

KATHRYN CARTER

## An Economy of Words: Emma Chadwick Stretch's Account Book Diary, 1859-1860

Tues 2 Felt rather better but fear I've lost my hearing baby no better weaned him altogether.

– Emma Chadwick Stretch,  
2 August 1859

EMMA ANN CHADWICK STRETCH kept a diary between 1859 and 1860.<sup>1</sup> It begins a few years after she emigrated from Britain to rural Prince Edward Island, with her husband, Joseph, his sister Sarah, her husband Critchlow Harris and their respective children. The Stretches settled on a farm a few miles south of Charlottetown, near Long Creek, while the Harrises ultimately took up residence in Charlottetown.<sup>2</sup> The Harris experience of this move and the challenge of building new lives in Prince Edward Island has been well-documented. In part this is because Critchlow and Sarah Harris's famous sons, Robert and William, have been the subject of biographies.<sup>3</sup> As well, it is because the Harrises left a self-consciously fulsome correspondence that charts their experience in the New World. Much of what we know of the Stretches, and particularly Emma, is derived from this correspondence and is coloured by Critchlow Harris's antagonism towards her. Emma's record, in the form of her diary, has received little attention. This is understandable, as the diary is

1 This paper could not have been written without the help of Harry Holman and Charlotte Stewart who responded individually in their capacities as archivists at the Public Archives and Record Office of Prince Edward Island [PARO], David Annandale who helped with the research, and Monica Russell y Rodriguez and Roxane Head Dinkin who were very attentive and supportive readers. The diary and account book of Emma Chadwick Stretch is in the Stretch family fonds, file 2540/1, PARO.

2 Although his first name was "William" most references to William Critchlow Harris, senior, refer to him by his middle name. The Stretches may have had the funds to purchase their farm outright, suggesting that they were not poor immigrants on arrival. Charlotte Stewart, Personal correspondence, 10 November 1995; J.H. Meacham & Company, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Province of Prince Edward Island* (Philadelphia, 1880), pp. 135-6; Moncrieff Williamson, *Island Painter: The Life of Robert Harris, 1849-1919* (Charlottetown, 1983), p. 22.

3 Robert Harris was a noted artist whose paintings include "The Fathers of Confederation" and "A Meeting of the School Trustees". William was a prominent architect. Moncrieff Williamson, *Robert Harris: 1849-1919* (Charlottetown, 1973) and *Island Painter*; Robert C. Tuck, *Gothic Dreams: The Life and Times of a Canadian Architect William Critchlow Harris 1854-1913* (Toronto, 1978).

Kathryn Carter, "An Economy of Words: Emma Chadwick Stretch's Account Book Diary, 1859-1860", *Acadiensis*, XXIX, 1 (Autumn 1999), pp. 43-56.

flatly narrated. It is an account-book diary: the sort of hybrid form described by folklorist Marilyn Motz and historian Terry Crowley containing both account-book entries and some narrative of daily events however briefly stated, the two types of entries being interspersed or formally separated.<sup>4</sup>

Diaries of this type have often been overlooked by scholars because they seem inexpressive and opaque. Cynthia Huff, for example, an authority on 19th-century British women's diaries, has stated her preference for diaries that "speak to us without the need of a mediator", those that are "accessible" and can be used to levy arguments against "an authority who . . . initiate[s] us into the mysteries of the text".<sup>5</sup> Emma's diary and others like it (prevalent at roughly the same historical moment), are not easy to understand. They are, however, a richer source than they might initially seem. Emma Stretch's diary is short on words and description, indeed strikingly so by comparison with the writings of the Harrises; like other account-book diaries, it is not immediately forthcoming; it cannot speak to us without the need of a mediator. Nonetheless, a close reading of this text can help us better understand the texture of women's lives in the 19th century.

To make effective use of such sources, scholars need to learn how to navigate the ellipses and compressions found in this form of writing. As well, we need to accept that account-book diaries such as Emma's are uninformed by — or at least inattentive to — cultural contexts that would urge their authors to make a claim for an inner life disengaged from the material world.<sup>6</sup> Emotions are not the central concern of Emma's diary nor the pivot upon which meaning turns. Her writing demonstrates an economy of words that is guided by an internal system of organization, informed primarily by her social interactions and material transactions. Emma, who is not wasteful or profligate when it comes to managing the household economy, is equally parsimonious with words in daily diary entries. Her word choices are frugal. Her writing interweaves social happenings with more mundane record keeping, chronicling her participation in the rural economy and revealing her contributions to the Stretch family's successful adaptation to settler life. But it does more than this, as its textual presentation, and that of other diaries like it, suggests something of the

4 Marilyn Ferris Motz, "Folk Expressions of Time and Place: 19th-Century Midwestern Rural Diaries", *Journal of American Folklore* 100, 396 (April - June 1987), p. 134; Terry Crowley, "Rural Labour", in Paul Craven, ed., *Labouring Lives: Work and Workers in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto, 1993). Emma's diary with its record of accounts and of yearly work was, perhaps, kept to be consulted as needed; why it survived beyond this immediate function is hard to tell. Archivist Charlotte Stewart speculates in correspondence with the author, 10 November 1995, that Stretch's family may have preserved it in order to maintain her memory: "I cannot say for certain, but it appears . . . that Mrs. Stretch died at age fifty-three, relatively early, and perhaps the volume was treasured by the family for sentimental reasons". If the diary had not survived, few other historical records could give us insight into the texture of daily life for this farmer's wife.

