

PRIVATE CHRONICLES IN PUBLIC PLACES

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AS AN INDUSTRIAL NATION Canada is renowned for its natural resources, but among the lesser-known materials of its literary wealth, manuscript diaries have seldom received much attention. The poor relation of life-writing, the diary has existed as a raw, imprecise literary form for some considerable time. In Canada, although a couple of centuries' worth of such manuscripts has accumulated, their presence is for the most part perhaps assumed but sadly neglected. Occasionally a diary draws attention to itself as a promising commodity — recall the headlines over a newly released Mackenzie King revelation or about the auction of Louis Riel's manuscript — but generally diaries fail to attract the academic investor (in either sense). The metaphor, of course, has more glitter than modesty, but this article will be outspokenly “bullish” in assuming that the diary, being so little known, generally has not had the scrutiny it merits and that it has potential for growth and even rich, literary dividends.

Part of the problem in the past may have been that old feeling of national inferiority, a sense that there were likely to be many epigones but no Pepys or Boswell or Woolf, or again, that no Canadian item could measure up to the attractions of journals kept by Hawthorne, Dana, or much less those by Anaïs Nin or Gide. All of which is a pity because since centennial year especially, Canadian diaries have been increasingly available both as manuscripts in archives and even as published books.

Even so, it is hard to dismiss the reflection that possibly neither the general public nor the academic community is aware of how many diaries are available for perusal or study in one form or another. Beyond the unique manuscript, that same diary is often to be seen as a typescript or carbon copy, as a xerox, or in microfilm and microfiche; and such copies may exist not only in the home archive but in distant archives and research collections elsewhere in the country. Yet the usual access is through its published version. Even here, though, one may need a very comprehensive guide to what is in print. Published diaries are often the enterprise of small presses, who are prone to regard their editions as parochial affairs unlikely

to generate large or far-flung sales. Hence knowledge of such works may depend on seeing a brief notice or advertisement in a regional journal such as *The Atlantic Provinces Book Review* or *The Saskatchewan Multicultural Magazine*.¹ Happily, established publishers have not wholly ignored diaries, so that exceptionally one notices that the fame of Charles Ritchie as diarist and award-winning author owes much to the initiative of Macmillan of Canada.²

Another part of the problem for the literary critic in approaching this sub-genre of literature has been an awareness of the mean status accorded diaries in the past. Even now they are too often regarded as the preserve of those who are interested in the work for their own special, if legitimate, ends. Thus, a social scientist may focus on a particular aspect of society as expressed through its diaries.³ Furthermore, the approach may even be restricted to territorial or sexist concerns.⁴ Yet again, diaries prized by local historians may be chock-full with facts about their community but otherwise dull and poorly written; similarly, genealogists seeking details of family history may enthuse over meagre trifles of prose; or the office or position of the writer may grant his diary an importance which is either ephemeral or false. Certainly, the diary of a somebody may disappoint just as easily as that of a nobody may please.

Diaries pose a special problem to readers because when published generally offer a filtered version of the original, and that resulting selection is invariably the result of another mind. So there is the critical problem of being able to study the published diary knowing only imperfectly how far the text is the result of the tact, finesse, skill (or guile) of the editor. What is offered for public perusal, then, may be a full or reasonably faithful rendering of the original, but for better or worse it may bear only a loose resemblance to, or even be a distortion of, the original manuscript. Writers who edit their own diaries for publication face severe temptations to delete the contemporary effusion, substitute the better phrase of hindsight, and otherwise mar the original diary's candour. This must be pressingly so where the essential task is one of condensing an overlong original. To amend would be all too human. And even editors, who are often descendants or family friends, may find that subtle strains of discretion lure them overpoweringly from scholarly rectitude. Such tinkering with original manuscripts by editors would be condemned where other art-forms are concerned; yet if the writer himself is making the changes, these may elsewhere (for example, in his poems or fiction) pass as desirable, manuscript revisions. But because the diary has such a special focus on the serial, day-by-day entries which constitute a form of autobiography, such meddling is unconscionable.

