the totality of women’s labouring activities.

Assessing women’s work using a definition that presumes payment of services and well-defined, formal tasks only perpetuates stereotypes of colonial women. More important, it also devalues the real work that women in Upper Canada (and I would argue, women of other times and in other places) performed. As Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, Mary Ryan, and a growing number of British and American historians have so ably chronicled, in pre-industrial communities like Upper Canada, women, work, and family must be seen as inseparable categories. Narrow categories of “productive” and “reproductive” labour must be replaced by new definitions of work that take into account not only paid and unpaid labour but also the impact that place and conditions of work, its purpose, and the expectations of those involved had on a worker’s activities. In short, the eulogies of prominent colonial women must be taken as both a reflection of colonial leaders’ aspirations for the colony and at least a partial statement about what women actually did.

This study of the nature of women’s work in Upper Canada is a preliminary probe into what at least some colonial women considered their work to be, by describing and analysing what they did.
Part One considers the all-important women's world of "reproduction." Marriage and motherhood were the two central events in most colonial women's emotional and physical lives: they defined whom she was, where she lived, and what she did. Marriage and motherhood also provided the context within which and from which almost all of women's other work was performed. For, as Parts Two and Three illustrate, much of women's domestic work—keeping her house and family clean, ensuring that the members of the household were fed and clothed, and fulfilling the various responsibilities of companion/consort for their husbands, was physically done in and around the home.

But as the following tries to make clear, what was involved in accomplishing this work depended on where a woman lived, and the financial resources and composition of her household. It would also be a mistake to suggest that women in Upper Canada worked alone or were isolated within the confines of their individual households or businesses. As women themselves realized, they needed the help of other women to successfully fulfill their roles as wives and mothers. Parts Two and Three therefore consider the lives and work of women alone, and in community with others within two broadly defined types of households—the farm/artisan household, and that of the "big" house of more affluent Upper Canadians.

Of course, not all women either lived on the farm or worked in the big house. As Part Four illustrates, despite the rhetoric of domesticity and the assumption that women should work in the home, a number of women, particularly those in towns and villages, either were obliged because of family responsibilities or chose to start their own small businesses. But, as emphasized throughout this volume, these women too were part of an often complex community of women. The lives of female merchants and proprietors often intersected with those of women who lived in the big house and on a nearby farm. Moreover, such women shared many of the concerns and experiences that preoccupied non-income earning women.

I realize that the categories of work set out in the following discussion are themselves artificial and in some ways oversimplify the story of women's work. The various groupings of women who are identified here primarily by their roles or by "occupation" inevitably have within them wide variations as to lifestyle and expectations. Moreover, women in Upper Canada simultaneously assumed a number of the roles and were involved in more than one household. It must also be noted that certain groups of women are notably absent from this discussion. Although working in the colony, and at times part of the community of women, Native and Afro-Canadian women have not
been considered here at all. And no attempt has been made to consider the lives of those women who were attached to the local garrisons. The specific impact that race, ethnicity, religious belief and affiliation had on women’s work and their own expectations has also received only cursory attention. In short, although this study considers some of the fundamental factors that shaped many women’s lives and work in Upper Canada, it is by no means complete. Our understanding of colonial women’s lives and the complex, often interdependent world of women’s work is only just beginning.

I began this project a number of years ago with the assumption that I would be able to complete a general history of women in Upper Canada in three or four years. I was soon overwhelmed, however, by the complexity of women’s lives and a wealth of sources. The question of colonial women’s changing legal status and the often sharp dichotomy between the law and the manner in which women and men actually conducted their lives has become a study unto itself. So too is trying to understand and appreciate the varied experiences of women as immigrants. Even after I had narrowed down my original topic to what seemed a more manageable study of women’s work in the colony, I was confronted with the realization that there was far more to be explored than could possibly be accomplished within one volume.

What began as an intriguing academic endeavour quickly became a very personal pursuit. As I worked through the documents and then tried to recreate the world of work of Upper Canadian women, I was continually struck by how much has not changed. Certainly, life in the late twentieth century is better for many women than that at the beginning of the nineteenth. Scientific “breakthroughs” have given many women choice as to whether or when they will become mothers. Better nutrition and medical intervention have significantly increased our life expectancy and that of our children and husbands. Today, it is hard to ignore women in the public workplace. We vote; we own land and run businesses; and, increasingly, we voice our concerns about our own circumstances and those of others. But what I found startling is how much of the rhetoric of the nineteenth century continues to resonate in the contemporary world. Although it is now expected that women will go “out to work” and find fulfilment in business, it is still largely women’s work to keep their homes clean, to care for children, and to look after their husbands. “Progress” has not resolved the dilemma faced by battered wives and it has not assured many women equality in their places of work or their homes. Indeed, my continuing fascination with this topic arises in large part because many of the difficulties confronting women today had their roots in...
our colonial past. Even more intriguing is that so much of what “my” women of Upper Canada did and so many of the concerns they expressed continue to be echoed a century later by my female friends and even by myself. In the end, this study has reaffirmed my own sense of womanhood and of the connections that bind women together. Perhaps most importantly, it has made me doubly aware of how important women friends, colleagues, and family members are in my life.

This project would not have been possible without the support of many individuals and organizations. I would like to acknowledge the support that the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada gave to this project, in the form of a strategic grant for women and work, and the financial assistance that I received from my university, the Royal Military College of Canada (RMC). The publication of this book was made possible by a grant from the Social Science Federation of Canada.

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Once the writing began, others helped me to formulate my ideas and sharpen my conclusions, realizing always, of course, that any shortcomings of this work are mine alone. To George Rawlyk, a long-time friend and colleague, my heartfelt thanks for comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript and his quiet encouragement. Donald Akenson’s support as friend and editor has been invaluable. Roberta Hamilton contributed to the completion of this book in more ways than I think even she realized. Her perceptive suggestions on an earlier version of the manuscript added immeasurably to my understanding of my subject. More important, however, she is a treasured friend whose support and enthusiasm was and continues to be invigorating and comforting.
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My biggest debt, however, is to members of my own family. This book is dedicated to the three women who inadvertently provided the inspiration for this book and who, during their lifetime and even now, continue to have a significant influence on who I am and how I approach the world – my grandmothers, Agnes Myles Tusting and Clela Margaret Ellis and especially my mother, Elizabeth Stewart Errington. I was fortunate in that not only did I know them as my mother and my grandmothers, but in my adulthood, each, in her own way became a valued friend, supporter, and mentor. These three very different but equally remarkable women showed me, through their actions and their words, the importance of friends and family. They taught me that alone, but also in concert, individuals and particularly women can have a remarkable impact on those around them. Collectively, they bequeathed me their strength and, I hope, their tolerance. Each of these women was, like women in Upper Canada, a wife, mother, sister, and friend, and I continue to be astounded and delighted by their ingenuity and ability in coping with all that this entailed. As a daughter and friend, I miss their strength, their generosity, their humour, and their support. In a small way, I reaffirm my connection to these three women by reclaiming my first name, which was also my mother’s. And I only wish that she, who was so interested throughout the early stages of the writing of this book, could now see the final product.

I would like to conclude with a very special thanks to another, equally important member of my family. My father, William Errington, also values family and friendship. And it is because of his ongoing encouragement and support that this book is finally finished.