

Book Reviews

Until Next Year: Letter Writing and the Mails in the Canadas, 1640–1830. JANE E. HARRISON. Ottawa: co-published by the Canadian Postal Museum and the Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1997. xx, 155 p. ISBN 0-88920-298-2.

Most Canadians take it for granted that the only thing needed to send a letter is to give it to the Post Office. Jane Harrison's book begins in a Canada where there was no regular postal service and handwritten letters were the only way to break an isolation which we, in the electronic age, can hardly imagine. The ingenuity and energy with which our ancestors solved this problem is the subject of this interesting account.

Writing on the history of postal communications in Canada, especially about the early period, is limited. William Smith's *History of the Post Office in British North America, 1639–1870* was published in 1920, and J. C. Arnell's *Atlantic Mails: A History of the Mail Service between Great Britain and Canada to 1889*, published in 1980, is weak on the French period. Philatelists and local historians have written about postal history from their own points of view but little has been published about the wider social history of the mails as a means of communication. The studies that have been published have mainly used official records to study the establishment and administration of formal postal and courier services. Harrison's book adds a new and important perspective to the field. She has examined collections of private correspondence to discover what the letters themselves can tell us about the systems which carried them. In doing so, she has revealed a great deal about the postal system that cannot be discovered from the public records of official bodies. Because the letters were so important to the people who sent and received them, they are full of detailed discussions about the way the system worked and reveal how much time and effort were needed on the part of individual correspondents to make sure that their letters reached their destinations.

In her preface, Harrison explains that constraints of time made it "necessary

to focus on broad patterns and on selected routes, communities and moments” (p. xvi). The study is centred on mails between the Canadas and France and England; little or nothing is said of experience in the Maritime colonies and Newfoundland, or about correspondence with the American colonies before or after the Revolution. Time constraints also led her to use letters in a limited number of large collections rather than searching more widely for the isolated references that undoubtedly exist in other collections all over the country. As Harrison is well aware, the people who wrote the letters she uses were part of an elite. She suggests it was only such people who had the resources, the opportunities, and the education to carry on extensive correspondence, and she may be correct. It would be interesting, however, to know whether this impression is accurate or merely the result of the fact that the correspondence of ordinary people, whether extensive or not, is less likely to have survived. Whatever the answer, Harrison has selected well from the collections of letters available to her. Her subjects represent a wide variety of occupations and there is a good balance between men and women, and between letters written originally in French and English.

The work grew out of research for an exhibit at the Canadian Postal Museum, and as a result it includes excellent illustrations and examples of the material artifacts used in the process of writing and sending letters. The first chapter deals with the physical letter itself. We discover how the pages were written, folded, sealed, and addressed. Contemporary instructional manuals and examples of letters are illustrated. There are detailed instructions for making quill pens and for keeping ink from freezing. There are pictures of tools used for erasing errors by removing the surface layer of paper and then polishing it smooth again. The practice of using mica or ground cuttlefish to dry ink, common in the days before the widespread use of blotting paper, is explained. This chapter alone would make the book a valuable source for any archivist dealing with early manuscript collections. It reminds us of the evidential value of the physical aspects of documents. Because these letters were written before the widespread use of commercially made envelopes, the seals, addresses, directions, and other markings are usually found on the letter itself and survive as further evidence of postal transactions. The use Harrison has made of this evidence may teach us to be more careful about the wholesale destruction of envelopes, especially in collections of private papers.

The remaining two chapters deal with the mails in New France and after 1759. A large part of the first chapter is spent examining the letters of Marie de l’Incarnation. This collection, which has been a basic source for so much Canadian historical writing, proves to be a wonderful source for the study of the use of the mails in the early period of New France. Marie de l’Incarnation, like all the other letter writers in this book, was obliged to take great efforts to send and receive letters. In winter, Quebec was completely cut off once the Saint Lawrence froze. The earliest ships from France did not usually arrive

until the end of May and might be as late as August. The last vessels usually left on the return journey in October, or sometimes November. The result was that writers in Quebec sent letters in one year and received their answers in the next. There was rarely enough time to complete an exchange in one season. The winter was a time of complete isolation. On the other hand, in the summer, correspondents tried to send letters by every ship leaving port and spent much of the season writing letters. "In short," Harrison writes, "the rhythm of communications helped determine the rhythm of affairs ... [I]n most summers an ordinance was passed suspending government business until the end of the season of navigation in order to give correspondents the time to write their letters" (p. 85).

