

**Lorraine Gadoury.** *La famille dans son intimité. Echanges épistolaires au sein de l'élite canadienne du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle.* Montreal: Hurtubise HMH, 1998. 186 pp. \$24.50, paper, ISBN 978-2-89428-311-0.

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The transition from the pre-modern to the modern family type constitutes the starting point of Lorraine Gadoury's interesting book, *La famille dans son intimité*. Mme Gadoury's object is to study that transition, from the point of view of the private affective life of the Canadian elite as recorded in their correspondence. The family and private life, two established traditions in western scholarship are thus morphed into a single intimate perspective in which the quasi-intangible emotions, hopes and fears of Man are front and center of the analysis which hopes to thus depict more fully his *mentalité*. Mme Gadoury is not alone in this field. Practitioners of micro-history have found ample food for thought in the memoirs and depositions of 16th Century Italian millers.[1] James and Janet Robertson composed an entire book based on the contents of boxes upon boxes of family papers that originally belonged in the basement of their Hampton, Connecticut house.[2] More recently Dirk Hoerder has written a history of immigrant lives in Canada based to no small extent upon various sorts of life-writings.[3]

Gadoury's contribution consists in a study of a sample of 1400 letters, dating from the 18th Century, from the very rich Baby Collection of the Université de Montréal, hence the other half of the title, *Echanges épistolaires au sein de l'élite canadienne*. Historians have been dabbling in this collection for years, for a recent example see Jane

Harrison's study of the colonial mails.[4] However rarely have they conducted such a direct frontal assault. The sample allows Gadoury to address such themes as marriage, child rearing and education, family ties and networking and the resonance of disease, death and spiritual belief.

The author's approach is a conscious one. The letters are mined not only for their content but also for their significance as a means of communication. Informed by current epistolary historiography Gadoury raises a number of interesting points with respect to the authors of her correspondence. First, she notes that within a particular family network of correspondence the pivotal role may fall to a single influential person, upon whom requests for advice, money, letters of reference or simply a job converge. Although domiciled out west in the Illinois country, in Kaskaskia, the Cerre family willingly delegated the role of family pivot to Pierre-Louis Panet, the husband of daughter Manon, and a Montreal gent with solid connections to the political and judicial establishment of the St. Lawrence valley (p. 58). The hundreds of kilometres of distance between Kaskaskia and Montreal was no barrier to the pursuit of the family's interests. Within the Baby clan this role fell upon François, (Uncle Frank?) the Quebec City merchant (p. 58). A grateful nephew Louis, thus effusively thanked François in 1780 for the opportunity to engage himself in the military:

"sachant que vous connaissez mieux que moi-même ce qui me sera le plus avantageux, j'accepterai toujours avec joie l'emploi que vous me destinez et soyez sur que je ferai tout ce qui dépendra de moi pour remplir les devoirs de mon état et vous donner tout le contentement possible" (p. 113)

A second point involves the family pattern of correspondence. One's epistolary culture is learned within the confines of the family cocoon. With respect to its corresponding habits the members of a family share certain common habits, they exhibit a common personality. There may be as many patterns as there were families. Thus the D'Aillebousts addressed one another in a very formal way --"Mon cher, Monsieur mon cher [...]"-- whereas the Lacornes might prefer a more intimate approach - "Mon incomparable niece, "Ma tendre amie" (pp. 60-61).

The population targeted by this study consists of the French-speaking Canadian elite in the 18th Century. Chapter one discusses the essential contours of this class. The relatively long period of time--a hundred years --is deemed appropriate to the relatively slow unfolding of family events in history (p. 54). Three outstanding features characterised this elite: a) it was able to read and write, quite superbly at times; b) the circumstances of a mobile lifestyle, resulting in a sprinkling of family members here and there throughout the western hemisphere, made it inevitable that they would have to write in order to keep in touch with home; c) writing was a vital part of maintaining if not embellishing the social network to which the family belonged; the author elsewhere quotes from a French epistolary scholar: "la lettre est l'élément fondamental de l'information et de la communication dans les sociétés d'autrefois" (p. 51-52). No letter no news, no news, no strategy.

