

## *Family Papers and the New Social History*

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In their quest for the history of common men and women the new social historians of Canada have largely ignored family papers. These documents do not fit neatly into the schemas of quantitative historians, whose enterprise demands large bodies of systematically gathered information. Nor do they easily meet objections that literary sources provide hopelessly atypical glimpses of past societies. Because of the presumed elitist bias of the origins of these documents, and the haphazard ways in which history winnows its record, social historians have placed little faith in the representative nature of family papers. Now commonly disparaged as “soft sources”, they have occasionally been dismissed as nothing more than belletristic.

This scepticism is certainly not without some justification, for family papers admittedly raise complex problems of analysis and interpretation. They do have an obvious bias toward the literate (and therefore to some extent toward social elites) and they do survive in such random ways that their use requires great care. But they also offer us a window upon facets of the past which we otherwise could not see. The collections of family papers found in most Canadian public archives possess a vast store of information about our common past, information which we can obtain in no other way. Thus, whatever the problems of their use, we neglect these sources to the detriment of our historical understanding.

What follows are several lengthy excerpts from nineteenth century Canadian family papers—chosen to illustrate diverse themes in the history of society—and some observations upon the range of matters which these documents reveal. It goes without saying that these are merely examples, examples chosen rather arbitrarily which could be multiplied almost without end. Canadian archives are far richer in nineteenth than twentieth century family papers. This is due as much to vagaries of document preservation and collection as it is to any other influences. The fact is that common phenomena in the recent past are seldom accorded much importance, and few forms of correspondence are more common than the routine letters exchanged by family members. Only when such documents acquire the patina of age is their worth likely to be recognized. But by then the hazards of time have destroyed the great majority of family collections. The implication of declining literacy and the

rise of the telephone quite apart, unless this situation is remedied in future, and archivists actively seek out major collections of family papers, the opportunity of our heirs to know the private life of our own world will be sadly diminished.

Not surprisingly, family papers are a basic source for the study of the history of the family. In a recent survey of the subject Michael Anderson has noted that over the last decade or so three fundamental schools of family history have evolved: demographic, sentimental, and economic.<sup>1</sup> Since the early 1970's historians of the Canadian family have been linked most closely with the first and third of these schools. Dechêne, Katz, Bouchard, Gagan and others have employed a wide range of demographic techniques to explore family structures and the household economy.<sup>2</sup> (Those who have examined the history of childhood—an important theme in family history—do not fall neatly into any of these categories, having tended to view their subjects more from an institutional than a familial perspective.) By and large these diverse studies have drawn upon public sources: censuses, tax rolls, land registers, government reports, case records, newspapers and the like, the documents commonly used to make the historically inarticulate speak. On the whole, however, their authors have shown the common reluctance of most new social historians to exploit available collections of family papers. Anderson's sentimental school has had no major practitioners in Canadian family history to date. Consequently there is no literature which discusses the content of Canadian family life, which illuminates the changing attitudes, feelings and relationships that doubtless formed the vital core of the family experience in Canada over time.

The following letter of Simeon and Eunice White of Barnston, Lower Canada to their son and daughter-in-law in 1823 provides a graphic illustration of the contribution of family correspondence to the study of family history. In their old age the elder Whites wished their son and his wife to return home from New York State and help out on the family farm in Stansted County, not far from the Vermont border.

You have wrote that you had about concluded not to come back to live [here]. If you think that you cannot be contented as [in the] States after receiving one more letter from you I shall forbare writing on that subject. .But Simeon I ever expected if you came back that we should give you our property. . . [I]t is our wish for you to come if you and Lydia think that you can come and undertake the task to live with us. It is uncertain that perhaps we may live 5 or ten years and perhaps not one—that is unknown to us. But perhaps your prospects is to good now that you feale loth to leave it. But one thing Simeon I would just state to

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1 Michael Anderson, *Approaches to the History of the Western Family, 1500-1914* (London, 1980).

