

**REVIEW OF**

**GAIL G. CAMPBELL, *"I WISH TO KEEP A RECORD": NINETEENTH-CENTURY NEW BRUNSWICK WOMEN DIARISTS AND THEIR WORLD.*  
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Gail G. Campbell's *"I Wish to Keep a Record": Nineteenth-Century New Brunswick Women Diarists and Their World* makes a space for a collective record of the lives of twenty-eight women of New Brunswick between 1825 and 1906. These are not women who made an enduring mark in public life or in the larger society, at least not individually; nor are they specifically reformers or radical figures. They were not given the voice nor had they won the receptive public such as belonged, and in some ways continues to belong, to figures such as Susanna Moodie or Catharine Parr Traill. The latter are immigrant women whose lives have rightly or wrongly become synonymous with notions of life in nineteenth-century Upper Canada, and, by extension, in many courses in Canadian history and literature in the academy at least, with the life of women in Canada as a whole in that era.

On the other hand, neither do the women in this book belong to the utterly marginalized, or to the silent (or silenced) groups of the displaced, or the abjectly impoverished, or the completely overlooked. They are women of the reasonably well-established settler society, from a host of mainly rural farming, lumbering, fishing, or seafaring communities throughout much of New Brunswick. Their families are of several generations' rootedness in the province. They are women young and middle-aged, and they belong to various denominational communities of what Campbell calls the "dominant sector of New Brunswick that was Anglophone, Protestant, and white" (303). The scope of the portraits in this book is certainly wide enough to give a nuanced and revealing insight into the fabric of the life of women in those generations. It is necessarily limited in certain obvious ways, however, as it does not include diaries by Acadian women, or by members of other communities who may have been able to keep journals or diaries, such as the Irish Catholics, who by the nineteenth century were numerous enough in some counties of the province. These boundaries are readily identified by the author in the introduction and are revisited in the conclusion. Moreover, the "demographic context" offered, for example, in Chapter 3, as well as the population statistics offered in the Appendix, are very helpful in situating the subjects of this book in their time and place.

What Campbell achieves in this carefully considered work is to offer the reader a textured and detailed account of women's lives in several small towns and rural communities of the era, portraits that explode some of the clichés and misconceptions we hold in the twenty-first century. Her accomplishment is the more laudable because of the scantiness of the available material, and because of the varying styles and idioms of its forms. Some women kept diaries for only a few years before marriage and motherhood; some for a while after widowhood; some kept diaries while travelling with their fathers or husbands, and some kept them while their partners were away from home for work. Campbell introduces us to a cross-section of women of various ages and from three generations, in a social range from working class to what we might now call upper middle class. Thus, the sample excerpts vary from the terse entries of the very busy Jacobina Campbell of rural York County or Marjory Grant of Oak Ridge near St. Stephen, to the clear and careful prose of Sophia Bliss Carman of Fredericton, a well-educated woman of Loyalist ancestry. Grant, the daughter of Scottish immigrants,

writes on Wednesday, 15 February 1827: “Fair and clear—father was chopping [sic] wood at the door—me and Isabella was out to John’s in the afternoon and to Caty’s in the evening—It snowed in the night. Mrs. Grimmer was here in the afternoon” (154), while Sophy Carman’s diary records her reading various books (often published sermons), mentioning connections with the Episcopalian bishop and his wife, and, during summers spent at Bay Shore near Saint John, making such entries as this one from 30 July 1872: “Heavy rain last night, cleared off. W (her husband William) went to town, theatre, stayed all night. Jean, Cassie, Coy and I took a long walk. Got a book from Annie. Had some music and fun after tea. Letters from Mother to Jean” (168). Even Sophy Bliss Carman’s more expansive entries, however, do not offer much insight into her thoughts or her emotional state. In neither case is the material psychologically complex or extensive, and of course diaries, as Campbell reminds us, are selective documents in and of themselves, so Campbell must construct her analysis by careful reading, assiduous cross-referencing, and observant inference.

