



The Woman Who Waits by Frances Donovan The Saleslady by Frances Donovan The Schoolma'am by Frances Donovan

Author(s): Barbara Celarent

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The Woman Who Waits. By Frances Donovan. Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1919. Pp. 228.

The Saleslady. By Frances Donovan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929. Pp. 267.

The Schoolma'am. By Frances Donovan. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1938. Pp. 355.

Barbara Celarent
University of Atlantis

It is a truth universally acknowledged that data outlive analysis. Belittled in their time as “mere description” by men whose theoretical writings are today forgotten, Frances Donovan’s three books read as freshly now as when they were written more than a century ago. Moreover, we now know a good deal about their author. Like so many interesting women of early 20th-century America, Frances Donovan was rediscovered by later feminists, and so we possess in the dissertation of Heather Kurent (University of Maryland, 1982) a well-researched study of Donovan’s life.

Cora Frances Robertson was born in 1880 in St. Clair, Michigan. Like many successful students, she taught for a while in rural schools. Then, despite her father’s wish that she remain home until marriage, she secured from a grandfather funds for the normal school at Ypsilanti. Jobs followed in a small-town school outside Detroit and in a Chicago suburb. Then wanderlust took her in 1905 to a teaching position in Great Falls, Montana, where church activities led her to architect William Donovan and marriage two years later.

Retiring without regret, she became a young matron of the frontier upper class. When the First World War demolished the Great Falls economy, the Donovans moved to Chicago. Shortly thereafter, William became chronically ill, eventually being institutionalized. Realizing that she would soon be alone, Frances enrolled in the University of Chicago to complete her bachelor’s degree, at the same time becoming a waitress for nine months. After her husband died in mid-1918, Frances finished her degree. She soon returned to teaching, although at first only as a substitute. After briefly managing a bookstore, she returned to teaching permanently in 1924, at Calumet High School on Chicago’s Southeast Side, where she taught until her retirement in 1945. She died in 1965.

Donovan published books in 1919, 1928, and 1938. All three concern women’s occupations. Moreover, all three consider women as sexual actors: wives and lovers, pursuers and pursued, virgins and prostitutes. Although Donovan never wrote theory, her work is among the first sustained analyses of middle-class work for women, as it is among the first sustained examinations of women’s sexuality outside the home. All three books were based on participant observation: the first on nine months of

waitressing, the second on two periods of two months as a saleslady, and the last on more than 30 years of teaching.

The obvious explanations for Donovan's oblivion are unpersuasive. To be sure, she wrote when the division between sociology and social reform was hardening into a gender division as well as a professional one. But Dorothy Swaine Thomas became a major university sociologist in just this period. Or again Donovan's work was breezy and personal when sociology was becoming "scientific." But Nels Anderson's quite similar *The Hobo* (1924) became a sociological classic. Or yet again she wrote about sex when America was drifting to the right. But Paul Cressey's *Taxi-Dance Hall* (1932) and Walter Reckless's *Vice in Chicago* (1933) were both about sex, and like *The Hobo* they became part of the Chicago sociology canon.

One comes closer to the mark in focusing on Donovan's amateurism. In an era of academic professionalization, she was not a professional academic. Nor did she think professional academics were her principal audience. She told the marketing department at the University of Chicago Press that personnel workers, department store employees, and vocational guidance departments would come ahead of departments of sociology as audiences for *The Saleslady*. To be sure, Donovan used theoretical phrases from Robert Park and W. I. Thomas, whose courses provided much of her interpretation of modern life. But she borrowed only scraps and phrases, and the core of her books is personal experience, remembered or stylized conversations, and occasional outside statistics. Only in *The Schoolma'am*, on her home turf, does Donovan give, along with her insider's view, a professionally comprehensive survey of an occupation.

Donovan's methodological insistence on the primacy of personal experience, her use of life history documents, her biographical approach, and her use of typologies make her the logical successor of W. I. Thomas, himself a rather amateur sociologist. Indeed, her rendition of Thomas is considerably more compelling than the ecological one emphasized in the many Chicago dissertations on social disorganization. For unlike the others, Donovan really participated. Cressey and Reckless were, after all, Juvenile Protective Association investigators, not a taxi-dance hall patron or a prostitute's client (at least, not so far as we know). But Donovan was a waitress, and a saleslady, and a teacher. And although she was shocked that waitressing involved varying degrees of prostitution, and although she seems a little disingenuous about the attempts on her own virtue, at least she was there and saw these things going on. Interestingly, Donovan's transcript reveals that she did the waitressing work for course credit in the Extension Division, which means that the work was probably supervised by Annie Marion MacLean, an extraordinary student of both Small and Henderson, who had herself done several ethnographies, including one on sales.

Finally, Donovan does not remove herself from the picture, as the new "scientism" of social analysis required. On the contrary, Donovan is very

much in evidence, whether she is being disgusted by the rats on a restaurant sink or telling us that, after all is said and done, every woman loves clothes. And no one could ever mistake *The Schoolma'am* for anything but an insider's book; no mere dissertation student ever got that kind of emotional detail. Perhaps it helped that Donovan was not young; her first essays in field method came when she was in her late thirties.