5 Cynthia Huff, "That Profoundly Female, and Feminist Genre: The Diary as Feminist Practice", *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 3-4 (Fall/Winter 1989), p. 6. See also Cynthia Huff, *British Women's Diaries: A Descriptive Bibliography of Selected Nineteenth-Century Manuscripts* (New York, 1985).

6 For example, British culture in the mid-19th century pressured women's diary writing to adapt to a newly formulated public/private dichotomy mediating channels of distribution for the written word. Consequently, the content of "private" diaries and the uncertain boundaries of their circulation was a subject of some anxiety. For discussion see Kathryn Carter, "The Cultural Work of Diaries in Mid-Century Victorian Britain", *Victorian Review*, 23, 2 (Winter 1997), pp. 251-67.

values and concerns of the author.

The basic chronology of Emma's life can be established with genealogical records. She was born in Britain in 1820 and died in Prince Edward Island on 16 March 1873. She is buried in St. Thomas's Anglican cemetery in Long Creek beside her husband, who died in 1896. The decision that brought Emma and Joseph Stretch to Prince Edward Island had much to do with the thinking of Critchlow Harris, to whom generous historians refer as a "dreamer", although his published letters reveal a desultory and restless nature given to extremes of optimism and pessimism. As a young man, Critchlow expected an inheritance to secure his life as an upper-class gentleman; it failed to materialize. He had never wanted to move from his beloved Wales, but a lack of business acumen compelled him to look for work throughout England. Finally, in desperation, he turned towards British North America in search of some situation that would support his family. When he made an initial investigative tour of America in 1854 he did not visit Prince Edward Island. He was impressed with Canada West but worried about rising land prices. He eventually chose the Island because he was favourably influenced by a chance encounter with a Newfoundlander who thought very highly of it, and because he was won over completely by a Charlottetown merchant who happened to be in Liverpool the day that Harris booked his passage.<sup>7</sup>

Critchlow's whim at the dock took two families to their fates in Prince Edward Island, for at some point during the planning, he managed to convince Joseph Stretch to join him on his adventure. On 7 September 1856, the two families left Liverpool on the *Isabel*. The Stretches, with their five children, embarked on the voyage with Critchlow and Sarah Harris, and their seven children, a tutor and his wife, and a servant named Jane. Sarah had a five-month-old daughter. Emma's youngest child, William, was less than ten months old. They all shared one cabin, sleeping two and three to a bed, and arrived in Charlottetown on 10 October. Critchlow brought with him a spinet piano, "a large dining room table, a handsome Gothic chair, a two-piece chest made of mahogany with brass fittings . . . a brass bedstead and a large glass-fronted bookcase", anticipating his future career as a gentleman farmer in the New World.<sup>8</sup>

Within weeks of their arrival, Emma recognized their last minute decision to go to Prince Edward Island was propitious. One of her early letters to England exclaims: "I quite rejoice at the exchange we have made".<sup>9</sup> The two families lived together initially, but following a dispute (or perhaps a series of disputes) between Emma and Critchlow, the Harrises moved to Charlottetown.<sup>10</sup> The point of contention is unclear. Emma does not refer to any ill feelings towards Critchlow in her diary written three years later, but she reveals in an early letter to England her thoughts on his restlessness: "Critchlow is as unsettled as ever; in fact, I think we shall be obliged to tether him to keep him from setting off to Canada".<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in early 1857 Critchlow

7 For information on the migration, see Williamson, *Island Painter*, pp. 13-17.

8 Robert Critchlow Tuck, *The Island Family Harris: Letters of an Immigrant Family in British North America, 1856-1866* (Charlottetown, 1983), pp. 5-6, 39-45; Williamson, *Island Painter*, pp. 13-14, 19; "Farm Families of the Century: A Prince Edward Island Centennial '73 Project", PARO.

9 Tuck, *Island Family Harris*, p. 47.

10 The move was in 1858: Tuck, *Gothic Dreams*, p. 16.

11 Tuck, *Island Family Harris*, p. 46.

was fretting. “It was a bad day’s work when I fixed to come to this place”, he wrote, “I ought to have gone to Canada”.<sup>12</sup> Some of his complaints about the new country concerned his relationship with Emma. In the same letter he writes: “It is a hard case to be in a strange country without means and friends. Yes, I say without friends, because those relatives that accompanied us have behaved unkindly, particularly the sister-in-law to Sarah”.<sup>13</sup> Six months later, he was still grumbling: “I am afraid you seem to think that I am the cause of all the unpleasantness between Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Stretch and myself. I can conscientiously say that this is not the case. . . . I shall be civil to him, and do all in my power to help him, but as to his wife, I shall never take any notice of her”.<sup>14</sup> Robert Tuck, Critchlow’s grandson, addresses this tension in his edited collection of Sarah and Critchlow Harris’s correspondence, noting that the “peppery natures of both Critchlow and Emma” led to inevitable tensions.<sup>15</sup>