Important news was repeated in several letters, and letters were sent by as many different ships as possible to lessen the effect of possible loss. Many writers developed the habit of making an inventory of the letters they had sent and received at the beginning of each letter, so that missing messages could be accounted for. In the early days of New France, correspondents in the small settlements inland were even more isolated in winter and had an even smaller window of opportunity to send letters to France. It was not always possible to get the letters from the upper country to Quebec between the time the ice broke up in the spring and the departure of ships for France in the fall. In the later period in New France, however, there were usually more ships sailing between Quebec and France. Evidence of a regular exchange of letters suggests that there may have been an official courier service within the colony, but the French post office took no responsibility for sending letters across the ocean.

The situation changed after the conquest. Writing to France, especially during the Revolution, became more difficult because vessels no longer sailed directly from Quebec, but correspondence continued, with the use of agents in England. Although communications remained easier in the summer, people were no longer entirely isolated in winter. Mails could be sent overland to Halifax and New York and, while the journey was slow and difficult, it provided an opportunity to exchange mail in the winter season. The British government established a post office at Quebec in 1763 which gradually expanded its services. A winter express through Upper Canada, which had been started in the French period, became regular. This service made an important difference to the inhabitants of the area, and increased in frequency as the population grew.

Perhaps the most interesting thing that Harrison's study uncovers is the relative unimportance of all other official courier and postal services. Even when they had access to an official service, many correspondents preferred to send their letters "by favour" with a passing traveler, a sea captain, or other private person. Harrison provides many interesting illustrations of the way people chose the best means of sending letters, of which the post office was only one. "In the context of the period from the 17th to the early 19th centuries," she

writes, “postal communications only incidentally had anything to do with the Post Office” (p. 149).

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“Titanic”: The Official Story, April 14-15, 1912. ARCHIVES OF THE PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE IN LONDON. London: Random House, 1997. 18 documents, 100+ p. ISBN 0-375-501150-0.

The Titanic Collection: Mementos Of The Maiden Voyage. ARCHIVES OF THE TITANIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY, TEXT BY ERIC SAUDER & HUGH BREWSTER. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998. 21 reproductions. ISBN 0-8118-2052-1.

With the world having just been washed over by the third wave of “Titanicmania,” the first having occurred immediately after the disaster, the second after the publication in 1955 of Walter Lord’s *A Night to Remember* and release of the subsequent film, and the third initiated by the discovery of the wreck by Robert G. Ballard’s Franco-American exploration team in 1985 (then whipped into tsunami proportions by James Cameron’s film *Titanic*), it is appropriate to examine some of the flotsam and jetsam of potential interest to the archival world which this last wave has produced. In *Down With The Old Canoe*, a study of the disaster’s place in popular culture, historian Steven Biel notes that when publishing on the SS *Titanic* one must question whether one should add to the flood of already available “stuff,” especially since by this stage most of it is essentially a reworking of previously known material. This same question must be asked of two recently published works: “*Titanic*”: *The Official Story* and *The Titanic Collection*, which are not exactly books, but “boxed collections” of textual items related to the sinking of the famous ship in April 1912. Those responsible for these sets are clear about why they created these products. In *The Titanic Collection*, Sauder and Brewster say their aim is to help readers “touch the past” and give them a “unique” and “first-hand impression” of what the great ship was like. “*Titanic*”: *The Official Story* states that “only by consulting original documents” can we find the truth and that they “will make history unfold in your hands.” Here the two collections largely succeed.

Such collections are not a new concept; perhaps the most widely known previous example is the once ubiquitous series of “Jackdaws” produced in the 1970s. However, what sets the two “Titanic” collections apart is that they attempt not only to reproduce the written content of their facsimile items, but also the texture and appearance of the originals. The presentation and produc-