A fourth problem with the form, one which has confused readers and archivists alike, is the term and its imprecision. At one time a "diary" in English was considered a personal and private record, and a "journal" as a record of a more official kind. It may be tempting to keep the two words distinct, but in practice journals

and diaries have become interchangeable; one reluctantly acknowledges that nowadays one accessioning archivist's *journal* may be another's *diary*. The slipperiness of terminology is not the fault of archivists.⁵ There could be nothing more personal than the gossipy *Journals* of Benjamin R. Haydon;⁶ nor anything more impersonally official than the desk diaries, for example, of Joseph Frobisher, an early nineteenth-century Montreal businessman, which chiefly record where he dined out.⁷ By contrast, Charles Darwin's *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries visited during the Voyage of HMS "Beagle"* is by no means the dry scientific treatise its title might imply.⁸ It may not record with intimacy a pain in the left testicle (as Pepys does) or casual fruition on Westminster Bridge, "being so closely united with such a low wretch" (Boswell's phrase), but Darwin often includes delightful and amusing accounts of his own personal experiences during the voyage.⁹ The point to be taken, as William Matthews acknowledged a generation ago, is that a useful distinction between "diary" and "journal" no longer exists.¹⁰

Nor is that the sole difficulty of terminology, for to compound the problem many allied terms impinge on the diary-journal category. There are many pretenders, many misnomers, yet all are works of diary potential whose existence is obscured by other nomenclatures. Consider these for a moment: letter-journals, desk-diaries, family diaries, appointment books, field-notes, scrap-books, aides-memoire, memoranda, reminiscences, almanacks, family histories, farmer's journals, and perhaps most capacious of all, the term "logs." In Canada there are fur-trade post logs, lighthouse keeper's logs, but above all, naval logs: admirals', captains', masters', ships' logs — all have their diary-like roles. Public Archives of Canada, for example, has copies of 413 volumes of Admirals' logs of Canadian interest kept between 1702 and 1911; these generally contain entries made under headings of a utilitarian kind: place of ship at noon; headings of orders and letters received and written; the number of signals made to and from the ship; and another column — which is of wider interest — for remarks and occurrences. Secondly, captains' logs follow these headings: winds, course, distance, latitude, longitude, bearings, distance at noon, and — of crucial interest again — remarks and observations. Thirdly, there are the masters' logs, which include entries under the usual headings; the ship's master was the official log keeper, but his entries were often made by a master's mate and checked by the master, or made by the first lieutenant at the end of each watch. In this category is the "log" of Lieut. Peter Puget, kept aboard H.M.S. *Discovery* in the Pacific with Commander Vancouver in the 1790s.¹¹ In addition to the expected log-headings, Puget often included fuller remarks and observations, such as this in early May 1792, concerning an expedition in the ship's boats "& Remarks on Port Discovery," while anchored in "Juan de Fuca Streights." The party of exploration was seeking a possible harbour on the coast: "Not far from this Situation our Astonishment was much excited by a Sight so truly horrid

that it awakened all those Ideas that naturally crowd on the Imagination; of the Savage Customs and Manners of the Indians who inhabit these [?]extensive Countries. A Long Pole & two others of smaller Size were put upright in the Ground each having a Human Skull on its Top, through which the Poles Penetrated; these appeared to have been lately put thus, as the Hair & Flesh still adhered to the Bone, & though I have heard & read of this mode of Punishment in England, for . . . capital offences where it was necessary as an Example, by such an ignominious testimony of the Crime committed, that it should have a public Exposal to deter others from falling into the same snare, but here ignorant of the Motives which had caused the present unhappy fate of these three persons, it was therefore attributed more to the Barbarity of the Manners and Customs of the Indians, than to any [word illegible: ?Monetic] Punishment — though they [i.e., the murdered men] might have been Enemies or might have forfeited their Lives to the particular Laws under which they were governed. But these Considerations were now totally out of the Question. The Effect was judged without Knowledge of the Cause. On this Point we stopped to Dinner. Of a pleasant Situation it was, at the Back of the Beach which was low and sandy, was some Quantity of Low Land, well covered with verdure & on which were plenty of Gooseberry bushes & wild Roses.”¹² The range of comment here includes a blend of official and personal observations.

However, to dwell on “logs” thus is to illustrate the variety of possible diary-like materials. If the writer, even keeping his log or journal for official reasons, persistently manages to give the palimpsest impression that he is doing more than simply recording data — miles covered since yesterday noon, or even the number of pelts received at the fur-trading post — then there is the rudimentary diary. In other words, whereas the word “log” suggests an impersonal record, the diary element begins at the moment that the writer begins to involve his own feelings and sentiments. This is a useful critical litmus paper. Furthermore, it should be noted in passing that some components of the traditional diary’s form are, nevertheless, technically objective; for example, that frequent human habit of remarking on the weather — “sunny at first but cloudy in the afternoon” — conforms with the rôle of log-recorder, and few diaries are without such remarks. Only by recognizing an acknowledged looseness of labelling and by being willing to consider related forms as specimens of potential diaries may one hope to encounter the fullest range of the Canadian (manuscript) diary.