After they parted ways, the two families saw each other at roughly 12- or 18-month intervals. While the Harris family remained in penurious circumstances in and around Charlottetown, the Stretches prospered in a rural setting, developing a farm on the banks of the Elliott River which remains in the family to this day. Robert Tuck speculates that “Joe was much better suited to Prince Edward Island than was Critchlow”, but it was not just Joe who made the transition go smoothly.<sup>16</sup> Emma’s diary charts the progress of their prosperity, keeps careful account of their finances and reveals her participation in a barter economy which facilitated her family’s successful adaptation to rural island life.

Emma Stretch was 39 and the mother of five when she began her diary, a book with lined pages that she brought from England.<sup>17</sup> Children scribbled and practised forming letters on the back inside cover. In some cases they wrote over sums totalled in Emma’s hand, and there are doodles on half-empty back pages. Entries are written in varied qualities of ink and in pencil. Most seem to have been completed at one sitting, judging by the uniformity of the handwriting. The date of each daily entry is recorded in the left margin with generally the number and weekday only (e.g. “28 Mon”). At the top of each page, Emma provides a running header with the month (“March 1859”) and notes the start of each new month at the appropriate entry (“April 1st”). The last several pages of the diary contain household accounts; a right hand margin provides the proper ruling for a financial ledger. These accounts at the end of the diary — running to roughly 11 pages — are apportioned one to a page, and many are now dog-eared and water-stained. A few odd accounts appear in the body of the text, and, quite often, daily entries contain references to material transactions. In tabular accounts at the back of the diary and in marginal annotations throughout the diary, Emma keeps a running tally of what her family buys, what they lend to others and how much she has on account with local merchants. The accounts are labelled: “Tea given on trust”, “Mrs. D. McEachern tea a/c”, “Mr Knight a/c”, “Contra Henry Knight”, “Contra” and “McPhael’s tea a/c”. The account headed “Contra” records those who

12 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

17 Charlotte Stewart, personal correspondence, 10 November 1995.

receive tea from Emma. Her accounts note two different domestic servants who began work with the family in 1859, evidence that the Stretches were financially comfortable by that time. Sarah (with no surname) arrived 15 June, and after she left in August Emma replaced her with Kathy McEachern, at the same rate of pay. The diary notes the amount of time the women worked and tallies debits Emma charged against their wages. For example, Emma charged Sarah for a (broken?) dish and two pence for some hairpins. Emma's accounts also record the family's purchases of goods — "bath lozenges", tobacco, rum, candles and pork. Certainly the Stretches did not begin rural life at a subsistence level; three years after arrival in Prince Edward Island, they had enough money to buy luxuries and hire servants to help keep their home operating smoothly.

The entries in Emma's diary chart her role in the exchange of labour and goods that helped secure the family's financial well-being. The entry from Saturday 2 July 1859 is typical: "Sat 2nd: Angus McCammon's girl called Josy gave her 8s for mending harrows. Lent Grace Knight a pint of rum. Mr. Hodgson called no letters paid Miss McKenzie 3/ for making Emmeline's frock". As in many of her entries, the focus is on social interactions and material transactions. In this example specifically, Emma's diary shows underpinnings of a primarily female economy at work in mid-19th-century rural Prince Edward Island: Emma's son Josy is paying Angus McCammon's daughter for mending the harrows; Miss McKenzie is paid for her sewing skills; Grace Knight, as usual, is lent a pint of rum for, in exchange, Emma regularly receives butter from the Knights. That Emma borrows butter may mean that, at this point, the Stretch farm has no dairy cows and that the Stretches rely on the Knights for butter. In return, Emma exchanges less usual foodstuffs such as rum (which she buys) and tea.

Emma swaps rum for butter, but tea is her primary method of payment.<sup>18</sup> The following entries from 1859 record all of the exchanges involving tea:

18 April: Grace Blue here let her have 1/2 lb. of tea took fat etc. to make soap for me also Chad's trousers.

23 April: Grace Blue made me 14 lbs of soap. Paid her 1/9 in tea.

27 April: [G]ave Peggy Blue 2/8 worth of tea to pay Grace for soap.

24 May: Gave Grace Blue 1/2 lb of tea for a pair of socks and 2 collars she remained all night to mind baby for me.

30 May: Donald McFale called and paid me 5/3 for tea.

1 July: Mr. and Mrs. McEachern here to tea and got a 1 lb of tea, 3/6.

18 Evidence of 19th-century bartering by women in the Maritimes is also found in Mary Bradley's memoir *A Narrative of the Life and Christian Experience of Mrs. Mary Bradley* (Boston, 1849). The New Brunswick writer set up a loom in her home and exchanged cloth for "such trade as was suitable for our family's use, which made payment easy to my customers". For a discussion of this memoir, see Margaret Conrad, "'Sundays Always Make me Think of Home': Time and Place in Canadian Women's History", in Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro, eds., *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia* (Victoria, 1984), pp. 1-16.

