

“I ham very much Sopriced of you not Riting to me Sooner”

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In 1964, the National Film Board produced a number of films on Canadian “history-makers,” with historians Maurice Careless and Gustave Lanctôt as consultants: *John Cabot, A Man of the Renaissance*; *The Last Voyage of Henry Hudson*; *Alexander Mackenzie: The Lord of the North*; *David Thompson, the Great Mapmaker*, and *Selkirk of Red River*. The film on Mackenzie is ambitious: it is in colour and shot in impressively authentic settings. *Thompson* uses some location shots, but *Cabot*, *Hudson* and *Selkirk* were filmed in black and white in the studio, with Venice evoked by a cardboard model and Hudson’s ship bobbing in a puddle masquerading as James Bay. Using stage actors, these movies are filmed theatre: the camera, not quite knowing what to do with itself, remembers every once in a while that a close-up may be in order and swoops like a vulture onto a ring-bedecked hand. The language abounds with “thou” and “sayest,” and, in *John Cabot*, actors pretending to be Venetian courtiers—a youthful Timothy Findley among them—stroll about popping grapes into their mouths or peering pensively out from underneath their ill-fitting wigs. In *David Thompson*, there is the snuff-sniffing HBC governor in powdered perrique and jabot (did they really dress like that in York Factory?), together with emotional Frenchmen, disobedient guides, and taciturn Indians. Women are, for the most part, decorative and mute. In *John Cabot*, they don’t get to say anything and content themselves with displaying their expensive wardrobe. In *David Thompson*, Mohawk activist and model Kahn-Tineta Horn as Thompson’s new wife Charlotte Small sits alluringly on her bed as he finishes up some urgent map-making. Her glamour makes for a singularly unconvincing

frontier housewife and we don't believe for a moment that she is ruffled by the arrival of fierce-looking Piegan warriors outside their house. The voice-over speaks of the Thompsons' growing family but the children don't feature in the action. *Lord Selkirk* daringly shows a pregnant Lady Selkirk, her condition camouflaged by her Regency gown but highlighted by her exaggerated awkwardness as she settles at her desk to write in her journal. She warns Selkirk that his dreams will ruin him and his family as she brings him a cup of tea in the middle of the night, but her domestic worries duly fade as he asks, "Why do you stare?" (which is a bit rich considering that he hasn't blinked once) and she concedes, "How strong you've become!" All of the movies end somewhat abruptly after thirty minutes or so, with the hero well on his way to death, disappointment, or failure, while the voice-over intones that his legacy will "make history" and become recognized in due time.

Enjoyable for all the wrong reasons, these films must have provoked some considerable eye-rolling and snickering among the schoolchildren for whom they were intended. I watched the "History-Makers" with growing fascination just after reading *Undelivered Letters to Hudson's Bay Company Men on the Northwest Coast of America, 1830-57* (UBC P, 2003), edited by Judith Hudson Beattie, Keeper of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg between 1990 and 2003, and by scholar Helen Buss. Films and book make for enlightening juxtapositions. In contrast to the single-minded, although often deluded, determination of explorers to find specific trade routes, here are letters from parents who had only the vaguest notion where their sons were headed. "Fort Anchovy, Collambia" features alongside "Arctic Regions" and, my personal favourite, the "Backside of the world." The level of rhetorical accomplishment in explorers' narratives varies, of course, and in his magnificent chapter on exploration literature in Carl Klinck's *The Literary History of Canada*, Victor Hopwood praises the "dazzling illiteracy" of fur-trader Pierre-Esprit Radisson's narratives as a source of surreal poetry of sorts. The unorthodoxy of his English is, however, nothing compared to the obstacle course in spelling and grammar undertaken by these correspondents who had none of Radisson's connections or opportunities.

"My der," writes Ellenor Smith to her sweetheart, seaman John Coon, "Frind this Comes with My kind love to you hoping that thes fiou [few] liends [lines] will find you in good thellth [health] as it leves Me bout [but] very porley at present for My der Coun I have had a very havey MisCarrey [miscarriage] bout thank god i ham a getting beter noy." This and other other letters in the collection read like a script in a strangely familiar language, and

I found myself reading back and forth over a line and muttering the words until they made sense. Ellenor's spelling is so phonetic as to require frequent square brackets with annotations from the editors, but there is still plenty of challenge left. The stage dialects and portentous schemes of the "History-Makers" are here replaced by a rich chorus of regional dialects and the worries of ordinary people, inadequate as this description may be for a mother from Stromness, Orkney Islands who supported herself by opening a makeshift "hospital for twenty-six scurvy-ridden whalers." Driven by economic necessity, Margaret Humphreys's sons were scattered all over the globe (Halifax, Mexico, New Orleans, Hudson Bay), but troublesome as they had been, she was determined to keep their younger sibling Charles in line, exhorting him by letter not to give in to "Extravigance" and the bottle "like some of your Brothers."