ALL THE REFERENCES in this article so far have been to English-language diaries. Beyond present concerns and belonging to other traditions there are in Canada extensive holdings of manuscript diaries written in French, especially those kept by seafarers and explorers, trappers and traders, mis-

sionaries and soldiers, Oblates and Jesuits, priests and nuns. Apart from these, the English-language Canadian materials occasionally have multilingual dimensions. Some diaries are only partly in English. For example, among journals of Moravian missionaries to Labrador in the late eighteenth century one can find mixed entries of English and German. In our own century and on western shores, some diaries of the Canadian-Japanese population mingle Japanese and English entries, and there are many other such permutations to be found where new immigrants find the diary a useful way of providing themselves with exercises in the new language. A more dashing blend of two languages is provided by a certain judge in British Columbia who in the manner of Pepys rather deceptively (or is it self-deceptively?) switches into French when recounting his amours (presumably illicit). More versatile again was a Canadian woman on a European tour in the last century who switched to entries in French while in Paris and to Italian while in Rome.

As Ponsonby noted years ago about English diarists, travel is a great fillip to journalizing.¹³ Since Canadians are tireless travellers, diaries kept in transit here or abroad have been plentiful. So impressions of the frontiers of the new land are by settlers on the banks of the Red River, at Canford Manor, at the Barr colony, or on Prince Edward Island, by opportunists in the Cariboo or Yukon goldfields, by surveyors of the 49th Parallel or the hinterlands of Ontario and Quebec, or again by scientists in the eastern or western Arctic. But many of the diarists are recording their experiences of the nearer sights and cities. There abound diaries kept by tourists abroad taking a fond look perhaps at the Scotland left behind in their own or in their forebears' childhood. Then again, there is that special category of travellers, Canadian soldiers, who fought in the Sudan, or in the South African War, or in two World Wars. Still extant are diaries kept by Canadians at the fall of Hong Kong, in German and Japanese prisoner-of-war camps, during the Normandy invasion, in the push through Italy, and at the struggle in the Ardennes. In short, one should recognize that what may otherwise appear to be "foreign" subject-matter may well have a strong Canadian component; such is the case with those diaries of officers in the Winnipeg Grenadiers who were responsible for the defence of Hong Kong in 1940, or among the journals of Canadian volunteers in the Royal Flying Corps serving in France. Whatever the reason for their travel, then, Canadians in past generations have been just as anxious to write down their impressions of distant provinces or other lands as contemporary Canadians are keen to record experiences of their own with cameras.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the monumental difficulty confronting the student of the diary is the lack of an adequate guide to those manuscript diaries which are extant. While it is true that with persistence one can find most diaries in print, unpublished diaries are seldom known outside the walls of their own repository.¹⁵ One recent, positive step in aiding scholars who wish to know more about the holdings of Canadian

research institutions has been provided by the University of Calgary Press's "Canadian Archival Inventory Series"; so far, volumes have been prepared which describe the papers of Hugh MacLennan, Alice Munro, W. O. Mitchell, Joanna Glass, Robert Kroetsch, and Rudy Wiebe. These, of course, include far more than diaries. For the specialized interest, one may need to start with the pioneer work, *Canadian Diaries and Autobiographies*, compiled by William Matthews.¹⁶ Matthews includes not only published and unpublished diaries but also narratives, reminiscences, memoirs, etc. But there are limitations, beyond the fact that he was collecting information forty years ago. The 'Preface' lists his exclusions: no French material prior to the Indian and French wars; no material relating to the old North-West or the Pacific Northwest (with some exceptions); no diaries of American visitors to Canada; no diaries of fur-traders who worked in what is now U.S. territory; no journals of world explorers or of Arctic explorers! Perhaps the largest limitation on Matthews's work, however, is that it appeared before the sense of Canadian nationhood, symbolized by its centennial year, had produced such a heightened awareness of the value of its manuscript heritage; in the intervening years archivists, local historians, amateur enthusiasts and the like, have been able to secure private chronicles which otherwise might have perished unread. Similarly, enlightened administration has allowed most federal, provincial and municipal archives better facilities, more space for storage, and positive policies of collection.¹⁷ Enthusiasm obviously varies from region to region, but one especially admires the work of several agencies on the Prairies, which possess that special awareness of how close their pioneer history is and of how easily fragile materials might disappear, like topsoil in a thirties' dust-storm; that part of Canada has made notable efforts to secure the manuscripts and artefacts of its past. The upshot of similar collection policies is that throughout the country there are today many more diaries available for perusal than Matthews could have known about. By no means are all the post-centennial year acquisitions by the public domain contemporary manuscripts; many are from the last century, and others older still.