2 Louise Dechêne, *Habitants et Marchands de Montréal au XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle* (Montréal, 1974) 414-49; Gérard Bouchard, "Family Structures and Geographic Mobility, 1851-1935", *Journal of Family History*, 2 (1977), 350-69; Michael Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975); David Gagan, *Hopeful Travellers: Families, Land, and Social Change in Mid-Victorian Peel County, Canada West* (Toronto, 1981).

you—you ought to remember that when your strength is weakened by sickness then your income must stop. I think that the income of a small farm is much better than a macannick. But if you should come home and wish to work at making barrels you will find a rapid sail for all that you can make. A number of stills and potashes are built in this town, one still at David Radway, one potash in home [?] Mr. Baldwin. [Illegible] barrels are in good demand and fetch redy pay. [All] we want is for you to come and labour on the farm, raise stock, make butter and cheese. Your mother has just now put one into the cheese press 14 or 15 pounds wt. I hope that Simeon and Lydia will come and help [with] it next winter. All that we want is to have the statement in such a way that we may have a comfortable support [?] in this life with and for our own health and think that we deserve that and I also think that [illegible] it. There is no [illegible] in my mind if you stated you [did?] to me that it was with grate reluctance for you to come back but said it was out of duty that you owed to your parents. Then I stated after you said that you never was contented nor did not think that you ever should be, then I stated like this on what I did; but our minds are still the same as before, and if we have hurt your feble minds, I feale willing to ask forgiveness in everything. The fact is this [is] all that we want is if you can find in your mind, duty to come. Why then children come. We want for you to come. You stated that I had never sent now or in such cases, that is what was my meaning for you. And Simeon if you come back you will not find me resentfull. The man that we let our place too this summer is a young man in his 22nd. year, moved from the Bay State, left in fawl. A good man for labour, but not my own children; and one-half is not all. I think that is you should come that with good economy we might live comfortable not withstanding we have had to hire our labour. We have raised enuff for 2 or 3 years for both your family and mine. If you should come you may have the farm, if not, I think that I shall intail the land to my heirs. If you conclude to come, I wish you to come this fawl, for it is very difficult for your poor old mother in the winter. She has [illegible] lugin wood and water, to make fires. The [illegible] any more for I cannot lift ten pounds heft, but still I can earn 5 or 6 dollars per month in my way [?] house. Sold and got my pay with in six years, 365 dollars 64 cents, and for want of stock have not worked not more than one half of the time, and my children I do not know that I can say any more but to tell you we are well as usual and also to tell you Eli has gone to Boyntton and Tunbridge, been gone 2 weeks this day. He has a great [?] desire to see you. Stephen and family was well the last we heard from them, now moved to the north part of the town. Hope you will send me an answer soon, that we make calculation for the same. I think that we shall look for you by the last of October next. Your father and mother, brothers and sisters all sent their best wishes to you all. We still remain your unworthy friends.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Simeon and Eunice White to Simeon White [Jr.], 14 July 1823, Courtesy of P. Greenwell, Ponoka, Alberta.

In graphic terms this letter tells the story of an elderly farm couple no longer able to maintain their small place in the Eastern Townships. To ensure their economic security they asked their only available son and daughter-in-law to return to live with them on the farm. There were serious obstacles to be overcome, however: Simeon junior's independent livelihood as a cooper and, it would seem, a family rupture as well. The ageing parents had few tangible inducements to offer, principally a modest living on the farm and the prospect of its inheritance when the elder Whites died. The only other claim they could make was upon their son's sense of filial duty and family feeling, to which Simeon senior appeals without hesitation.

Unfortunately the consequences of this appeal are unknown; nonetheless the letter takes us to the heart of a common family experience in nineteenth century English Canada. Small landholders like the Whites had little security against increasing age and declining strength except that provided by their children. But throughout much of the century the expansive economy of North America provided widespread economic opportunity for the young, either on successive agricultural frontiers or in the growing commercial and industrial cities of the eastern half of the continent. Thus the male children of farmers could often achieve independence from their parents at a relatively early age. They need not be tied to their fathers and mothers by expectations of inheritance, as was far more often the case in French Canada and much of western Europe at this time. These gains were won at the expense of their parents, however, who lost the greater authority and security which possession of a scarce and valuable resource would otherwise have given them in their later years. In such circumstances, when strong inter-generational family ties were maintained, sentiment doubtless was more important than interest in preserving family solidarity. If Simeon junior and Lydia did return it was likely more because they too felt the special claims of family obligation than because they wanted the old folks' farm.