14 July: Grace Blue brought a doz. eggs and sat a hen. She also got 1/4 of tea paid.

7 November: Blue girls called let them have 1 lb of tea to pay for potatoe getting.

In exchange for tea, Emma hires out her sewing, knitting, child care and soap-making; she employs potato diggers; she receives soap and eggs. Tea is currency in a barter economy, but it is also an integral part of her social life, for other entries show that taking tea with neighbours is one of Emma's most frequent social events. Indeed, tea sometimes necessitates these interactions, as with neighbour Donald McFale on 30 May or the McEacherns on 1 July. Tea is important both for material transactions and social interactions — but that does not mean it can be simply differentiated as commodity or comestible. Tea-taking facilitates the connections that ensure Emma's involvement with those who have goods and services to offer in return.

Emma pays attention to tea supplies during the first half of 1859 because she is unsure when to expect the next shipment. The brief phrase “no letters” in the passage from 2 July (the one which begins with Angus McCammon's daughter) alludes to her expectation of a reply or a shipment of tea from her brother-in-law, Tom Stretch. This phrase — without any verbs or adjectives that might give it meaning — can be used as a point of entry into one of the submerged narratives that winds through Emma's diary. By the beginning of July, Emma's husband has written at least two letters to his brother. She records on 22 April that “Joe wrote to his brother Tom”, and her son, Chad, posted the letter the next day. Again on 10 June Emma reports that “Joe wrote to his brother”, and on 12 June she “took the letters for the post”. There are no other letters mentioned in the previous four months, so although they may be hoping for other family news, it seems they are waiting to hear from Tom. If Emma does not hear from Tom she does not know when to expect her next shipment of tea. “No letters” equals no news of tea and, in a worst-case scenario, perhaps no tea. Tellingly, there are no records of tea payments after 14 July. This might indicate that she ran out of tea, and her redoubled efforts to contact Tom in June might have reflected her realization that she was running out. The expected tea shipment did not arrive until 5 November, nearly six months after she posted her first letter. On that day, Emma noted that two friends brought back “goods from Isabel”, the ship that plied the waters between England and Prince Edward Island and the same ship that brought Emma over. After this shipment of unnamed goods, her accounts record a flurry of tea transactions. In the entry for 7 November, cited above, she resumes her practice of paying the Blue girls with tea, giving them one pound in return for “potatoe getting”, and the column labelled “Contra” at the back of the diary listed many paid in tea after 5 November.

Emma's tea bartering reveals an economic strategy more focused and more successful than that of the Harrises who had the same opportunity to take advantage of Tom Stretch's help. We know from Robert Tuck's biography of William Harris that Tom sent some goods to Critchlow and Sarah Harris during 1859; although Critchlow tried to sell the drygoods, he decided that groceries were a better commodity and sold the whole shipment “almost intact”.<sup>19</sup> Instead, the Harrises

19 Tuck, *Gothic Dreams*, p. 16.

gratefully received unrequested monetary gifts from their Grandmother Guest and apologetically requested help from others.<sup>20</sup> The two families' divergent approaches to economic survival suggest that it was more than "peppery natures" that led to the conflicts between Emma Stretch and Critchlow Harris: their financial undertakings reveal completely different approaches to survival in the New World and different orientations to life. Critchlow the dreamer expected a quick and dramatic rise to fortune and became frustrated when it did not happen immediately; practical Emma slowly but surely contributed to the establishment of a viable and successful farm by charging her domestic help two pence for hairpins, bartering with locals for services and keeping careful track of it all in her diary.

Emma's carefully chosen words reflect a network of meaning and narrative, of connections, plans and community norms. It can be compared to the voluminous but similarly sparsely-worded diaries of 18th-century American midwife Martha Ballard, recently interpreted by historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. The problem for future readers, as Ulrich notes, is not that such diaries are inexpressive but rather that "they [introduce] more stories than can easily be recovered and absorbed"<sup>21</sup>— all this from a format considered too reticent to yield much information. Like other 19th-century men and women, Emma used her diary "to record expenditures and calculate profits, as well as to note farm work, weather, and crop yields to aid in planning future seasons".<sup>22</sup> She kept track of how much the family was owed and how much they owed, how many hours of work were performed by hired domestic help and how much food was coming into the house.

Such a practical undertaking was endorsed by the *Canadian Farmer* on 15 February 1869, but this purpose for making diary entries has been obscured by 20th-century notions of diary-writing as introspective and therapeutic. There are other diaries like Emma Stretch's written at roughly the same time in Canada. Queen's University and the University of New Brunswick hold, respectively, the "diary and expense book" of a Mrs. McLachlan circa 1840 and the 1859-62 account-book diary of Fanny Brigantine Palmer. Upper-class Amelia Ryerse Harris, whose extensive diaries have been published by the Champlain Society, includes 12 pages of accounts at the back of her 1854-56 volume.<sup>23</sup> Her practical daughter-in-law, Lucy Ronalds Harris, from a farming background, begins recording domestic expenses in a diary given to her by her brother-in-law in 1868 and keeps up with her accounting until 1895.<sup>24</sup> Other examples are found later in the century. Queen's University Archives holds the account-book diary of Mrs. Boothe, a farm wife in Metcalfe, Ontario, written between 1897 and 1898. Mary Beatty, homesteading in the Melfort District of what would become Saskatchewan, kept a joint account-book diary with her husband, Reg, from 1885 to 1898. The Beatty collaborative diary included information about weather, farm work, her menstrual cycle and seed prices before it was taken over by

20 Williamson, *Island Painter*, p. 22.

21 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York, 1990), p. 25.