Since *Canadian Diaries and Autobiographies*, other more local guides have appeared to aid diary seekers. Most provincial archives have some in-house means of directing researchers to diaries among their manuscript holdings; often this takes the form of descriptive lists of personal papers in major collections, though to my knowledge none (alas) keep an up-to-date card or computer index. More published bibliographical works on particular regions, like Bruce Peel's descriptive index of sources for study of the history of the Prairies, would be welcome.¹⁸ Probably the best general guide available currently is the series of volumes which make up the *Union List of Manuscripts in Canadian Repositories*.¹⁹ Even there, unless it happens to be the sole subject of the entry, the presence of a diary may not be apparent among the descriptions of other manuscripts.

B EING INTERESTED IN THE HISTORY of the diary as a genre in Canada over the past centuries, I began several years ago to collect and sift information on manuscript diaries in my Canadian Manuscript Diaries Project, surveying more than three hundred years of diary-writing in English.

The range was kept wide to include early diaries which had content that pertained to Canada even though the writers might have been from other countries; so there were no limits imposed regarding early materials, though the ideal cut-off date among modern diaries caused much hesitation. The original intention was to omit diaries which began after 1960 on the grounds that they would be too recent and presumably closed. However, some repositories are collecting works written in the last decade, and not all of these are restricted. Furthermore, among responses to my public appeals for information about diaries or from diarists, a number have been from current journalizers who have had no qualms about my reading or even publicizing their work. Some of these diaries were actually started a very long time ago and have occupied their keepers ever since. Among the most voluminous of such diaries are two that may be mentioned here. First, the diary of Father Bobilier, O.M.I., of Dawson City; he was still at work as an Oblate parish priest (and diarist) when I visited him in 1982; he is a keen student of Yukon history and its lore, and has kept journals, often supplemented with photographs, for over forty years.²⁰ Secondly, there is the diary of Harold E. Escott, who died in the fall of 1979 in his 98th year; it is now deposited in the Special Collections Department of the Library of the University of British Columbia.²¹ Entries begin when the young diarist was a soldier in India in January 1919, and the Curator told me that Escott was still journalizing in his nineties — clear testimony to the mania that is diary-writing. The overall result is that the Project has file cards on some diarists who are scribbling at this very moment.

Once flexible limits of chronology were determined, the Project was already in progress. It soon became clear that in Canada as elsewhere the diary has broadly a two-fold appeal. There is the extrinsic worth attached to the diary as a document, in the social-cum-historical sense of the word. Secondly, there is a potential intrinsic interest attached to the diary as a serial autobiography revealing the writer's personality.

Virtually all Canadian diaries have some extrinsic interest as sources of information. One thinks here for example of eyewitness accounts such as that provided by Henry Kelsey of the fall of HBC's Fort York to the French under Iberville in 1694, or those describing the seizure/defence of Louisbourg or Quebec in the eighteenth century. The North-West Rebellion engaged a number of the first Canadian soldier-diarists; both World Wars have produced a crop of diaries in our own century. But Canada's diaries are not wholly a matter of military diarists. One

might list a near-Homeric roll-call of explorers and fur traders whose diaries have survived: Sir Alexander Mackenzie (1764-1820), David Thompson (1770-1857), Simon Fraser (1776-1862), the Earl of Selkirk (1771-1820), Sir William Parry and Sir George Back. Likewise, to come closer to our own period, there are diaries of surveyor-explorers George M. Dawson or William Ogilvie, or of scientist-explorers like Vilhjalmur Stefansson and R. M. Anderson, or, to be more modern, the diaries kept by Inspector Henry Larsen during his command of the RCMP vessel *St Roch* as it made its successful voyage through the Northwest Passage in both directions during World War II.²²

Gentlemen of the cloth provide a vast stratum of diaries; missionaries of many denominations kept semi-official or personal diaries — these are often relative gold mines for genealogists and local historians. Quiet lives, too, are recorded which allow one to experience (albeit vicariously) something of the lives of very ordinary people. Many are by women who wrote little else, and so their diaries are especially interesting sources for students of feminine sensibilities.

