

## Persona in Planter Journals

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In *His Majesty's Yankees* by Thomas Raddall, the Planter merchant, Simeon Perkins, is depicted as "unheroic, uneasy, un-everything."<sup>1</sup> The portrait is anything but flattering, but the inspiration for it lies not in Raddall's creative imagination but in the private journals maintained by Perkins from 1766 to 1812, the year in which he died in his adopted home of Nova Scotia. A native of Norwich, Connecticut, Simeon Perkins had immigrated to Liverpool on the south shore of the province in May 1762 only three years after Governor Charles Lawrence had issued warrants to survey the township. Beginning as a dealer in lumber and fish, Perkins went on to become a prominent property owner, merchant, farmer, mill operator, shipbuilder and Atlantic trader, as well as a member of the Legislative Assembly, a Justice of the Courts, a Judge of Probate and a Colonel Commandant of the Militia for Queens County. By the time of his death, he was described as a "father" to the town of Liverpool, known as his obituary pointed out, for "great wisdom, general knowledge, piety and benevolence, and uncommon usefulness."<sup>2</sup>

"Uncommon usefulness" is an unsentimental attribution for someone to bear in death as in life, yet a reading of the five volumes of Simeon Perkins's diary published by the Champlain Society reveals a persona consistent with *The Weekly Chronicle's* assessment of Liverpool's leading citizen. Writing in his journal more frequently after war broke out in 1775 than before, Perkins records what he has seen and done and heard. There is nothing introspective or analytical about his entries. His journal is intended to document financial matters, ships leaving harbour, occurrences in the meeting house, weather conditions, or visitations of family and friends. However, it becomes something more because of the historical events in which Perkins is caught up. "Experiencing life as a graduated succession of changes is an absolute prerequisite for writing a journal,"<sup>3</sup> argues Robert Fothergill in *Private Chronicles: A Study in English Diaries*, and in Perkins's case, these changes were precipitated not so much by the domestic crises and financial transactions that punctuated his everyday life as by the political events between 1766 and 1812 that drew him willy-nilly into the fray, expanded his social and business horizons,

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1 Thomas H. Raddall, *His Majesty's Yankees* (1942 repr. Toronto, 1977), 43.

2 C. B. Fergusson, ed., *The Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1804-1812* (Toronto, 1978), liii.

3 Robert A. Fothergill, *Private Chronicles: A Study in English Diaries* (London, 1924), 14.

and brought new stimuli to the town he had helped to nourish. Beginning as a personal recorder of mundane matters, Perkins was to become a self-appointed chronicler of his community in a period of enormous social change.

The catalyst for many of his observations came with his increasing role of responsibility within the township, for public affairs had become part of his private domain. Concurrent with Simeon's growing prominence within the town, however, was the outbreak first of the American Revolution, then of the Napoleonic Wars, and later of the War of 1812. In all of these cases, one senses that the Simeon Perkins of the journals shrinks from a breakdown of rational order and all that it implies. Thomas Raddall suggests Perkins's state of bewilderment when he compares him to "a sad little saw-whet owl"<sup>4</sup> when he is faced with the choices of the American Revolution. Yet, seemingly unhindered by any kind of active imagination, Simeon was able to initiate militia offensives and to document the social, economic and religious impact of the times on townspeople like himself living on the sea-lanes of the conflict. It is this unvarnished quality that Raddall recognized as a valuable resource in Perkins's journals when he first read them in the 1930s, and it is for this reason that Raddall's fictional treatment of Liverpool's Strang family in *His Majesty's Yankees* strikes true in idiom, domestic realism and historical detail.