22 Motz, "Folk Expressions", p. 134.

23 Robin S. Harris and Terry Gonçalves Harris, eds., *The Eldon House Diaries: Five Women's Views of the 19th Century* (Toronto, 1994), p. 40.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 417.

a son who used it for school exercises.<sup>25</sup> Rebecca Chase Kinsman Ells of Nova Scotia kept an account-book diary between 1901 and 1906 while her husband went off to the Yukon to search for gold.<sup>26</sup>

Some 19th-century manufacturers marketed diaries specifically for accounting purposes. “The Improved Housekeeper’s Diary or Register of Family Expenses” compiled in the 1870s by Dawson, Foster and Company was formally arranged as an account book with columns to indicate weekly expenditures on medical attendance, coal and wood, and postage stamps, for example.<sup>27</sup> Commercially produced diaries available in the mid-western United States in the mid-19th century were ostensibly designed for businessmen, incorporating “the distances between major US cities, current interest rates, postage rates, and other information relating to a national network of commerce”, but the form was easily adapted and “served as account books for all aspects of life, recording births, deaths, holidays, and visits as well as expenditures and work completed”.<sup>28</sup> These may have been the forerunners to today’s Daytimers and Filofax planners.

Although scholars have noticed evidence of financial accounting in diaries written by women in the 19th century, diaries that focus on spiritual accounting are more well-known. In Emma’s immediate context, her sister-in-law Sarah Harris kept a letter journal and wrote letters that were more concerned with spiritual issues. A telling counterpoint to Emma’s writing style, Sarah’s writing is fueled by a search for the religious significance of life events. Notable religious diarists include Hannah Chapman Backhouse who kept a Quaker diary between 1804 and 1850 when she lived in Upper Canada. Backhouse used it not only to contemplate her relationship with God, but to record her tentative participation in social activism with women such as Elizabeth Fry and the Grimké sisters.<sup>29</sup> Another well-known spiritual diary of Canadian origin written during the 1820s and 1830s is that of Eliza Ann Chipman, who began a journal at the age of 16 at the urging of a Baptist minister. Three days before she died, she revealed the existence of the diary to her husband, who was also a Baptist minister, and asked him to publish it to help others in their spiritual journey.<sup>30</sup> More numerous were those diarists responding to religion’s resurgent popularity in Canada West during the 1850s and 1860s, such as Lydia Clark Symmes of Ottawa, who kept a spiritual diary in the 1850s, or Catherine Bell van Norman of

25 Barbara Powell, “Discourse and Decorum: Women’s Diaries in Nineteenth-Century Canada”, in Uma Parmeswaran, ed., *Quilting a New Canon: Stitching Women’s Words* (Toronto, 1996), pp. 342-3.

26 Margaret Conrad, Toni Laidlaw and Donna Smyth, eds., *No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women, 1771-1938* (Halifax, 1988), p. 205.

27 Dawson, Foster and Co., compilers. *The Improved Housekeeper’s Diary or Register of Family Expenses: adapted for any year and commencing at any time*, (Toronto, [1870 ?]). Its format speaks not only to a focus on household accounting but also to the malleability of the term “diary” (a meaning which persists in the British use of “diary” to refer to appointment books with hour-by-hour daily schedules).

28 Motz, “Folk Expressions”, pp. 134-6.

29 Hannah Chapman Backhouse, *Extracts from the Journals and Letters* (n.p., 1858), pp. 40, 106.

30 Her husband privately published her diary, written between 20 July 1823 and 6 August 1837, in Halifax in 1855. It has since been republished: Eliza Ann Chipman, *Memoir of Mrs. Eliza Ann Chipman, Wife of the Rev. William Chipman of Pleasant Valley, Cornwallis*, ed. by Allen B. and Carolene E.B. Robertson (Hantsport, N.S., 1989).