One of the fascinations of the form is, of course, that occasionally people who have written seldom and perhaps nothing more than letters, are found to have tried to express themselves, however humbly or haltingly, in daily entries. Thus in the diary of Christina Bogart, for example, one may recapture something of the isolation and loneliness experienced by an adolescent in nineteenth-century, rural Nova Scotia.²³

By means of such diaries the social historian may reconstruct the minor details of life in past times. It is little wonder that in reconstructing Louisbourg, the Parks Canada historical unit amassed a large number of contemporary diaries (though mostly in xerox and microfilm). It is because state papers and other official, historical documents so often ignore the small, human details that older diaries are prized. Even the chit-chat of scandal found in some private diaries has some value.

By contrast, an approach which sees the diary as a literary object in its own right or as a distinct form of serial autobiography calls for degrees of subtlety. One may have to be alert to more than the surface story the diary tells; for example, the diary of Kenneth Chipman serving with the Canadian Arctic Expedition (1913-18) reports more than simply his workday life or the disaffection of the southern Party (under Dr. Rudolph Anderson) with Stefansson's leadership.²⁴ The attraction may lie, rather, in the personality of the diarist as he reveals it in what he records about himself and his friends, his own likes and dislikes, and the thousand and one petty incidents which make up the life of ordinary mankind.

A MORE SUBSTANTIAL DIARY altogether exemplary of the point is that kept by Canada's longest-serving Prime Minister — a later Gladstone

one might remark, since the English statesman was an avid diarist. After reading only a portion of Mackenzie King's diary, one almost knows him as a man, because King cumulatively recorded enough of the minutiae of his life to establish his own imprint.²⁵ Illustrating the virtues of an ample recording of events and reflections are Mackenzie King's early diaries in the 1890s, before he had become in any way famous. His diaries have the requisite length; the entries, though by no means uniform, are seldom less than two hundred words and often many more. While he was a student at the University of Toronto (and later at Harvard), he was a faithful recorder of his life's pattern, what he did and what he thought. The kaleidoscopic nature of his entries can only be sketched in the paragraphs which follow.

Mackenzie King as a young man noted his daily activities quite fully, so that one knows almost his hourly movements. One learns which lectures he attended at university, what reading he did for courses or for amusement; one learns of his recreations and sporting interests; one learns of his religious life and some of his internal conflicts.

In greater detail, this means that the reader can build up a sense of the diarist's life: King recorded which chapters of what books he was reading; he logged the progress of making extensive précis notes on textbooks and of discussions of key ideas with selected friends; he has left no doubt as to which professors are worthwhile, and after examination results had been posted he wrote of his disappointment with a second-class Honours, but later was pleased by an examiner's comments on his facility of written expression. In documenting his leisure reading, King specifies and reflects; thus one gathers that he was critical of Tolstoi's *Master and Man* and that he enjoyed George Eliot's *Romola*, finding the chapter about the old man and his daughter especially moving.

Furthermore, the diary shows a sporting side to King of which most people are unaware: his work-outs in the gym, enjoyment of swimming, attendance at rugger practices and matches in which he appeared in the 3rd xv. In the spring of 1894 he was elected first vice-president of the Varsity Cricket Club, though subsequent entries suggest his skill met with varied success: "I played cricket for the first time this year, bowled out first ball" (21 April 1894). The following month he was able to record an innings of 11 runs and the taking of "a good many wickets" — for once the specificity breaks down! His bowling may have been vicious, since in August that year in Muskoka he wrote: "I saw Prowse, the proprietor of the summer hotel . . . I gave him a black eye playing cricket at Bracebridge two years ago" (22 Aug. 1894). It is just possible (if less probable) that the black eye was accidentally caused by King's bat.