While Simeon Perkins's journals grew out of his personal experience, they also represent part of the great impulse toward journal writing that flowered in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Pepys' famous *Diary* maintained from 1660-1669 had set a standard as a personal record of the times and in the very year that Perkins removed to Liverpool from Connecticut, James Boswell had begun his *London Journal* by vowing to preserve the "many things that would otherwise be lost in oblivion."<sup>5</sup> Yet there was a marked difference between Boswell's journal and Pepys's, for Boswell was preoccupied less with events than with his self-conscious role in them. Boswell, as Fothergill points out, is more egocentric than is Pepys, who desires only "to cherish the events of each day, not because they are the theatre for his latest manifestation, but because they are what actually happened and as such deserve to be acknowledged."<sup>6</sup> Boswell creates a persona satisfactory to himself in a way unknown to either Pepys or Perkins. There are few revelations of self in Simeon Perkins's documentation of events, and when he does allow opinion to intrude into his record of wind and weather, the revelations are not inconsistent with the plain, blunt man who has been emerging: "I have been applied to for my approbation"

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4 Raddall, *His Majesty's Yankees*, 61.

5 Fothergill, *Private Chronicles*, 78.

6 *Ibid.*, 71.

of a dance, he wrote on 12 January 1797; "I think it rather premature in such a Young Settlement, and Considering the late frowns of Providence in the death of several of our young men, & others missing, and the threatening aspect of public affairs, I think it highly Improper at this time, whether it might be in other Situations & Circumstances."<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere, his observations can be more personal, focusing as he grew older as much on the affairs of his family as on the progress of the settlement. Typical of a rare glimpse into the sense of obligation he felt toward his children is the placing of his daughter Mary in a Halifax boarding school at the cost of £35 in October, 1804. "It is expensive," he notes, "but I think it my duty to give my children what Education I can, and this daughter acquiring Something may give the others an Opportunity to gain Something from her advantage."<sup>8</sup> Such insights into Perkins's character reveal enough of a persona to elevate the diary beyond the level of mere memoranda.

In this sense, Perkins's journal is far more interesting than are the Planter journals of the Reverend John Seccombe and his daughter of Chester with their litany of meals and visitations respectively. The Seccombe journals reveal life lead day-to-day in 1761, illustrating in the very narrowness of their references the limitations of dwelling in a community less strategic to the sea-lanes than was Liverpool. Moreover, the pattern of the Seccombe diaries suggests an exercise in personal documentation. On "Satterday," 21 November 1761, for example, the Reverend Mr. Seccombe noted: "Fair, cool — Pork & Cabbage Turnep &c for dinner — P.M. went wth Mr. Bridge to ye Mill, & to view a Lot. Supped on Moose Stakes, dry'd meat. Indians brought in wild Fowl. Bever &c."<sup>9</sup> In the Perkins's diaries, by contrast, there is the very real sense that Simeon is writing more of a record and from time to time will turn back to the pages of his journal to check an incident or date in the forty-six years of his recording. As Alan Young has noted in his book, *Thomas H. Raddall*, there are striking parallels between Perkins's diary-keeping and that of Sumter Larabee, a central figure in Raddall's *The Wedding Gift and Other Stories*. "The Diary of Sumter Larabee" was the "journal of a realist," he quotes Raddall, "written with an obsession for present facts and the deuce with past and future. Sumter seldom followed up an incident or looked back to compare anything but the weather or the date of last year's turnip planting."<sup>10</sup> Such seems to be the situation of Simeon Perkins whose sense

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7 D.C. Harvey, ed., *The Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1780-1789* (Toronto, 1958), xxxviii.

8 C.B. Fergusson, ed., *The Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1804-1812* (Toronto, 1979), 70.

9 "The Diary of Reverend John Seccombe," *Report of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1959), Appendix B, 18-47, 240. See also: "Memoranda of Leading Events by a member of the Seccombe Family," PANS, MG I, Vol. 797C, No. 2.

10 Alan Young, *Thomas H. Raddall* (Boston, 1983), 79.

of history was practical and whose future was always in the hands of God.

