

Authors of their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century By
David A. Gerber

Eva-Marie Kröller

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[See table of contents](#)

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dians. The work of Antal and Shackleton, ably supported by the Scottish Borderers Foundation in Windsor's Tilston Armoury, will do much to preserve the proud heritage of the Essex and Kent Scottish.

Bob Garcia
Parks Canada, Cornwall

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Authors of their Lives

The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century

By David A. Gerber. New York: New York University Press, 2006. x + 421 pp. US\$55.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-8147-3171-6.

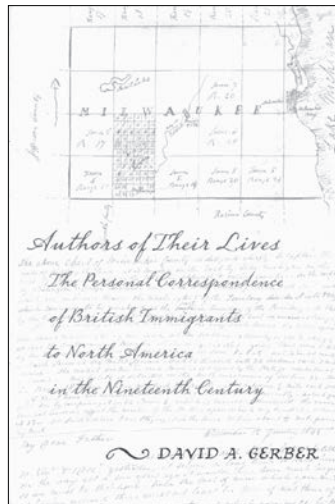
"Everywhere we turn the immigrants' letters cause us anxiety about the confident generalizations derived from such familiar conceptual models as assimilation and ethnicity, which prove not quite adequate for explaining the complexity of individual lives." So writes historian David Gerber in the conclusion to his well-researched and thoughtful book *Authors of Their Lives*. He then complicates the argument by reversing it, suggesting that individual lives are too complex to form the basis of generalizations about ethnicity. The book does not entirely elude the abstractions it criticizes, but

Gerber chips so efficiently away at them that he sometimes undermines his own

conceptual framework, though always instructively so.

Gerber includes several published collections of letters, but most of the 72 items he lists are manuscript collections in American, Canadian, Scottish, Irish, and Australian archives. From this voluminous material Gerber develops a detailed study of what he calls "immigrant epistolarity," considering such topics as "traditions of inquiry," "forming selves in letters," "writing with a purpose," "transnational networks on the edge of modernity," "establishing voice, theme and rhythm," and the character-

istic stages that occur "when correspondence wanes." These broader questions are



followed by four case studies.

There is a great deal of interest here for students of Canadian history generally and of Ontario specifically. Thomas Spencer Niblock's various disastrous emigration schemes, for example, included Canada. He favourably compared the country to Australia as "somewhat more civilized and held together by some sense of religious principle," but the virtual absence of an urban labour market made it almost impossible for him to find work in London (where he arrived in 1849) that would have permitted him and his family to survive the first winter until farming could begin. The various economic difficulties Niblock subsequently encountered when he did acquire land were described as typical of new settlers' situations by John Langton, an English immigrant and astute letter-writer who had arrived fifteen years earlier. For quite a few immigrants, emigration was not a one-way street, but involved trial expeditions to various destinations within the British Empire or North America, sometimes including return visits to Britain to recover from the losses and raise the necessary new funds. Niblock is one example, as is Dr. Thomas Steel, medical doctor and farmer, whose second emigration took him to rural Upper Canada before he settled in Wisconsin.

The volume concludes with abundant notes, informative not only for their painstaking documentation but also for the instructive parallels Gerber draws to the present. Quoting *New York Times* coverage of late twentieth-century global migration, for example, he discusses the significance of personal correspondence in the digital age. He cites the case of a hapless Pakistani cabdriver in Manhattan who found himself berated for four minutes (each costing \$5.00) by his sister for not writing home, when he had used a "video conferencing facility," clearly thinking he was giving his

family a special treat by doing so. While here a contemporary migrant's situation unexpectedly mimics a nineteenth-century one, Gerber is careful to point out that globalism is not, as is often asserted, an exclusively twentieth-century phenomenon. Oddly, there is only one entry under "globalization" in the index, but in general the index is an excellent illustration of Gerber's insistence that generalizations about immigrants' lives at any period are difficult if not impossible to maintain. Scholars of life-writing will not be the only ones intrigued by the number of headings that alternate between individual and community, but sometimes encompass both: for example, "emotions," "family relationships," "generations," "personal identity," and "the self."

Gerber patiently challenges contentions that only highly-educated women were capable of formulating their selves through writing, yet sometimes finds it difficult not to contradict his own argument. A good example is his discussion of blacksmith and farmer John Barker's correspondence, characterized by the writer's "inability to create narrative priorities and to separate large and small themes." It provokes Gerber's stern note: "if ever there were a writer who might have profited from beginning his composition with an outline, or revising his first draft, it was Barker, for with enough practice he might have eventually come to understand that writing was not conversation and that he had to fill the gaps that resulted from the vast differences between the two forms of discourse." Who says Barker had to? And are those who have their thesis statements in place the only ones to write themselves successfully into being? Gerber does acknowledge the differences between written and spoken language, though much too briefly, and he also concedes that Barker's correspondents may have had no difficulty understanding his letters.

The overwhelming impression, however, is that Barker has failed to meet an ineluctable standard by which textual composition is measured, and that by implication Barker's uncomplaining original readers perhaps have too. Gerber pithily observes that "[correspondents] wanted different content, not better grammar," but in asking for content to their liking, were they not also requesting the unorthodox grammar in which it was best conveyed? Gerber adopts a similarly stern tone in his discussion of Niblock, whose activities amount to "transnational and international failure, involving activities on three continents and a transoceanic network of family connections and subsidies and strained relationships" and whose correspondence is characterized by an inability to perform a "sustained reflection on the role in authoring the crises that punctuated his adult life." This judgment sits uneasily with Gerber's declaration, delivered in an eruption of jargon rare in a book remarkable for its lucid writing, that "[immigrants] were buffeted by the instabilities and discontinuities, such as emigrations and resettlement themselves, that necessitated adopting plural subject positionings appropriate to the shifting contexts of daily life common to modern individuals."

While in these instances a clearer expli-

cation of the author's own ambivalent position would have been helpful, other matters are discussed at unnecessary length – for example the several pages devoted to illustrating that correspondence was often rushed, when that point could have been made just as effectively in a single paragraph. Also rushed appears to have been the copy-editing. This book deserved better than letting confusion between "flaunt" and "flout" stand unchallenged, or failing to root out various stylistic infelicities (dangling modifiers, or noun-verb disagreements) that look all the more annoying in a study where the meaning of stylistics is front and centre.

None of these criticisms, however, makes this a less stimulating and important book. It is moving to read about correspondents like Mary Ann Archibald who assured her correspondent that "your letters are now so necessary to me that I cannot live comfortably without them and would wish to die with one of them in my hand" and who was comforted by their "friendly rustling" near her heart. Indeed, it is reassuring to know that in Gerber such letters have found the scrupulous and compassionate commentator they require.

Eva-Marie Kröller

University of British Columbia

The Dominion of Youth

Adolescence and the making of modern Canada, 1920 to 1950

By Cynthia R. Comacchio. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006. ix + 298 pp. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-88920-488-8.

In *The Dominion of Youth*, historian Cynthia Comacchio traces the emergence of the figure of the modern teenager in Canada during the first half of the twentieth century. Using a variety of sources including newspapers, high school

yearbooks, memoirs, and advice literature, she links the circulation of new ideas about adolescence with Canada's coming of age as a modern industrial nation. The book begins by discussing the many theories and anxieties about modern youth