Hamilton who wrote in rather self-flagellating terms about her spiritual shortcomings in 1850. Both were published — the latter by an historical society, the former by the United Society of Christian Endeavour — presumably for the spiritual edification of intended readers.<sup>31</sup>

The value of a religious diary for its audience is more intuitively obvious than the value of a personal account-book diary; to my knowledge, no account-book diaries have ever been published in Canada.<sup>32</sup> But a comparison of Emma's practical writing with the more spiritually-motivated writing produced by her sister-in-law reveals the value of account-book diaries for readers. Sarah Harris wrote expressive letters inflected with religious content and spiritual language to document her experience of migration and settlement. Her diction and tone suggest that she was better educated than Emma. Her education and her family's social aspirations (evident in husband Critchlow's plans and dreams) are reflected in her orientation to life and writing: Sarah freely expends words and financial resources. Her writing is profuse and expansive. Emma, by contrast, uses a minimal expenditure of language, in keeping with the way she handles the family's finances. She used words as tools and often employed very few words when a few more would have fleshed out the grammar. Emma's spelling and punctuation are idiosyncratic, but the grammar of her entries is not as bad as it might seem: transcriptions of manuscripts do not always do justice to the way in which diarists use the boundaries of a page to signify the end of a thought; when transcribed into typescript, the sentences seem to flow together uninterrupted when they do not do so in the original. But the informal writing in a working account-book diary probably did not, in her mind, call for more precise attention to grammar, spelling or punctuation. Nonetheless, two women in fairly similar circumstances offer very different textual presentations of their lives.

Their differing depictions of motherhood illustrate the difference. Sarah's letter-writing suggests that she identified with the saintly role for mothers assigned to her by Victorian culture. Emma, on the other hand, describes her children primarily in relation to their roles as farm labourers. She does not wax poetic on her role as mother. When, in 1864, Sarah's daughter dies, Sarah clothes the event in sentimental regalia and invokes religious discourse: "This has been a grievous stroke, but O I feel that it is a hand of love that has removed our dear little one from this world of sin and sorrow. May the affliction be blessed to us all. Our remaining dear ones are well".<sup>33</sup>

Sarah's spiritual orientation to the world guides the textual rendering of a deeply sorrowful event. It reads as expressive and emotional, although the prose may seem dated. By contrast, Emma's clinical description of her baby's recovery from a concussion seems laconic, although it actually offers more concrete information. In a summary for the week of 23-30 July 1859, Emma reports: "Baby taken bad with his head it is concussion of the brain. Joe and Mr. Hodgson took the cart to town showed Charlie [the horse] to Purdie preserved rasps Baby no better myself worse". What seems surprising in these entries is the lack of emotional affect attached to the

31 Lydia Fletcher Clark Symmes, *My Mother's Journal*, ed. by F.E. Clark (Boston and Chicago, 1911); *Catherine Bell van Norman, Her Diary, 1850* (Burlington, Ont., 1981).

32 With the exception of diary excerpts by Rebecca Chase Kinsman Ells in Margaret Conrad, et al., eds., *No Place Like Home*, pp. 205-26. Hers is a more expressive instance of the genre.

33 Tuck, *Island Family Harris*, p. 130.

description of Baby's condition. Here, in their entirety, are the entries for the following week, the first week of August 1859. Notice how Baby's recovery is not emotionally elaborated:

Mon Aug 1 Felt dreadfully weak commencing raining which hope will cool the air a little. Alick Lowrie here stumping.

Tues 2 Felt rather better but fear I've lost my hearing baby no better weaned him altogether. Alick here stumping. Mr. Lamont came for his bridle we fear is lost ordered hind quarter of veal from Mr. McEachern. Mr. Hodgson came up with newspaper.

Wed 3 Joey brought 16lbs of veal from McEacherns Alick busy stumping paid Mrs. Smith for making pinafores still continues oppressively hot much annoyed at not finding Mr. Lamont's bridle.

Thurs 4 Alick here Baby worse Hector Blue came to see him.

Fri 5 took a quarter of lamb from Blues Baby no better Mrs. Weatherby called holidays at the school very hot.

Sat 6 Alick still busy ploughing with Shaw's horse.

Sun 7 Hector Blue came to see Baby Chad went to town for medicine Grace Blue sat up with him at night Mr. & Mrs. Hodgson called also D Shaw & Sandy.

Mon 8 Alick here ploughing with Shaw's horse Baby a little better.

Tues. 9 Alick finished ploughing top land with Costello's horse. Mr. Hodgson called. Baby much the same.

Wed 10 Mrs. McEachern came to see baby who is rather better. Alick here ploughing with Fergus McEachern's horse Emmy and Tom went to take tea with Mrs. McEachern who sent 2 yds of flannel for Baby.

After the tenth of August, baby suffers another setback but is much better by 29 August. On 31 March 1860, he is still (or again) "poorly". Family records indicate that "Baby" was Emma's sixth and last child, Frederick, born in 1858, who went on to lead a full life producing seven children of his own, and living — it seems without any major ill effects from his early trauma — until his death in 1941.

Emma's rendering of this episode creates a sense of narrative estrangement. Why is there no developed commentary on her baby's condition, no fears for his health? Did she not care? This first reading, though, is a misreading; the emotional affect is not communicated in content. Unlike Sarah Harris, who phonetically spells out an interjection of pain, "O", and intones "May the affliction be blessed to us all", Emma Stretch signals emotional intensity not by metaphor or heightened figurative language

but by quantity: she “tells us more of the same without comparisons”.<sup>34</sup> Words on the page are spare, and each word is asked to bear a burden of meaning. As Motz notes, “the very act of recording information on paper, so commonplace today, may have had an aesthetic and a psychological value for those to whom written words were scarce commodities”.<sup>35</sup> It is entirely possible that the written word did not infiltrate Emma’s life to any great extent except through family letters and perhaps the odd book. She did not use words to fill space or create effect; they were managed very carefully. Therefore, in the entries about Baby’s concussion, it is the daily repetition of Emma’s concern that makes the episode noticeable, not the adjectives used to describe it. That the week’s entries share a common theme suggests the importance of Baby’s concussion.