A letter from J. Cradock Simpson of Montréal to his younger brother John in Penetanguishine in 1864 reveals other facets of the Victorian family experience in English Canada. In this instance Cradock wrote to intervene in a family quarrel.

I was very sorry to hear that you had been tempted to indulge too freely both during Papa's absence and on his return, and that in consequence of your not agreeing, you had left home with the intention of not returning. I am not sure but that it would be better for you to be away from Penetanguishine altogether — or at least for a time — if you could get a situation elsewhere. Now my dear Jack perhaps you may be offended at first at what I am going to say but the interest I take in your welfare and the pain I felt when I heard of your doings in Barrie and Collingwood (or rather the doings of the evil spirit that controlled you for the time being) induces me to write a few plain truths which I feel assured your own common sense will endorse. I have often thought of what you — with your good business talents — might have become had it not been for that cursed drink. You are now wasting the talents that God has given you — degrading yourself to a lower level than that on which you were placed — ruining your health wickedly, and flinging away your best years in folly and vice. Keep on in this course for a few years

longer, and you will not only become an object of contempt to the community; a source of mortification to all your friends; but you will also be the means of hastening your fathers death, and bringing your sorrowing mother to the grave. I do not know whether you have noticed the change, or perhaps you have attributed it to other causes, but others do see how her sorrowing and fretting after you is killing her gradually; and when one thinks of the many anxious and sleepless nights she has passed waiting for you, and the patient grief your conduct has caused her, the only wonder is that she has stood it so long. Besides all this if you persist in going on as you have done only think of what your end must inevitably be. Your bosom will become a living hell in this world; you will become a victim of disease brought on my abuse, or cut off suddenly in some attacks of delirium tremens—in either case with nothing in reserve but eternal damnation. My dear Jack you may think this strong language but it is true. With such certain consequences of your dissipation staring you in the face, is it not time to stop? Oh! Jack let me ask of you as a brother to think of these things and give up now and forever the use of spirituous liquors; for if, knowing the consequences, you still continue in your habits of dissipation—then, may God have mercy on your soul—a few short years more and you will be upbraiding yourself as the murderer of your mother.

Only think on the other hand of what you may yet become—with God's help—if you have the determination to give up all debasing habits, and manfully to commence a new and higher life. We read of hundreds of cases where men after a long course of dissipation, have suddenly resolved on adopting a high standard of life, and by rigid self-denial and energetic application to useful work, have succeeded in earning for themselves an honourable name, and in winning the respect and esteem of all who knew them.

There is no such thing, however, as drinking moderately. As Smiles "Self-Help" says "When a man cannot restrain, he must abstain.["] Dr. Johnson's case is the case of many. He said, referring to his own habits, "Sir, I can abstain, but I can't be moderate."

In the same book is the following quotation[:] "To wrestle vigorously and successfully with any vicious habit, we must not merely be satisfied with contending on the low ground of worldly prudence, though that is of use, but take stand upon a higher moral elevation. Mechanical aids, such as pledges, may be of service to some, but the great thing is to set up a high standard of thinking and acting, and endeavour to strengthen and purify the principles as well as to reform the habits. For this purpose a man must study himself, watch his steps, and compare his thoughts and acts with his rule. The more knowledge of himself he gains, the more humble will he be, and perhaps the less confident in his own strength. But the discipline will be found most valuable which is acquired by resisting small present gratifications to secure a prospective greater and higher one. It is the noblest work in self-education; for 'Real glory springs from the silent conquest of ourselves, and without that the conqueror is naught but the first slave.' "