News about extended families and entire villages is crammed into short letters, many of them cross-written, and some of them assume the entrancing cadences of a litany. Seaman John Flinn, stationed on the Columbia River, received an update on the professional endeavours of his acquaintances, among them one "John Kairnes," an "Undertaker and Vearynear Licenced." There was plenty of work for Kairnes because "Jhonathan Thomson he is in the W Indias his landlad[y] old Mrs Anderson is dead [.] Mr Ofield is dead [.] Thomas Caines the Wheate Chaff opposed to my House is dead [.]" and so on. In some of the letters the monotonous tally of death gives way to a crescendo when the passing of a loved one is described in agonizing detail for the benefit of the correspondent who could not be present. Although much of the writing, despite its fanciful orthography, remains formal in ways characteristic of infrequent letter writers, several also have delightful flashes of intimacy and wit. Thus, Margaret Simpson has to excuse herself from continuing her letter to her husband James because "the Babe is trubelsom" and a mother, hilariously, tries to lure her son home by reminding him that "little Careloine Taylor says she hopes you will soon come home to turn her Mangle."

Such notes, often accompanied by a lock of hair, would surely have been welcomed eagerly by the recipient had they ever been delivered. One can be fairly certain that this was not the case with the letter sent to Charles Baker by his new and solicitous brother-in-law, Charles Barrowcliff. In a frantic soliloquy that has all the drive of a Bloomian stream-of-consciousness, Barrowcliff evokes the dangers of melancholia: "conscience some times tells you that you are doing wrong but however you take another till the liquor

gets into your head & then you are as anxious to stop as any one else and you can hear or sing what you call the jovial song, you sink into a state of intoxication etc. etc.” However, there is a remedy, and Barrowcliff cites a whole page of suitable Biblical verse to fortify his relative. One all but sees him frothing at the mouth as his pen can barely keep up with the torrent of advice: “I was once a great sinner & God saved me & there is the same grace for me [crossed out] you as there is [crossed out] was for you [crossed out] etc.” The editors of *Undelivered Letters* sometimes express an appealing concern for some of the couples who become increasingly anxious and angry with each other as letter after letter fails to reach its destination. Equally appealingly, Beattie and Buss restrain their irony in their annotation on Barrowcliff’s tirade, merely finding it “[e]specially interesting.”

Although there are the occasional women and children in the wings, the “History-makers” are largely depicted as solitary men. Not so the letter writers. An entire family depends on the meagre earnings of Henry W. Harmsworth, an apprentice to the Hudson’s Bay, and he is reminded to “halp keep your Old Mother and sisters as we have no outhter Earthly Protector.” Failure to fulfill this duty landed families in serious difficulty. This was especially the case when Hudson’s Bay men entered a *mariage à la façon du pays* and as a result were under some pressure from the Company, if not their own conscience, to look after two families. In *Undelivered Letters*, most of the information on country wives and the appalling callousness with which they and their children were often abandoned appears in the editors’ annotations, but there is the occasional glimpse that women at home were aware of the practice and the potential competition for a salary. Mary Baker from Holborn was obliged to go into service to feed herself and her child because she had not heard from her husband, and she let him know that she was “very much Sopriced of you not Riting to me Sooner.” At least, Mary was assured respectability, but Ann Story had a child out of wedlock and complained to her brother at Fort Vancouver about the ruthlessness with which her former employer had turned her out “pennyless” and ruined her chances of finding work elsewhere. Ann had to seek shelter in her mother’s house, but “she makes me out the vilest of the vile.” There is much correspondence among siblings, and brothers and sisters become confidantes and substitute parents. Mary Humphries advises her brother Thomas Morrow that their sister Agnes has left the convent (“I got her out by Scheming unknown to Mother”), and dispenses parental advice about women who might want to ensnare him on his travels.

In Mark Starowicz's acclaimed CBC series *Canada: A People's History*, actors impersonating both the well-known and the obscure turn towards the viewer, citing from historical letters or journals as if the events described were happening in the very moment they speak. Unmediated by accomplished acting and requiring active participation from the reader, these "undelivered letters" to Hudson's Bay Men provide an even more immediate understanding of the many ways in which Canadian history can be recorded.