Emotion is not at the centre of this account. Rather, the entries offer a social catalogue of all those who pass through the house. In the entries concerning Baby’s concussion, Emma expends more narrative energy explaining who helped. Social transactions, in particular, receive narrative weight. The last entry on 10 August is a telling example: she devotes a full, grammatically complete sentence to such assistance: “Emmy and Tom [her children] went to take tea with Mrs McEachern who sent 2 yds of flannel for Baby”. In addition, Emma continues to note all the material goods under her survey: food (lamb and veal), clothes (pinafors and flannel) and a troublesome lost bridle. She does not deviate from her economy of writing even during a very trying episode in her life; although the entries are not emotionally expressive, readers are left with a wealth of detail about how Baby’s concussion affected Emma’s life, whereas Sarah Harris’s account of her daughter’s death provides little factual information. Even Sarah’s rather formulaic appeal to religion does not tell us much about her emotional responses. Emma’s diary indeed points to “more stories than can easily be recovered or absorbed”.

Emma’s seeming reticence in the last week of July and first week of August may be because she is suffering from scarlet fever. Sarah’s letters record an epidemic of scarlet fever which began in June, and Emma notes in her diary that her husband spent time fishing with Critchlow Harris just when the Harris children were suffering from the disease (25 June 1859).<sup>36</sup> Although Emma never names her end-of-July illness as such, the seriousness of her condition is evident, first, in an unusual summary entry covering a week’s worth of events, as she was likely too sick to write the previous week. On the day she revives, when she first writes about Baby’s condition, she gets up and preserves raspberries even while she feels quite ill. The next day, she pays for her burst of productivity by feeling “dreadfully weak”. The day after, she acknowledges that she has lost her hearing from the illness, a common side-effect of scarlet fever.

The severity of her illness also suggests why she weaned the Baby “altogether”, fearing the possible communication of scarlet fever through breast milk or feeling fatigued from continued breast-feeding. Emma’s frank description of maternal bodily functions is one of the more unusual features of her diary writing. Helen Buss has suggested that “references to pregnancy, birthing, lactation and other nurturing

<sup>35</sup> Motz, “Folk Expressions”, p. 138.

<sup>36</sup> See Tuck, *Island Family Harris*, pp. 82-3.

activities are seldom found in settler women's memoirs", and my own research indicates that the same is generally true for women's diaries written in Canada.<sup>37</sup> More precisely, educated, middle- and upper-class women are the most unlikely to write about maternal processes in their diaries. To use the example at hand, Sarah Harris appeals to abstracted religious discourse surrounding motherhood and loss while Emma simply states the factual and concrete — "weaned baby altogether".

The serial entries touching on Baby's concussion and Emma's scarlet fever conform to what critic Rebecca Hogan sees as one of the defining features of diary writing: that things happen "between entries", not in them.<sup>38</sup> The week's entries about Baby's illness are not laconic; closer reading suggests that Emma is overwhelmed by the events between entries. In Andrew Hassam's excellent work on 19th-century shipboard diaries, he distinguishes two types of silence that threaten a diary: "the silence of 'nothing to report' and the silence of 'unable to write'".<sup>39</sup> In the second case, a diarist may be unable to write due to unfavourable material conditions or to an accumulation of events that overwhelms the possibility of narrating discrete incidents. In that case, too much to report is as paralyzing and as frustrating as too little to report. The entries in Emma's diary from those two summer weeks fall into the latter category; there are too many events to narrate, and her physical illness further prevents writing. She was battling scarlet fever, dealing with Baby's concussion, racing against time with a crop of ripe raspberries and contending with a number of visitors and workers at her home. Farm hand Alick Lowrie is stumping and plowing; a hind quarter of veal arrives; neighbours call; two different horses are borrowed, and a bridle is lost. Regardless of Emma's condition or the baby's, life at the farm goes on, and she must have been bone-tired. The picture that emerges is one of busyness and overwhelming plenitude, an abundance of (breast) milk and food; even in illness Emma's attention is drawn to the necessity of capitalizing on or managing these resources.

The potential for uncovering the economic implications of women's work compels researchers in the fields of women's studies or women's history to find a way of interpreting account-book diaries, for Emma shows clearly her economic involvement in both her contributed labour and in the record-keeping function of her diary. Evidence of women's economic contributions can be found elsewhere, of course. Historian Elizabeth Mancke, for example, looks to the ledgers of Edward Dewolf's General Store in Horton, Nova Scotia to find traces of women's work in the late 18th century. She uses evidence from the ledgers to contest the accepted notion that a gendered division of labour underwrote distinctions between subsistence and market economies. Drawing attention to the large number of women named in Dewolf's ledgers in the period from 1773 to 1796, Mancke "underscores the importance of

37 This quote is taken from the abstract to Helen Buss, "Listening to the 'Ground Noise' of Canadian Women Settlers' Memoirs: A Maternal Intercourse of Discourses", *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 60 (Winter 1996), pp 199-214.