Gentler recreations at this time in his life include singing with the Glee Club, writing for the student magazine, dating girls and sometimes taking them on day excursions by steamer across the lake to Niagara. He also enjoyed the theatre, enthusing over a production of Tennyson's *Becket* starring Henry Irving and Ellen

Terry at the Grand Opera House. Being a keen actor, King actually played a small role in the production of *The Merchant of Venice*. He writes: "Did not get up until 11:15 this morning. Then I had a shave and had lunch after which I went down to the Grand Opera House to take a very subordinate part in *The Merchant of Venice*. I was a man in half-armour, appeared on the stage with Irving and Ellen Terry throughout the whole of the 4th Act. I had quite a pleasant little talk with Miss Terry. It is remarkable the ease of manner she displays both on and off the stage. I never saw such a splendid rendition of the part of Shylock as Irving gave. . . . It was well worthwhile being behind the scenes to see the way the scenes etc. were worked . . ." (21 Feb. 1894).

A persistent motif in the diary at this stage of King's life was his religious thoughts. He may have contemplated entering the ministry, but commonly the entries show a confessional nature as pure thoughts jostle with guilt. One Sunday in the Fall Term he wrote: "My present thoughts suggest that there is no life like a Christian's. I am going to seek to know more of Christ and try to live a better life" (15 Oct. 1893). Or again, this effusion at the close of 1893: "As I see the days of the year dying away I feel that my days are numbered. I hope to be able to do more for Christ, to love him more and more. I long for this above every thing in the world. I hope I may do much even before this year has run its course" (28 Dec. 1893). Such pious thoughts are interspersed with brief acknowledgements in the vein of "I committed a sin today which reminded me of my weakness" (26 Oct. 1893); or again, "I cried after coming home tonight. I felt very sorry for something I did last night. What sort of a man am I to become? is the question that is bothering me at present" (2 Feb. 1894). This conflict is unlikely to be simply a self-dramatized concoction of the diary nor is it necessarily a late sample of the diary being used as a spiritual account book in the Puritan tradition, whereby the diarist attempts a quasi-private breast beating. In King's case the struggle moves outside the diary, too; he threw himself into a number of good works, ranging from the attempted reform of a certain Mina Cameron on King Street to the frequent visits to the Sick Children's Hospital to read to the patients. The diaries also testify to the outward religious life, his church attendance, notes on sermons heard, praise for hymn-singing, and private Bible reading.

While King actively pursued "good works," the drama is heightened by the way in which he appears to practise temptation, too. The struggle continued for some time, and while in Boston for postgraduate work he maintained not only the good deeds, such as visiting a hospital in Cambridge to read to patients — an activity he specifically calls "good Christian Service" — but also the questionable habit of occasional visits to Turkish smoking dens and Chinatown, "to see how men and women were spending their lives" (22 Jan. 1898). The diarist addressed the problem in these terms: "There is no doubt I lead a very double life. I strive to do right and continually do wrong. Yet I do not do the right I do to make it a cloak

for evil. The evil that I do is done unwillingly, it comes of the frailty of my nature” (13 Feb. 1898). Here is one of the fuller accounts of an excursion into temptation: “Tonight I went with Edgell into Boston; we went to see the dark and seamy side; put in a while on Salem Street and then spent a good part of the time in the music halls on North Street. Went from there to Chinatown — nothing of interest, then to the Turkish casino and finally put in part of the time strolling about the streets. It was particularly sad to see so many bright and beautiful lives being destroyed, it was sad to see deplorable surroundings of the many poor. I felt a deep compassion for the poor and longed to be able to better their condition. Yet I was torn by other feelings, and was reminded I was as frail as any myself, I ran close to the edge of temptation but resisted. I did not fall, I came home feeling that evil was more hateful to me than ever and that somehow that good had gained the better part” (10 Feb. 1898). However Boswellian this may appear, one should not over-emphasize the tensions of the spiritual and the secular in the young Mackenzie King. With religious thoughts mingle the usual worries of a student, the details of work and play, so that cumulatively the diary does leave a many-sided, personal imprint, even though a very small segment of the diary has been sampled here.

Elsewhere in the journal there is evidence of the side of King’s personality which is popularly known: his interest in phrenology and mesmerism, his careful noting of curious incidents and superstitions. May a last quotation from his early diaries suffice, an entry dealing with his political and social aspirations — which in the light of subsequent events reads like a mix of Elijah, Carlyle, and a Joycean epiphany: “This afternoon I got a copy of the *Life and Times* of Grandfather [i.e., William Mackenzie] from the library. I spent the hour after lunch reading it instead of going to cricket. I read over parts oh! with what intensesness! cry! How could I help it feeling his every thought in my own breast. I never felt it could be done before. I see it now. With Miss B—— [presumably his current love] at my side I can stand out against all the world and stand I will. His voice, his words, shall be heard in Canada again and the cause he so nobly fought shall be carried on” (26 Feb. 1898).

