

***Family Life and Sociability in Upper and Lower Canada, 1780-1870: A View from Diaries and Family Correspondence.* By Françoise Noël. (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. Pp. xii+372, ISBN 0-7735-2445-2)**

Sara Schwebel

Volume 27, Number 2, 2005

Terrains disputés
Contested Geographies

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/014049ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/014049ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Schwebel, S. (2005). Review of [*Family Life and Sociability in Upper and Lower Canada, 1780-1870: A View from Diaries and Family Correspondence.* By Françoise Noël. (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. Pp. xii+372, ISBN 0-7735-2445-2)]. *Ethnologies*, 27(2), 261–263.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/014049ar>

REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Family Life and Sociability in Upper and Lower Canada, 1780-1870: A View from Diaries and Family Correspondence. By Françoise Noël. (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. Pp. xii+372, ISBN 0-7735-2445-2)

Using diaries, letters, and the notes penned by society ladies, historian Françoise Noël explores Canadians' construction of family and kinship relations, as well as their means of sustaining them, during the period spanning the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. In the houses of the elite and middling classes, Noël argues "home" extended beyond the narrow confines of a domestic sphere and its nuclear family members to embrace friends and kinfolk separated by significant geographic space. Industrialization and its accompanying alteration of people's work day, living patterns, and conception of self notwithstanding, courtship and marriage remained a communal affair in which many people had a stake. In stark contrast to contemporaneous didactic literature that extolled middle-class domesticity, Canadians who kept diaries and wrote long letters described their efforts to build and maintain extensive networks of neighbours and social acquaintances. These networks ensured them a group of people trusted to monitor family and friends' social behaviour.

Noël's analysis of family life moves from the intimacy of the marital unit to the intricacies of the parent-child relations soon to follow. The study concludes with a discussion of the family as a unit, detailing its interactions with the local, regional, and international communities forged through marriage and kinship. Noël builds upon Peter Ward's *Courtship, Love and Marriage in Nineteenth-century English Canada* (1990) by tracking a bride and groom's relationship beyond the utterance of marriage vows. More importantly, Noël seeks to enrich Ward's conclusions by examining sources spanning a wider geographic area and more diverse population base. Although still limited to the educated

adults who composed and perused letters, Noël's sources include the papers of French as well as English speakers, and they stem from Catholics (and one Jew) as well as Protestants. The breadth of Noël's subjects allows for the use of exceptions — the negotiations required when a Canadian Protestant and *Canadien* Catholic formalized their marriage union — as a means of highlighting the norms.

More frequently, however, Noël's subjects remain rooted in a distinct community, rural *or* urban, English *or* French, Protestant *or* Catholic *or* Jew. Discussion of a husband and wife or parent and child's correspondence provides a wealth of detail about everyday life and prevailing attitudes in a particular community. In one correspondence, a father asks his wife to tell their little ones "to be good children and Papa will love them more and more." Noël explains that, "like many parents in this period, he used love as a form of discipline" (158). Here, the particular illustrates a larger trend. The mother's return letter — which described exactly *how* each child attempted to earn Papa's love through proper behaviour — provides a window into familial relations within a sizable household.

Other sets of correspondence rooted in particular social and linguistic communities are less convincingly used to generalize about family relations as a whole. Because *Family Life and Sociability in Upper and Lower Canada* is organised thematically, Noël's narrative moves from one family and distinct community to another as she builds her argument. Unfortunately, this structure confuses rather than complicates the author's overall argument about family relations in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Canada. Specifically, Noël's analysis and quotations from family papers lack deep contextualisation, obscuring the degree to which a particular circumstance or cultural background may have shaped the evidence, and thus its ability to further the larger thesis. In reading the many sections containing extended analyses of one family's papers, it would be helpful to have more information about the subjects' community. For example: to what degree had industrialisation penetrated the diarists' or letter writers' lives? Did the letter writers or diarists have access to mechanized transportation? Was the family as a unit representative of the surrounding community, or an anomaly within it? Closer attention to demographics throughout would enhance the analysis, elevating the usefulness of individual histories.

Sharper readings of literary sources would also strengthen the analysis. At times, the author's discussion of quoted material merely skims the surface ("The two reasons for letting Michael go were quite different. If it were simply because Mary did not like his looks, this would underline how arbitrary the hiring and firing of servants was. On the other hand, if he had been responsible for an accident while inebriated, they would have every reason to let him go..." [87]); analysis occasionally borders on the obvious ("to lose suddenly a parent who was still young was undoubtedly more difficult to accept than the anticipated death of an elderly one" [185]). Both the letters and diaries examined provide opportunities to analyse the writer's choice of language as well as the writer's choice of subject, but only slight attention is given to the former. This is unfortunate given that, especially in the courtship letters, writers' use of sentimental conventions illustrates the way new middle class ideals intertwined with older practices. Men and women often expressed themselves in ways advocated by the sentimental advice literature even as their families and social circles intervened, pointing them to more "appropriate" lines of behaviour and objects of affection.

Family Life and Sociability in Upper and Lower Canada contains a rich array of previously unpublished stories, providing a fascinating peek into the social life of Canadian communities. As Noël states in her introduction, few studies utilise literary sources to uncover family relations in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Canada. *Family Life and Sociability in Upper and Lower Canada* begins to address this gap. Although it falls short of providing a definitive study inclusive of and attentive to Canada's diverse population, Noël's work should inspire others to build a convincing argument for the distinctiveness of familial relations in the Canadian context and the importance of this to the development of Canadian society.

Sara Schwebel
Harvard University
Cambridge (MA)