38 Rebecca Hogan, "Engendered Autobiographies: the Diary as Feminine Form", in Shirley Neuman, ed., *Autobiography and Questions of Gender* (London, 1992), p. 103.

39 Andrew Hassam, *Sailing to Australia: Shipboard Diaries of Nineteenth-Century British Emigrants* (Manchester, 1995), p. 105.

women to the 18th-century agrarian economy”.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Margaret Conrad also names an array of materials that can illuminate women’s economic contributions: “scrapbooks, genealogies, local histories, minutes of meetings, recipes, samplers . . . quill baskets, quilts, and rugs comprise the material legacy which these women have bequeathed to us”.<sup>41</sup> Conrad would agree that account-book diaries are part of this list and would urge readers to find ways to “come to terms” with these artifacts.

Emma’s diary allows us to see the substructure of work and labour supporting a mid-19th-century rural Prince Edward Island community and reveals the essential part this woman played in her family’s economic and material prosperity. The evidence in Emma’s diary contradicts findings by Crowley, who argues that women were uninvolved in economic matters of 19th-century farm life. Referring to unpublished diaries from 19th-century rural Ontario, Crowley writes that they “show farm men and women discussing or working together in deciding on such major purchases as houses or cream separators, but they seldom mention women’s involvement in decisions about what crops to plant or other aspects of economic management”.<sup>42</sup> Crowley may have been looking at men’s diaries; Emma’s diary clearly shows her involvement in aspects of economic management. Her record-keeping, her business acumen and her network of suppliers and clients keep domestic life flowing smoothly in conjunction with a barter economy. The accounting recorded in the diary shows that she is clearly the partner who oversees all domestic work; she manages the economic transactions for the family and keeps track of where the money and the tea go. There may have been a gendered division of labour, but Emma’s intelligent and shrewd participation is an integral part of the farm’s success.

In the novel *Swann*, by Carol Shields, the character Sarah Maloney, an academic, puzzles over an unforthcoming journal written by a Southern Ontario farm wife, Mary Swann. The fictitious Maloney is attempting to recuperate the fictitious Swann’s poetry for her own professional gain. In one passage, Maloney describes the “profound disappointment” she feels on reading Swann’s journal for the first time:

What I wanted was elucidation and grace and a glimpse of the woman Mary Swann as she drifted in and out of her poems. What I got was “Creek down today” or “Green beans up” or “cash low” or “wind rising”. This “journal” was no more than the ups-and-downs accounting of a farmer’s wife, of any farmer’s wife, and all of it in appalling handwriting. I puzzled for days over one scribbled passage, hoping for a spill of light, but decided finally that the pen scratches must read “Door latch broken”.

Mary Swann’s notebook — Lord knows what it was *for* — covered a period of three months, the summer of 1950, and what it documents is a trail of trifling accidents (“cut hand on pump”) or articles in need of repair (a kettle, a shoe) or sometimes just small groupings of words (can opener, wax paper, sugar) which I decided after some thought, could only be shopping

40 Elizabeth Mancke, “At the Counter of the General Store: Women and the Economy in Eighteenth-Century Horton, Nova Scotia”, in Margaret Conrad, ed., *Intimate Relations: Family and Community in Planter Nova Scotia, 1759-1800* (Fredericton, 1995), p. 169.

41 Conrad, “Sundays Always Make me Think of Home”, p. 15.

42 Crowley, “Rural Labour”, p. 67.

lists. Even her chance observations of the natural world are primitive, to say the least: “branches down”, “radishes poor”, “sun scorching”.<sup>43</sup>

The humour in Shield’s passage arises from the conflict between Maloney’s expectations and Swann’s laconic and unpoetic journals; the humour depends on understanding both that this young professor feels obliged to search out a marginal figure like the poet Mary Swann in order to establish her academic reputation and that these journals pose a threat to her professional duty to make meaning. Despite the paucity of language to describe how such diaries work, it is too easy to dismiss the reticent diary of a farm wife and too easy not to include it in more general summations or speculations about what diary writing meant to women in the last century.

The spare entries of account-book diaries pose challenges for students of the diary, but our reading practices and our understanding of history can only be enriched by struggling with the writings of women who were not motivated to express an “inner self” and represent an orientation to the world not easily understood by late 20th-century readers. Women’s account-book diaries provoke questions about feminist historiography, or about how to find a vocabulary to articulate issues of motivation and aesthetics while respecting the life of the diarist. The condensations and silences of individual or collected entries alert us to particular concerns and values of the writer and, in turn, the community to which she belongs. More importantly, what seems like unforthcoming writing may actually contain a wealth of concrete information about the texture of women’s lives. Emma’s diary allows us to recover some of the material contributions made by strong and active rural women like her, and her accounts help us to reconstruct women’s role in a 19th-century rural economy.

43 Carol Shields, *Swann* (Toronto, 1987), p. 55.