The case for Mackenzie King as a remarkable diarist is not a difficult brief to argue; to choose his writing to make a case for the intrinsic value of life-writing is easy enough. By contrast, most diaries found in archives lack the glamour of this extraordinary and famous figure. Very, very few of the several thousand diaries which are being perused for an annotated listing in the Canadian manuscript diaries project were ever intended for public viewing. Most diarists covered by the Project would have been surprised, even embarrassed, if they had been told that someone in the future was likely to direct attention towards their manuscripts. The majority of the diarists are unknowns — some indeed are now anonymous — and they are usually very local; they tend to be rural and brief of utterance; a

large number are unlettered, their memory temporarily assured only by their surviving pages.

TO COMPLEMENT THE KING DIARY, consider the diary of James Reid, a pioneer in rural eastern Ontario.²⁶ A farm diary is very utilitarian, a sporadic testimony to a diurnal grind dominated by weather and work. This farmer lived all his life on Lot 15, west half, Concession # 2, Dalhousie Township. His surviving diaries, 1861-1881, laconically record the major events on his farm and in his family, occasionally local events — these tend to be deaths and funerals — school meetings and church affairs, some local prices and details of produce yields; moreover, he rarely uses more than five lines for a day's entry. He was no village Hampden, but a man who served as township Treasurer for fourteen years and who was a locally respected judge of seed grains and farm produce. He was versatile: a farmer who mended shoes, repaired clocks, and who was instrumental in building the local school. The diary is repetitious, though cumulatively informative and not without its pathos. The March 15, 1881, entry reads: "Pretty hard frost this morning but another beautiful, clear, warm, sunny, spring-looking day." The next day's final words are, "I am still keeping better," but a later hand has added that that very day the diarist died of a paralytic stroke. Through the careful, dignified words of Reid's last entries one surely catches something of an indomitable, cheerful, pioneer spirit.

Not all of the shadowy diarists manage to leave such an impression, of course. But one *is* surprised by moments of telling utterance where the arresting words have been chosen, where the phrasing is felicitous, and the sentence lingers in the mind. At such times even the most untutored diarist has made his personal imprint.

It should now be clear why the diary ought to be more often seen in its manuscript habitat and why the archival repositories of Canada should be applauded for their active role in conserving the species. The achievement may not always be of the order that can confidently recall the diary of Malcolm Bradbury's phrase: "an existential confusion, a present-tense, hour-by-hour, emotion-by-emotion record of interaction with changing time, a tale of exposed intelligent life." Rather, the writing quality does vary; but an abundance of manuscript diaries does exist for those interested in enlarging their knowledge of the written, collective expression of Canadian consciousness. The goal of this manuscript diaries project is that the literary harvest of the Canadian self revealed should be bountiful. There is, of course, much dross and little enough gold among diaries; it may well be that sceptical readers will have suspected that enthusiasm in the preceding remarks has been akin to the alchemist's. Yet life-writing is surely worthy of a sustained investment of academic time and energy — it may even be poised to make gains in the literary stock-market!