Let me entreat of you Jack to make a bold stand, once and for all, and give up drinking altogether. Commence right off, this very day, and look upon every one that asks or presses you to drink sprituous liquor in future as your enemy. Do this, and you will find friends willing to lend you a helping hand should you need it. If you wish to try for a situation in Montreal I could be looking out for you between this and next spring. Clerks are generally engaged in February or March, and sometimes in January, and I have not the slightest doubt but that if you commence now to prepare yourself for a new and nobler life, you could get a situation here early in the spring where you could commence afresh without the fear of being scoffed at or taunted by former companions, and in a few years with your business talents, and steady perseverance you would be almost certain of acquiring an honorable competence, or what is as good an honorable name. Please write soon and I hope that you will take all this in the same kindly spirit that it is offered.<sup>4</sup>

This letter is of interest for several reasons. It reveals the persistence of continuing family interest and strong family ties among adult siblings living far from one another. Superficially this might seem so commonplace as to preclude remark. But it does qualify substantially the assumption of many demographers that the family is effectively a co-resident group. Here we see strong fraternal ties extending over a great distance, though they certainly smack of an older brother's paternalism. In addition, Cradock hints at deep intergenerational tensions linked with the maturation of children. While John's age is unknown he appears to be young and unmarried, without a career, living at home, and dependent upon his parents. A dispute over his drinking habits has evidently precipitated a family rupture, his parents no doubt attempting to impose restraints upon him which he strongly resented. Although the evidence is not entirely clear, it would seem that John was caught between his desire for autonomy and his inability to achieve full independence (perhaps because of his intemperate behaviour). Bitter family conflict was the result. The letter also reveals the sentimental idealization of motherhood and a son's obligation to his mother — materdolatry — characteristic of Victorian bourgeois domestic thought. Mother and son are here bound by complex reciprocal ties, she the fond mother grieved by her boy's folly, he the dissipated son denying the filial duty customarily owed to an ageing parent. Finally, the letter provides a fascinating glimpse of the penetration of self-help ideology into conventional social relationships. Smiles' doctrines were widely disseminated in the mid-Victorian English-speaking world. Yet only occasionally do we see them harnessed for the task of personal improvement as Cradock Simpson has used them here. On this occasion ideology served not only as a set of abstract ideals but an active instrument for personal rehabilitation. Cradock was employing a common Victorian form of behaviour modification. Like all nineteenth century liberals imbued with self-help doctrines, he saw the solution to his brother's crisis solely as an internal reformation, a major change of personality which could only be achieved by

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4 J. Cradock Simpson to John Simpson, 31 Oct. 1864, Simpson Papers, Archives of Ontario, (AO).

denying his former self and internalizing a new doctrine of right conduct which bore the stamp of bourgeois orthodoxy.

Beyond the history of the family, family papers also contain a rich and miscellaneous storehouse of information on an extremely broad range of other subjects. Take for example the letter of William Percy to Francis Shanley, written from the Toronto Poor House March, 1855.

You may see the reason I am going to trouble you again. Necessity urges me to do so. Little I thought when I left home I would be obliged to come to such a place as this. I had nothing else for it unless to perish in the street and to beg I could not do it. Before I got in I got wet and damp feet which gave me a cold made my Cough worse than it was. My Lungs and Chest are badly effected now. I think I will not be long a trouble to anyone. If my poor Wife and Child were provided for it would be well for me if it pleased God to call me to him. I have only the Cloths on my back no flannels nothing on my feet except a pair of shoes Mr. W. Shanley gave me last year. The Man I lived with has all my things as I could not pay him. I expected to have heard from my Brother who is in St. Croix in the West Indies but I suppose he did not get my letter so that if I had heard I expected he would have helped me as I have done to him when I had it in my power. I would have written again to him but had not the postage. It would not go without being paid as it is a Danish Island. Now what to do I do not know. I have not even what would get something for my Cough. I can only sleep on my left side and very little of that I get from Coughing. If I had something to do that would suit me if it was only to pay my board and put some clothes on me when I required them. I would not be able for much exertion that is heavy work. The Drs. know that perhaps through your interest and Mr. Walter Shanley you could get me something. You may depend upon it Mr. Shanley whatever it might be I would be attentive to it. As to drink I never taste it for it would kill me. As I think Mr. W. Shanley did not wish me to write to him I did not. Indeed I was in trouble to him and you but I did not think it would come to this. I have neither money or clothes now. I can hardly write my pen is so bad. I hope you will excuse this trouble. Situated as I am I can scarcely think or write as I ought to do. For God sake Mr. Shanley let me hear from you and you will be doing a charity. If I ask the Master he will allow me to go to the post so that if you please only direct Toronto. I am picking hair here. It is so full of dust it hurts my chest but every one must do something. I wish I never had seen America.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Wm. G. Percy to Francis Shanley, 31 March 1855, Shanley Papers, AO.