The book is structured around thematic principles; the diaries are generally excerpted in non-sequential order. Campbell explores her subject in fifteen chapters that reveal various facets of the lives of the women she studies, from social to political to religious contexts in domestic and community spheres. The reader learns about the intersection of responsibilities women assumed in farming communities and in towns, both as partners in running family economies and as independent women alone by happenstance or necessity. Campbell also offers evidence of the rich social networks even very busy women built and relied upon. This approach interweaves the voices of the young and the mature, of the travelling wife or daughter of a sea captain with those of women deeply rooted in their place of birth. The strategy not introducing the diaries sequentially, or the various women strictly chronologically, enables Campbell to visit different issues from a variety of angles and perspectives. This enhances the depth of analysis and interpretation. The cost, however, is an occasional repetitiveness, as the reader revisits certain elements of the women’s lives. One example is the multiple reminders that Ann Eliza Rogers’s first husband John Gallacher’s work took him to the States, that he died young and tragically, and that Ann Eliza, like other women who were at times separated from their husbands or who were widowed, had to manage by relying on her family of origin, or by joining a society of similarly situated women, or both (50, 116–17, 136, 151, 286). Such reiteration is of course an inevitable function of the comparative and integrative approach Campbell has taken in this work. Her aim is to let the diarists have a voice, and to the extent possible, to “encourage the reader to interpret their ‘texts’ for herself” (8). Further, she wants to invite scholarly readers and generalists alike to enter the world she portrays. This may account for the casual and even repetitive use of language: in the earlier chapters the word “snapshot” is recurrent, and Campbell, as when she tells us that Lucy Morrison established her garden for “her own good and sufficient reasons” (56) or that the diarists are “ensconced within a supportive network of kith and kin” (305), is occasionally inclined to cliché.

These are minor observations, however, in what is an impressive achievement. Among the key insights offered in this work is a clear illustration of the interdependence of men and women in the nineteenth century, and a further debunking of the persistent notion of “separate spheres.” Moreover, Campbell’s careful reading and interweaving of selected texts reveals and acknowledges female agency even in what some uninitiated readers, historians or otherwise, may have seen as an era more restrictive than it actually was.

Campbell offers important evidence of women’s roles in their respective church communities as well as of their crucial engagement in the establishment and development of public and private education in New Brunswick. (In this latter context, the necessary relegation to brief mentions and to

endnotes of the women in the Roman Catholic communities, especially those women religious who established convent schools in the province during this era, is perhaps an invitation to the writing of another book.) Of equal interest are the explorations of what Campbell refers to as the “cosmopolitan outlook” of many of her diarists, as well as insights into the expanding circles of their influence in the work for women’s suffrage and other important civic struggles. In the later chapters, where there are more sustained excerpts from some diaries, Campbell reveals the struggles of women to establish themselves in work outside the home as professional nurses, businesswomen, and in particular as teachers, in the face of the intermittent commitment to education in rural communities. The excerpt from Mary Wolhaupter’s diary in “Beyond the Bounds of Family” is one such story of persistence and discouragement. In the closing chapter “In the Midst of Life,” Campbell offers a glimpse of the precarious nature of existence: the sometimes terse, sometimes emotional accounts of both sudden and lingering deaths in the communities, and the generally strong determination and courage with which such deaths were met, is poignant and striking.

Finally, in addition to broadly analytical chapters such as “The Life Course in Demographic Context” (Chapter 3) and “A Cosmopolitan Outlook” (Chapter 14) already mentioned, the extensive and thoroughly informative endnotes of this work, as well as the extensive and equally impressive bibliography, demonstrate its achievement and usefulness as a work of true scholarship.

In her introduction, Campbell says she “‘imagined’ a book that would resonate with the widest possible audience: students as well as scholars, the general reader as well as the professional historian” (7). With this admirably researched and carefully nuanced volume, she has succeeded exceedingly well. “*I Wish to Keep a Record*” is rewarding reading.

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