Donovan's first book—*The Woman Who Waits*—captured in its title the fact that occupation is ultimately not a structure, but an activity. This focus on activity in part reflected the historical moment, for millions of young immigrants still swarmed in American cities, making and breaking their lives in a whirlwind of turnover and mobility. After the American labor force stabilized in the 1920s, the structural notion of an enduring occupation became more realistic.

But Donovan had another waiting in mind. Her waitresses not only wait for the orders of restaurant patrons. They wait for men: for the male diners whom they often disliked, for the lovers they welcomed and spurned, for the husbands they hoped to find. Waiting made the women more aware of themselves than were the men, and because of that self-awareness more aware of others and their dependence on them. It is, after all, only men's obtuseness that frees them from such dependence, as Donovan often reminds us.

What makes this book a classic, however, are the fine details. Donovan tells us that her wedding ring loses her tips, that winning large tips becomes an irresistible game, that "girls" steal each other's setups, that they eat leftovers off diners' plates, that they point out customers known (from experience) to have strange sexual tastes. She tells us about the rats gorging themselves in the kitchen of the pleasant, home-style neighborhood restaurant. She allows herself numerous diatribes on women customers. She chronicles the sex games of waitresses in great and often hilarious detail.

Sex is indeed the main theme of the book. Donovan's numbers show that nearly one in 10 Chicago waitresses was treated for venereal disease in a given year (1915). Hence, her fascination with waitresses' use of sexual favors (or more often the mere promise of them) to milk men of money was not merely middle-class self-righteousness. It was frank recognition of the dominant facts of the waitress world, which was less about providing food than about finding men who would fund the waitress's clothes, rent, and entertainment. Even Donovan occasionally falls into this understanding of waitressing, as we see in her description of the grill room of Usher Lane (actually the Walnut Room at Marshall Fields—Donovan intended her pseudonyms to hide nothing). With undisguised disparagement, she tells us "it would be difficult to find [there] a kissable mouth or a pair of enticing eyelashes."

In the end, Donovan views this sexual marketplace in very optimistic terms. The waitresses are for her a political vanguard: "Here we have the feminist movement and ideals embodied in a class." She mocks the female clerk who will marry an office worker; "[She] will live the narrow,

shut-in existence of the home-cooking woman in utter ignorance of life in its nakedness and crudity.” Better the waitress:

The waitress is different; she is ignorant and coarse, but genial. She is often unwashed and her teeth are unfilled, but she knows life and she is not afraid of life, which is to her big, dramatic, brutal but vivid, full of color. . . . Even when she is a grandmother, her life is still full, full to overflowing with excitement and the fierce joy of struggle. . . . To go out into the world and grab from it the right to live in spite of the competition of youth is vastly more interesting than to make weekly pilgrimages to the beauty parlor in the vain attempt to get rid of the symbols of old age that bear witness to the fact that you have never lived.

Donovan was a poor waitress but a first-class saleswoman. She couldn't do the sales forms properly, but she sold dresses like an old pro. Perhaps that is why *The Saleslady* is a less passionate book than *The Woman Who Waits*, although nonetheless interesting for that. Even popular reviewers (there were many) found the book too upbeat. This may have reflected the general shift of the 1920s toward what has been called “American cool,” the detached, uncommitted emotional style that replaced the intensities of Victorianism. Donovan was herself of the older, committed generation, and perhaps her wide-eyed approach to the pleasures of sales seemed naive to newly hip reviewers. (Indeed, one wonders whether the move to scientism in sociology may not itself have been as much part of this change in emotional tone as it was a matter of professionalization or gendering per se.) But it is true that the coy tone—each chapter ends with a “daily observation”—falls flat after the raw energy of the *The Woman Who Waits*.

Once again, the details are the sweetmeats of the book. The salesladies change shoes every day, they do comedies of customer/saleslady interactions during the slow times, they send each other up, they have precise categories of customer (the old, the flapper, the looker, the fat, the pair of friends) and quite precise expectations for each. Donovan gives us an excellent portrait of the new industrial relations of the 1920s, with its quotas and rules and human relations specialists. She also gives us a fine picture of sexuality in this new venue: her account of selling a “good-looking, well-dressed business man” a flashy purse for his mistress is a classic. So also is her surprising remark that hotels at this period kept lists of potential dates (among them salesladies) for lonely visiting businessmen, a system that undoubtedly had the same partial-prostitution functions as she found in waitressing. Donovan sees this, but does not offer the detailed analysis (and moral justification) for it that she gave in the earlier book:

There are a great many Kitty Klovers [the false name the businessman gives] in New York and they constitute a large proportion of the customers at this and other ultra-smart shops on Fifth Avenue. It is inevitable that

the saleswoman who waits on these customers should be intrigued by their manners and appearances and that vague speculations in regard to their lives are bound to occupy a space in her day-dreams and reveries.