This pathetic note probes deeply into the experience of the poor in mid-nineteenth century Anglo-Canadian society. Here we see the corrosion wrought by poverty upon family life, as well as the vulnerability, humiliation and physical suffering of the poor, all accentuated by the environment of the poor house. The letter itself also hints at an elaborate, informal system of clientage in the emerging industrial economy of Canada West. As assistant to his brother Walter, chief construction engineer on the Toronto and Guelph railway (soon to be absorbed into the Grand Trunk system) Francis Shanley had many jobs under his patronage. Percy was one of thousands who, while not as desperate as he, sought jobs and favours from men like the Shanley brothers. For many poor men and women direct appeals such as this were their only possible source of relief from the misery which they endured. When speaking in this fashion the poor in history tell us much about themselves which we can know in no other way.

Family papers also often refer to medical matters and, in so doing, inform us about common medical practises and popular responses to disease. In 1812 Johnathan Peters' description of his wife's fatal illness, for example, provides a layman's view of prescientific medical practise in pioneer Upper Canada. As he wrote to his late wife's sister,

I improve this conveyance by Mr. Henderson, to give you the Malloncolly news of your Sisters decease; on Friday Morning the 10th Inst your letter came to hand, your Sister was struck with death about 2 O Clock the day before, but retained her Senses perfectly to the last moment. I red about half of your Letter to her, when she said she could hear no more. She died between 6 & 7 O Clock in the Eveng without the least struggle or groan.

To give an adequet discription of her complaint and sufferings is not in my power, but as I am sensible it will afford you some satisfaction, I willingly make attempt as well as I can. Some few months after her youngest Child Mary was born, she verry nigh lost her life by a hard swell in the lower part of the body which after a tedious and sever illness appeard to be removed. In Feby last she began to be verry unwell, and com plained a soreness principlly in her left side. I applied to the Doctrs, who treated it slightly and supposed it a state of pregnancy. In May I had two Doctrs who concluded the same and allmost convinced her. At least she was induced to think so, although I was convinced otherwise and told them that it was something more serious and then, two or of these hard lumps could be felt on the body. & were verry sore. However the Dr gave some little Medium that give her some ease. In July the swelling became alarming and she in the most extreme pain, when I had recourse to all the Doctrs I could who then concluded it a Dropsy and Doctored for that untill Sept. when they all gave up; then we tryed every thing could be thought of by [illegible] and every thing any person proposed. Some things would give a temporary ease, but not for any length of time; the pain & swelling increase. In Octr. I got a new Doctr from the States who said no Medium could have any effect, but that taping might Possibly give temporary relief & prolong her days a little. She would not concent to



the operation. All this time in the most extreem pain that ever person I believe underwent. She could not set in consequence of the abdomins bearing down, and out of the body nearly the bigness of a Childs head. The only position she could be in was on her hands and nees, or on her right elbow and hip and on her feet, which she was obliged to helped to perhaps 10 times in 24 hours which continued till the day before she died. In Novr. Dr. Mervin came from Detroit. He said, had he been here three Months sooner he might have helped here by opening the body and removing the cause but she was now to low. She would never have consented, and I Know now it would not have anserrd. The last Doctr was one Kittridge from the States. He said nothing would do any good except Taping, and that could not cure. However she consented and on the Wednesday before she died he tried the operation to no effect. He said a gangerine had commened that the water was too thick to run. That was not the case. I saw afterwards he did not go through the rim of the body and if he had she would have died in his hands. She said then she must die and requested that her body might be opened, which was done, and found to contain I think upwards of two pails of Water & nearly or quite as much corrupted Matter. The body was all perfectly sound excepting in the vicinity of the Womb which was all in Ulcers some nearly as large as a Turkys Egg, in short that whole part was in a state of corruption—Her brother D. called to see her in July the only time except in passing to and from Kingston, & saw her buried, but I never saw more attention paid to a sick person than was done in this Neighbourhood, giving assistance in necessaries and one two or three Women watching almost every night for three Months. The Elder Children almost worn out with watching. . . Believe me dear Peggy my heart is too full to write anything correct. Nothing else would have enduced me to attempt it, but to let you know how much your Sister, and my Dear partner suffered before she left me in charge of our ever Dear Children, and by this you cannot know—neither could any person tell half she underwent, fatigue and who was not an eye witness to the agony, when for Days and Nights, Weeks and Months she might for the greater part of the time be heard 10 Rods from the house.<sup>6</sup>