NOTES

- ¹ *The Atlantic Provinces Book Review*, ed. Kenneth McKinnon, is a quarterly review of books published by St. Mary's University, Halifax; *The Saskatchewan Multicultural Magazine*, ed. Avra Watson, is published by the Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan, Regina.
- ² Charles Ritchie, *The Siren Years, 1937-1945* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977). Other published selections of his diaries are: *Appetite for Life, The Education of a Young Diarist, 1924-1927* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1981); *Diplomatic Passport: More Undiplomatic Diaries, 1946-1962* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1983); *Storm Signals, More Undiplomatic Diaries, 1962-1971* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1985).
- ³ Paul C. Rosenblatt, *Bitter, Bitter, Tears: Nineteenth-Century Diarists and Twentieth-Century Grief Theories* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983); his blurb records that "nineteenth-century diaries are valuable because they provide a more finely textured record than other research materials."
- ⁴ To cite but two specimens of these special interest guides: *Planting the Garden: An Annotated Bibliography of the History of Women in Manitoba*, comp. Mary Kinnear and Vera Fast (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 1986); Margaret Conrad, *Recording Angels: The Private Chronicles of Women from the Maritime Provinces of Canada, 1750-1950*, CRIAW Papers No. 4 (Ottawa: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 1982).
- ⁵ Though this fault is not of archivists' making, someone at the National Library of Canada might look more closely at its computer-based DOBIS index, where under the subject-searches for diaries currently there appear a number of dairy reports!
- ⁶ *The Autobiography and Journals of Benjamin Haydon, 1786-1846*, ed. Malcolm Elwin (London: MacDonald, 1950).
- ⁷ Diaries of Joseph Frobisher (1740-1810): PAC, MG 19 A 5 vol. 4. (Originals at McGill University Library, Special Collections and Rare Book Room.)
- ⁸ Charles Darwin, *Diary of the Voyage of H.M.S. "Beagle,"* ed. Nora Barlow (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1933).
- ⁹ *The Diary of Samuel Pepys, A New and Complete Transcription*, 10 v., ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970-83); *Boswell's London Journal: 1762-63*, ed. Frederick Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1950), pp. 255-56.
- ¹⁰ William Matthews, *British Diaries: An Annotated Bibliography of Diaries Written Between 1442 and 1942* (1950; Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1967), p. xv.
- ¹¹ Peter Puget, "A Log of the Proceedings of H.M.S. *Discovery*" (4 Jan. 1791-14 Jan. 1793): PAC, MCF B 832. (Originals: PRO, Adm. 55/27.)
- ¹² Puget, "A Log," Monday, 7 May 1772.
- ¹³ Arthur Ponsonby, *British Diarists* (London: Ernest Benn, 1930), p. 27.
- ¹⁴ See, for example, Eva-Marie Kröller, "Nineteenth-Century Canadians and the Rhine Valley," in *Gaining Ground*, ed. Robert Kroetsch (Edmonton: NeWest, 1985), pp. 234-46.
- ¹⁵ John S. Batts, "Seeking the Canadian Pepys," *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979-80), 125-39.
- ¹⁶ William Matthews, *Canadian Diaries and Autobiographies* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1950).

- ¹⁷ A more sober account, with an international perspective, is given by Grace Maurice Hyam, "The National Manuscript Inventory," *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979-80), 195-207.
- ¹⁸ Bruce Braden Peel, *A Bibliography of the Prairie Provinces to 1953* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1953). This work was revised and updated in an edition of 1973. Currently Alison Peel Nussbaumer (Library Science, University of Calgary) is creating a data base for a supplement.
- ¹⁹ *The Union List of Manuscripts in Canadian Repositories*, rev. ed. (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1975); and there are now four *Supplements* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1976-1985).
- ²⁰ Private possession of diarist, Rev. Bobilier, o.m.i., The Rectory, St. Mary's Church, Dawson City, Yukon.
- ²¹ University of British Columbia Library, Special Collections Division, Harold Escott Papers, AXA 7/3 Boxes 1-8, 10.
- ²² McGill University Library, Special Collections and Rare Books, the diaries of George Mercer Dawson (1849-1901); (2) PAC, MG 30 B 22, the diaries of William Ogilvie (1846-1912); (3) PAC, MG 30 B 81 vols. 1 & 2, the diaries of Vilhjalmur Stefansson (1879-1962); (4) PAC, MG 30 B 40 vol. 17, the diaries of Rudolf Martin Anderson; (5) PAC, MG 30 B 75 vol. 3, the diaries of Henry Asbjorn Larsen (1899-1964).
- ²³ PAC, MG 55/29 no. 80, the diary of Christina Grace Bogart, of Granville Ferry, Nova Scotia, 1880-82.
- ²⁴ PAC, MG 30 B 66, the diaries of Kenneth Gordon Chipman (1884-1974).
- ²⁵ PAC, MG 26 J 13, the diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King, 1893-95.

READING

Susan Glickman

It was what I'd been waiting for almost forever, when the letters danced together to make sounds, the sounds I heard in my head, or anyone's. When I first realized I was doing it I thought I was cheating, borrowing the "ook" from "book" to make "took" and "look," like copying someone else's tree in my drawing instead of making up my own: central pillar, three branches, a pillowy crown, five apples. Shouldn't each word have its own special, its own personal letters? But there could never be enough letters, enough angles and curves and loopy loops, to make all the words I knew and those I didn't know yet but would. And so I learned the economy of language, to borrow and copy and make do, remaking meaning. Someone else's tree in my drawing, curly smoke from the chimney, two windows, tulips all around. "Look" what I "took" from the "book!"