Such characters had of course already been placed before the American imagination. Theodore Dreiser's Carrie Meeber could easily have been become a waitress in one of Donovan's restaurants, and while Edith Wharton's Undine Spragg wouldn't have been caught dead in Donovan's "McElroy's" (Macy's), she undoubtedly patronized "Harold's" (Saks). Both were women who used their sex quite frankly to climb social pyramids. But it was Wharton's Lily Bart whom the public preferred, committing suicide sooner than barter her charms beyond a matrimonial market that ran to the stupid, the venal, and the poor.

That market is offstage in Donovan's reading of the saleswoman's world, with its female managers, female staff, and female clients. Donovan revels in this: "The stores and their encounter with the real world had made [the saleswomen] free souls and women of the world." Moreover, she tells us, "the store itself is fascinating, chock-full as it is with colorful merchandise, the understanding of which is in itself a liberal education." Here again as in *The Woman Who Waits* we find Donovan's fascination—and that of her mentor, Robert Park—with the sheer excitement of modern urban life. This romantic temper—in Donovan as much as in her fellow workers—papers over the managed world of welfare capitalism. Donovan likes piece work (small wonder—she sold dresses faster than anybody else), and she likes it that Macy's has a library, a savings system, and a workers' mutual-aid society. But it turns out that the sales force turns over at about 75% per year and that much of that turnover involves matrimony. So this women's world, although much more respectable and self-contained than the waitress world, is still dependent on male suffrage. Nothing makes this clearer than the speech Donovan puts in the mouth of an enormously successful fictitious buyer (whom, incidentally, she portrays as a lesbian):

[A buyer] must be hardboiled and she must have virgin habits. She can't let her emotions be upset about men—in fact, men can't enter her life at all; she has neither time nor energy to spend on them. In the second place, she must have an iron constitution and an iron spirit, she must climb over everybody, and she must understand Yiddish. . . . Her background, her education, her culture aren't worth a damn—what counts is her ability to make money in the production end and to save money in the service end.

A hard world, then, if a romantic one. A world in which success comes at the price of intimacy. One wonders to what extent Donovan's appraisal reflected what she knew about the alternatives—about being a school-teacher, a waitress, a housewife, a manager, all those other things she had done. A widow making it on her own, she saw young women by the

hundred graduating from her high school every year. Sales may well have been the most attractive thing available to them.

With *The Schoolma'am* we come to Donovan's own world. This is the book of an older woman (in her mid-fifties by this time). On the one hand, it is an impassioned *apologia pro vita sua*. Chapter 6 is the pseudonymic life story of the author herself. Indeed, Donovan begins the book with the "romantic young creatures" who read Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) and, following its plot, headed west to teach, and "married the ranchers, bankers, lawyers, physicians, and copper kings of El Dorado." This was her own story.

But the book is also a rich portrait of an entire profession by an insider. Donovan mixes statistics and anecdotes with the sure hand of a seasoned professional and sometime administrator. The book covers all aspects of teaching: from types of teachers, to life histories and mobility, to private life and place in the community, to bureaucratic involvements and old age. It is indeed a classic. The theme of sex and marriage returns here, for unlike the sales world—filled perpetually by new young women seeking a brief independence while awaiting marriage—teaching enables respectable women to support themselves over a long period without a man. Like any time-dependent demography, the teaching profession is thus filled with long-stay spinsters, of whom Donovan's understanding is profound indeed. Explaining "why [the teacher] is unmarried" (the title of chap. 3), Donovan tells us: "Still unsophisticated and romantic, she is not prepared to make the compromises necessary for a successful love adventure." Indeed, Donovan gives us a veritable taxonomy of spinsterdom. But the last chapter is a valedictory for Donovan's life and her occupation, and she aims high. Had Americans followed Donovan's prescriptions their society would indeed have become great:

[The schoolma'am of tomorrow] will need both courage and perseverance for hers will be a position of leadership. She must be proud of her profession. Through her own individual efforts, and through her professional organizations, she must help to inaugurate constructive policies in the school and the community, and to improve the profession of teaching until it becomes one of the most powerful agencies for social progress in the nation. This will not be easy, but she will be an American woman with the pioneer spirit of her ancestors.

Professional social science this book is not. But it contains more insight into the state of teaching as a living social phenomenon of the 1930s than any survey. Donovan's first two books had lain clearly within the Parkian study of the social psychology of the newly exciting commercial world of the 1920s. In them we find the focus on urban loneliness from Simmel, the "romantic temper" of Park, the "gambling instinct" and "search for new experience" of Thomas—all those themes that would resurface in Goffman's account of "where the action is." But her third book steps back from this agenda to make a more sober appraisal of the place of women—

American Journal of Sociology

especially single women—in the new society. It is a committed, noble statement.

Taken together, these three books are the first sustained inquiry into occupational experience both by the Chicago school and by American sociology more broadly. Indeed, we can say that Donovan inaugurated the Chicago tradition in the sociology of work that would later be elaborated by her longtime acquaintance Everett Hughes and his students, and that would be still later continued by Eliot Freidson and Andrew Abbott. But that later work would lack the sparkle of Donovan's. Her books may not have the scientific detachment of the new sociology. But they have what is better—a mix of distance and commitment that brings their data and their author alive to readers in any generation. Read any one of them and you will enjoy it. Read all three, and you will come to know a remarkable woman and her equally remarkable vision of women's place in her society.