Of all the journals emerging from the Planter experience, it is those that probe the individual's relationship with God that best exemplify the qualities of introspection and analysis associated with the development of a persona in journal literature. As Steven Kagle has pointed out in *American Diary Literature: 1620-1799*, the spiritual journey occupied a central place in colonial America. Usually employing a standardized rhetoric and modelled after celebrated examples, the spiritual journey "allowed its author to find a pattern which could reveal the truth of the past and plan the direction of the future."<sup>11</sup> Particularly in Puritan diaries were the conventions of self-examination, self-abasement and dramatic conversion developed. For Puritans, salvation was an arbitrary thing dependent on the will of God, and the maintenance of a religious register was not only a way of justifying one's conduct but also a process of documenting one's path to election or grace. In a sense, then, the spiritual journal was a statement against despair, a form of confessional which the Puritan or Calvinist would construct in the spiritual isolation that went with his or her self-analysis. Casting back to his youth in his spiritual journey, Henry Alline of Falmouth, Nova Scotia, remembered in the 1780s that "God...gave me a sense of my lost and undone condition in a great degree: fearing almost everything that I saw, that it was against me; commissioned from God to call me away, and I unprepared: I was even afraid of trees falling on me, when I was in the woods, and in a time of thunder would expect the next flash of lightening would be commissioned to cut me off. Thus I was one of the unhappiest creatures that lived on earth; and would promise and vow, in time of danger, that I would leave all my carnal mirth and vain company, and that I would never rest until I had found rest in my soul."<sup>12</sup>

Alline's expression of fear and unworthiness is a stock convention in Puritan and Calvinist journals and finds repetition in the spiritual journals of two other Planter writers, Jonathan Scott of Chebogue and Mary Coy Bradley of Gagetown and Saint John. For both Alline and Bradley, this fear coloured their childhood years, so that Alline would pray even on his way to school "that this angry God would not send me to hell,"<sup>13</sup> and Mary Bradley would agonize, "how can I dwell in flames of fire and brimstone, through an endless eternity!"<sup>14</sup> Entering a covenant with the Lord

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11 Steven E. Kagle, *American Diary Literature, 1620-1799* (Boston, 1979), 29.

12 Henry Alline, *The Life and Journal of the Rev. Mr. Henry Alline* (Boston, 1806), 29.

13 *Ibid.*, 4

14 Mary Bradley, *A Narrative of the Life and Christian Experience of Mrs. Mary Bradley* (Boston, 1849), 28.

dispelled that fear for both authors, but their pre-covenant terror is more rhetorical than chilling because of the retrospective nature of their journals. Alline's work was begun during his ministry in the late 1770s and, at the time of his death in 1784, was left to circulate privately in manuscript form, finally reaching publication in Boston in 1806.

Bradley's work was also destined for a public audience, becoming one of many Wesleyan-Methodist spiritual records published in the mid-nineteenth century in the wake of diaries by John Wesley, George Whitefield and others. While intensely focused on the routine events of Mrs. Bradley's Christian life, the *Narrative of...Mrs. Mary Bradley* does project into the litany of Methodist religious records the perspective of a woman who wanted to play anything but a passive role in the profession of her faith. "I always heard that women had nothing to do in public, respecting religious exercises," she noted early in her journal, "and that it was absolutely forbidden in the Scriptures for a woman to pray in public, or to have anything to say in the church of God. Under the consideration of those things, I felt much shame and confusion and knew not how to endure it."<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere in her journal she chafes under the social and marriage bonds that require sublimation of her opinions to those of her first husband: "But soon I found that, being his wife, I was bound by law to yield obedience to the requirements of my husband; and when he enforced obedience, and showed marks of resentment if his wishes were not met, I was tempted with anger and felt a spirit of resentment arise in my heart and retaliating expressions come into my mind...."<sup>16</sup> As Margaret Conrad has pointed out in an introduction to Mrs. Bradley's narrative in *Atlantis* in 1981, her authorship offers glimpses into the social and legal position of women in the Planter community and reveals something of the work patterns of such women in rural areas of the Maritimes.<sup>17</sup> However, the overall narrowness of Mary Bradley's interests restricts the emergence of a distinctive persona in her journal. Only when she recalls her childhood in Gagetown or describes the early years of her marriage is there a glimpse of the human being behind the stylized rhetoric of the spiritual diary. On the whole, Mary Bradley's journal conforms to established patterns and rarely offers those touches of domestic originality that emerge when she pauses in her weeding to compare herself to a good seed choked by weeds in the garden of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

It is in their inability to transcend the conventions of their genre that

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15 *Ibid.*, 50.

16 *Ibid.*, 106.