The most obvious feature of this account is the enormous pain borne with fortitude by a woman with a protracted, debilitating disease, suffering against which we are now largely insulated but which must have been a very common experience before anaesthesia and modern pharmacology provided relief. Of necessity most of our ancestors must have anticipated and repeatedly endured a level of pain far greater than that which most of us will ever experience today. How did they regard physical suffering? How did they cope with pain? Peters' description suggests the crucial role of family and friends in times of great trouble. Here too we see the haphazard nature of medical diagnosis, the repeated failure of various

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6 Jno. Peters to Margaret Greeley, 31 January 1812, Rogers Papers, AO.

therapies, and the continued search by physicians and others for a possible cure. In the patient and her family these bred a curious blend of optimism and fatalism, a willingness repeatedly to seek out new medical advice combined first with a reluctance to submit to heroic treatment and, ultimately, to a reconciliation with impending death.

The family has been the setting of an enormously broad range of experiences over time, and these have been recorded, considered, and analyzed in the private correspondence of ordinary men and women. Thus this short list of subjects which might be informed through judicious use of family papers could be lengthened almost indefinitely. Even a cursory glance through a few substantial family collections reveals an astonishing array of topics discussed: a distant war, a marriage proposal, last Sunday's sermon, next fall's crops, a local scandal, some advice to the young. Clearly, family papers offer a fruitful source for many students of the new social history, family and non-family historians alike. Perhaps most important of all, they provide an unexplored body of information on social rituals, the primary patterns of human behaviour in history. Human actions are anything but random and unstructured. As our ancestors passed through their lives many of their most fundamental acts were shaped by traditional practices. In particular, convention has always guided behaviour in the three great crises of life: birth, marriage, and death. Various rituals have given form and meaning to the basic experiences of countless millions in western Europe and North America throughout the modern era. They lie at the very heart of the primary acts of our species. What were the rituals of childbirth and infant nurture? How did they influence the lives of the very young? What conventions and considerations shaped the process of courtship and marriage? How did they leave their mark upon men and women as they chose their lifelong mates? What rituals moulded the experience of mourning? How did they affect attitudes to approaching death and the acceptance of deep loss among those who survived? Answers to these questions will tell us much about the social and personal context of the most basic of human experiences, experiences which we still share with our forbearers. The search for these answers should begin in the family records of the past which provide the most intimate view of former times we shall ever be permitted.

Finally, while many major Canadian archives possess substantial collections of family papers, few archivists have recognized the intrinsic value of their holdings. Like many historians, most archivists have always shared a predilection for the public life in history, and this tradition has been slow to change in both professions. Consequently family papers are among the least accessible of archival holdings. Finding aids seldom offer much information beyond a simple description of authors and recipients. Given the enormous range of subject matter to be found in domestic correspondence this may be understandable. But it also is unfortunate, doubly so in that archivists themselves seldom have an intimate knowledge of the contents of family collections in their custody. As a result researchers using such papers have few aids to guide them through their labyrinths. At very least finding aids should provide some general indication of major subjects discussed in family letters. A

note on the full range of topics discussed would be even more desirable. Archivists have a central role to play in writing the new social history. Amongst their most important tasks, they must first recognize the enormous value of family papers and then set about the laborious job of making them more accessible.

