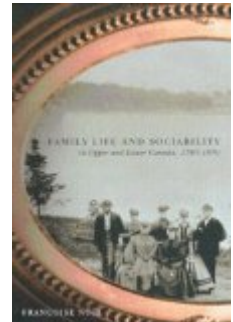


Françoise Noël. *Family Life and Sociability in Upper and Lower Canada, 1780-1870.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. xii + 372 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7735-2445-3.



Reviewed by Bettina Bradbury

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Family Life and Sociability offers new and intriguing glimpses into family life among the middle classes and lower elite of the Canadas in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Noël draws on some eleven diaries and about twenty collections of family letters and papers located in the Archives of Ontario and the National Archives to paint a moving, accessible portrait of many aspects of family life. Her main arguments and her main contributions are threefold. First, she supports the growing body of literature that has been arguing that the idea of separate spheres fails to capture the gender dynamics of early nineteenth-century lives. Men were intimately involved in child-raising—though often in the families whose lives she reveals, this was from a distance through letter writing. Some were present at child-birth. Women ran businesses and farms during husbands' absences and following their deaths. Men were frequently the main shoppers, even for fabric and other items we might associate with women. Second, she argues convincingly that family life was essentially social. Its relationships and rituals stretched well beyond the nuclear family and well beyond the kitchen door. Her sources thus al-

low her to follow family relationships beyond the boundaries forged by census takers that for so long constrained historians' visions of family and household and to highlight the central importance of kin living elsewhere. She shows how visiting, letters, and family rituals cemented familial and social relationships, and how familial relationships were significant components of business ties. Third, she joins Peter Ward in arguing that most couples were marrying for love, and extends his arguments into marriage by suggesting that though there were some rocky relationships, most of these were companionate marriages in which these middle-class parents showed love for their youngsters, sought to teach them self control and respectability, allowed them to choose their own spouses and retained emotional links once they left home. She highlights the significant impact of children's deaths, as well as the support that some children provided elderly and sick parents as they neared their death.

The book is organized roughly around the family life cycle. It starts with a section on the couple, in which chapters explore courtship, mar-

riage, housekeeping, and married life. The second section, entitled "Parents and Children," includes chapters on childbirth and infancy, childhood, childhood accidents, illness and death, and parent-child relationships. The third part explores kinship and community with chapters on domestic rituals and celebrations, family sociability, mutual assistance and reciprocity, and the role of correspondence. Most chapters begin with a brief discussion of some relevant historiographical debates, then proceed thematically, sometimes drawing information from all the relevant letters and diaries, and at others concentrating on families that left particularly rich information.

Nol has sought to let the men and women speak in their own words, and in many ways she does so successfully. The lives of these people, as interpreted by her from their own writings, dominate the narrative of the book. This is both a strength and a weakness. The reader learns a lot about the most prominent couples—from Lower Canada these include Ludger Duvernay and his wife, Reine Harnois; Amde Papineau, his wife Mary Eleanor Westcott; and their parents, especially his father, Louis-Joseph Papineau and hers, James Westcott; and about the Jewish merchant, Abraham Joseph, though less about his wife Sophia David. Upper Canadians featured most frequently include Susanna and John Dunbar Moodie, Frances Tweedie Milne, and Eliza Bellamy.

Because few individuals left full sets of letters or diaries, and their records cover diverse moments of their lives, we learn about different aspects of many of their lives. Some, therefore, appear in early chapters, then disappear, so that the reader never learns what happened to them in later life. Obviously in some cases this is unknowable. Yet, Nol sticks so close to her sources, that even when the later contours of a couple's life could be sketched in from other sources or secondary literature she does not do so. Thus, we learn much about Reine Harnois during the time Duvernay was in exile in the United States after

the rebellions, but nothing about their later married life after he returned to Montreal, despite the significant amount of writing about him. Or, we learn about the early years of Amde Papineau's marriage with Mary Eleanor Westcott, but little about their old age when they spent much of their time living on different continents. Nor is there any indication that Nol sought genealogical or other information about others whose papers cover only a short period. As a result, although the reader learns wonderful and moving information about many couples and their families, this book is not about them directly. It is about what the particular diaries and letters she has used can tell us of family life and sociability. I sometimes felt that having peeped so intimately into some moments of peoples' lives, I wanted to at least know how long they lived together and who died first. But perhaps that is because of my particular interest in widows and widowers.

And, in interpreting these lives, Nol remains very close to these primary sources. She interprets them in the light of very broad arguments in family history, but seldom wrestles with alternative interpretations, engages in any depth with historiographical debates, or draws on secondary literature that might contextualize these individual experiences. This, along with her clear writing style, helps make the book very readable. It keeps the focus on the individuals. But it means that her analytical claims are modest and at times disappointing, and interpretive musings are minimal. For example, when she reports on Reine Harnois's letters to the exiled Ludger Duvernay, in which Reine is constantly telling him how much the children miss him, and how they play up in his absence, she makes no comments on how this might be seen as manipulative, or simply unfair to a husband who had fled the country in danger of imprisonment or possibly hanging. Nor does she help the reader work out how Reine became pregnant during Ludger's lengthy absence (p. 132). It is only the mention in a later chapter of her taking a trip to see him with her oldest son that alerts the

puzzled reader to the probable timing of this conception. In the chapter on married life she seeks to explore what companionate marriage was like in the day-to-day activities of a couple. Yet, in her zeal to assess whether each marriage could be described as companionate, she bypasses significant opportunities to present an original picture of the workings of masculinity in these middle-class marriages. And, finally, although she effectively argues against separate spheres as a useful analytical device, and for families as deeply embedded in networks of kin and friends, she does not attempt to make any arguments about change over this period. She does not attempt to locate her findings within the economic changes of the period, just as she gives little indication of the characteristics of the places within which they live. Nor does she indicate whether she thinks that she is observing the end of a largely pre-industrial way of life in which the newer bourgeois understandings of gender have not yet taken hold, or whether her critiques of separate spheres and of historians' narrow focus on the nuclear family are ones she believes would also apply to the second half of the century. And, although she clearly states at times that these were largely middle-class couples, she frequently writes as if they were representative of all families at the time, and wisely, perhaps avoids making any comparisons between English- and French-speaking families.

In the difficult decision about how to balance narrative and analysis, Nol has opted to concentrate on the former. This makes the book an exceptionally good and interesting read that teaches much about the trials and joys of early nineteenth-century family life in Upper and Lower Canada.

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