

Exhibition Review

Travels with Elizabeth Simcoe – A Visual Journey Through Upper and Lower Canada. ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO WEB SITE, on-going (<www.archives.gov.on.ca>).

What a remarkable woman Elizabeth Simcoe must have been! Hers was an incredible experience, not just during her five years in Canada, but during her eight-decade-long life. Orphaned shortly after her birth into an English country family, Simcoe (née Posthuma Gwillim) was raised by an aunt. At age nineteen (or sixteen, depending on which biographer you choose) she married John Graves Simcoe, a man who may have been her first serious suitor. He was ten years her senior, a military officer, and her uncle's godson. Mrs. Simcoe gave birth to a succession of children soon after, and by the summer of 1791, when her husband was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, she had borne five daughters and a son and long-awaited heir, the latter only in June 1791. Rather than remain behind in England with her children, she chose to accompany her husband to Canada, bringing with her the two youngest children. While in Canada, she gave birth to another daughter in January 1793, who fell ill and died suddenly in 1794. Mrs. Simcoe remained in Canada with her two older children until 1796, when her husband asked for and was granted a leave of absence to return to England. They never returned to Canada, and when Simcoe was eventually appointed to an English command close to home, the family continued to increase the size. Mrs. Simcoe had two more sons and two more daughters by 1804. In 1806, as she was preparing to accompany her husband to yet another overseas posting, this time as Commander-in-chief in India, he died suddenly. She had been left a widow in her early forties, with 7 daughters and 2 sons to care for, and a lifetime yet to live.

But what does this have to do with the Archives of Ontario virtual exhibit on Mrs. Simcoe, one might ask? For me, Mrs. Simcoe is one of those fascinating figures in Canadian history. This exhibit is an important means of ensuring that new generations of Canadians, especially the generation of school-children

who use the Internet as one of their main sources of information, will learn more about this fascinating individual.

The exhibit is well organized, and the viewer is provided with some of the highlights of her life in Canada. This includes a short introductory section and a series of diary entries, as well as over fifty digital images of many of her most important watercolours, all grouped into eleven chronological sections. The site also provides separate lead-ins to sections about the Simcoe Collection at the Archives of Ontario, Mrs. Simcoe's diaries, and her husband John Graves Simcoe. Text-only versions of the quotations are also supplied. The Archives of Ontario should be congratulated for providing some of the quotations in sound format, as well as a chronology of important events in Canadian history, and a list of acknowledgments and further sources. The texts and diary excerpts are well selected, and the images are beautifully reproduced. However, the fuzzy vignette-style presentation of the smaller images – perhaps done as a design concept – is visually obtrusive, and one has to click again in order to see the full image to reassure oneself that nothing has been cropped or omitted from the picture. The site is not cluttered with many such design conceits, such as flash imagery, or a colour scheme which may actually hinder rather than assist a viewer's understanding of the site's contents, two of the most common and disconcerting features of on-line exhibits on other archives and museum sites. I like the exhibit; it is straightforward, nicely laid out, can be navigated back and forth with relative ease, and understandable to even the most novice visitor.

And yet, something is missing. I would have liked to see a good contemporary map of Upper and Lower Canada on the site linked to the visual images being reproduced. I think that there should have been a hyperlink to a listing (if one exists) to all of the 595 watercolours and drawings and the 100 maps in the Simcoe Collection and to the Archives' actual fonds-level description. Such references would have been useful to serious researchers in the visual history of the early Canadas. The failure to note the existence of other repositories where Mrs. Simcoe's work is held (most notably the National Archives of Canada, where thirty-two of her images are available on-line) or to provide a hyperlink to such on-line resources is unfortunate. The sources listed for further study includes neither Bruce Wilson's excellent and scholarly microfiche publication of the Simcoe Album, published in 1977, nor Marian Fowler's *The Embroidered Tent: Five Gentlewomen in Upper Canada* (Toronto, 1982), which puts Mrs. Simcoe into some context. There are some niggling spelling errors – Sir Guy Carleton's name is misspelled in the historical chronology, and Mary Beacock Fryer's name is wrong in the list of sources.

Perhaps the question of hyperlinking to other sites is a matter of technological limitations of the site at the AO, but it may be that they, like many other institutions, have come to recognize one of the great limitations of using the Internet for historical research. As long ago as March 1998, Dave De Brou, in

a review of *The History Highway: A Guide to Internet Resources* published in the *Canadian Historical Review* (March 1998, pp. 191–193), noted how quickly Web sites became obsolete, or disappeared entirely – six months after the book’s publication in early 1997, De Brou checked the 1170 sites listed by the authors, and found that 54 had been discontinued, and a further 204 had moved or altered addresses. The Internet is a fluid and ever-changing resource which presents its own challenges in making an on-line exhibit both inclusive and complete.

Perhaps it is the historian in me that struggles with another omission in the *Travels with Elizabeth Simcoe* exhibition. In the introduction the viewer is told that:

Elizabeth Simcoe, the wife of John Graves Simcoe, the first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, was an accomplished artist. As she travelled throughout Upper and Lower Canada, between 1791 and 1796, she produced a large number of sketches and watercolours depicting Canadian scenes. She was also an avid diarist and documented many of her experiences.

Nowhere do we get a real sense of Simcoe the individual, nor of her motivation in keeping a diary and in recording in watercolour the many places she visited. The site does feature a brief postscript (perhaps better placed at the front of the exhibit) which states that:

Most people in the colony described her as quiet and shy, perhaps due to a slight speech impediment.... Elizabeth clearly enjoyed being the wife of the Lieutenant Governor and revelled in the social status it afforded her.... what one is most struck with is her enthusiasm and curiosity. She enjoyed everything: the rough Atlantic crossing; social life in the colonies; the hardships of travelling throughout the Canadian wilderness; the opportunity to try new foods – including boiled black squirrel, coffee made from peas, and the odd chipmunk. At times, it appears that only rattlesnakes and mosquitoes gave her pause. Each experience was an adventure and offered a new opportunity for learning.

There is a rich literature about the art of diary-keeping; one is struck by the fact that she began her diary, as did so many other Englishwomen of her era, shortly before she set out on her journey and discontinued it immediately upon her return. Was it a memoir for her children and friends? Did she believe that her experience in Upper Canada would be, as one biographer has noted, “the most exciting in her long life?” If her husband had lived, she would have spent a number of years in India, and Upper Canada might have become a forgotten memory in the midst of a hugely different and much more colourful experience. Canadians are fortunate that Mrs. Simcoe made herself a part of a late eighteenth-century tradition of diary-keeping on long journeys, since so many

other English gentlewomen who came to Canada in the same decade appear to have left little or no records of their experiences. What clearly remains to be done by another historian is to analyze and understand more of her motivation in doing so.

The Archives of Ontario is to be commended for putting together an attractive, easy-to-use, and navigable site featuring the work and life of Mrs. Simcoe. Although there are some problems to be fixed, on-line exhibits are perfect vehicles with which to move forward: the site can be updated, added to, and improved on a constant basis. Unfortunately such work takes time and dedication, and it remains to be seen if the AO is willing to invest such time and energy.

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