17 Margaret Conrad, "Mary Bradley's Reminiscences: A Domestic Life in Colonial New Brunswick," *Atlantis*, 7,1(Fall 1981), 92.

18 Mary Bradley, *A Narrative*, 43.

many of the spiritual journalists fail in literary terms. The literary critic, as Robert Fothergill has pointed out, "is concerned with that work in which the impulsion to articulate the self has precipitated discovery of a fresh organization of the form's potential. The most remarkable displays of this discovery we call genius, and the diary indeed has its geniuses."<sup>19</sup> Amongst the spiritual journalists writing from the Planter experience, there seem to be few with this spark, for profession of faith rather than literary self-consciousness is both their intent and their preoccupation. The range is not wide, and even in the hands of so charismatic a figure as Henry Alline, the spiritual diary fails to reveal a persona so much as a vocation. This being said, it cannot be denied that Alline demonstrates a flair for dramatic presentation and an energy of phrasing that circumvent some of the limitations of the spiritual diary form. While honouring the same conventions as his spiritual colleagues (the terror of religion in childhood, the isolation of the unsaved soul, the revelation and covenant with God, the mission to carry the message), Alline can transform language into a powerful crescendo of euphony, rhythm, and harmony as he describes himself, "...groaning under mountains of death, wading through storms of sorrow, racked with distressing fears, and crying to an unknown God for help...."<sup>20</sup> As George Rawlyk has pointed out, Alline's power with language annoyed his Congregationalist opponent, Jonathan Scott, who saw Alline's work as "interspersed with Poetry calculated to excite and raise the Passions of the Reader, especially the young, ignorant and inconsistent, who are influenced more by the sound and Gingle of the words, then by solid Sentences and rational and scriptural Ideas of divine and eternal Things."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as a journeyer as well as a journalist, Alline had an opportunity to meet new people, see new areas and hear new arguments. This range of constantly shifting sights, sounds and experiences enlivens the pace of his diary in a way denied the home-bound Mary Bradley or the congregation-tied Jonathan Scott. Steven Kagle has argued that it was often the diaries of itinerant Methodists that focused "outward to the world, giving a valuable picture of their world."<sup>22</sup> Alline's case is similar. The travel pattern of his journal expands it beyond the conventional structure of many spiritual records and enables Alline to explore religious questions within a wider and more interesting social context. In the main part of his journal, he is not isolated physically and spiritually as he was before he made his covenant with God. Rather, he functions on a broad geographical stage where his personal journey and his relations with others

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19 Fothergill, *Private Chronicles*, 12.

20 Alline, *The Life and Journal*, 34-35.

21 George A. Rawlyk, ed., *The Sermons of Henry Alline* (Hantsport, 1986), 28.

22 Kagle, *American Diary Literature*, 51.

coalesce in a book designed to illuminate the lives of many.

As revealing as individual Planter journals can be about the social, political and religious lives of the speakers and their communities, there is little in the conventionalized language and format of most of these records to warrant their being called "literature" in the creative or imaginative sense. Thus, to speak of a Planter Literature is to speak of a Planter body of writing, for there is nothing of the development to be found later in nineteenth-century journals when literary self-consciousness made the persona assume a stance akin to that of a fictional character. In their dedication to fulfill their tasks, the Planter writers noted others as characters in the play of life (both Perkins and Bradley describe the visits of Alline, for example), but themselves only as vehicles (Alline wanted to be a mouth for God). It was to be left to the later generations of Thomas Raddall, Greg Cook and Douglas Lochhead, amongst the creative writers, and Michael Miller amongst the composers, to breathe imaginative life into the earnest personae who emerge from the Planter journals of Perkins, Seccombe, Alline and Bradley.<sup>23</sup>

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23 As has been mentioned, Thomas Raddall adapted his knowledge of Simeon Perkins and his diary into literary dramatizations in *His Majesty's Yankees*, *At The Tide's Turn and Other Stories*, and *The Wedding Gift and Other Stories*. Maritime poets, Greg Cook and Douglas Lochhead, are currently working on long poems on Henry Alline. The first act of Michael Miller's opera-in-progress on Henry Alline was performed at Acadia University in October 1987.