The elite is loosely defined in terms of its respective noble and bourgeois elements. Yet it should be remembered that the chapter is intended only to set the scene. If it is less than satisfying

this can only be owing to the tentative thinking in colonial historiography with regard to the precise nature of the social political and economic establishment of the colony, especially in the wake of the British conquest. More successful and concrete are chapters three and four which deal respectively with marriage and relations between spouses and child education. Here is where the real social personality of the correspondents is allowed to come to the fore.

Marriage among the Canadian elite is very much an affair of interests. There is simply too much in the way of material concerns at stake for the situation to have been otherwise (p. 72). Locating the right partner can be a drawn-out affair. Members of the family, this includes uncle and aunt as well as mother and father give freely of their advice and authority in the matter. Negotiations with the family of the other party are best kept secret. The impending marriage is not to be announced until the agreement is a fait accompli. Violators of the secret are frowned upon (p. 81). The bride and groom can themselves be kept in the dark as to the precise details (p. 80). The marriage de raison is a validation of family interests in the choice of partner. Such concerns can ride rough-shod over one's romantic inclinations. Thus Mademoiselle Lacrosse was head over heels in love with a certain Lennox, yet he was not judged by the family to be an appropriate match. Despite this interdict Mademoiselle was still able to exchange letters with her would-be lover, in fact she successfully enlisted the moral support of the household and the servants, "Elle a toute la maison dans sa manche et elle en recoit des lettres" (p. 77).

Marriages were arranged, intricate affairs. One reached out for a catch that would in the least maintain if not further the family's social station. If this meant marrying into a British family, and perhaps even the adoption of the Protestant faith, then interests of the family oblige (p. 80). Albeit an affair of reason marriage was by no

means devoid of romance. If the modern scenario is that love is supposed to propel us into marriage, the ancien regime pattern appears to be the exact reverse. Gadoury provides eloquent testimony of the warmth of feeling between the partners. Writes one wife, who could barely wait for the return of her husband, "J'attends mon cher mari a la fin de ce mois. Voila plus de deux mois que je ne l'ai vu et je trouve le temps terriblement long" (p. 87). The favour of such warm feeling was equally evident in the letters of the men. Monsieur Lavaltrie confided in his wife and daughter that he too found separation interminable, "Ah! dignes et respectables amies, quel sera le terme de notre separation? Pour peu qu'elle soit prolongee, elle sera eternelle" (p. 91). Presumably these sorts of partners had more on their minds than the mere production of an heir to the family upon entering the master bedroom.

Chapter four deals with children, the having of them and the education of them. Gadoury makes plain the dangers inherent in the birthing process. Husbands understandably express their concern for the health of their wives, as 1-2% of all births result in the death of the mother (p. 99). Once a child entered the world, he was invariably put out to some wet-nurse. Frequently enough (48% of the time) this could prove fatal to the survival of the child. (p. 126) From her previous studies Gadoury is well aware of this, however her sources regrettably have little to say concerning the practise. What exactly was the threat a wet-nurse posed to the health of the infant? How was a wet nurse chosen? How did one hear about an available nurse? How in other words was the information communicated? By word of mouth? How did the literate and oral worlds intersect?

What of the emotional bond between parent and child? Conventional wisdom amongst historians since P. Aries, has been that children and parents were somewhat estranged from one another during the pre-modern era. Gadoury introduces a major nuance. Once a Canadian child has passed

the wet-nursing stage, there developed a close bond between parent and child. Pierre Guy bitterly regretted that bond upon the death of his eldest in 1771: " Je ne connaissais pas encore combien il est triste de perdre des enfants de cet age et rien n'apprend mieux a ne pas gater et trop les aimer, les regrets en sont moins vifs. " (p. 124) The implication is that the older the children and the greater the investment in the child, the greater the bond. Gadoury even risks the controversial argument that Canadian parents, in comparison with their European counterparts, spoiled their children. The argument is substantiated by quoting directly from parents who openly admit to this behaviour (pp. 122-23) or, in other instances, by showing proud parents in the act of boasting of one or another of their child's prouesses (p. 104 ff.).

The bond between parent and child is close; parents react poorly to separation from their children. Yet among the elite they do accept the need to send them away to further their education. The father living in Martinique sends his son to school in Montreal, as does another from the Illinois. Other Canadian parents will send children to attend school in France or even London (pp. 112-116). Here the boys are taught to imbibe learning and eventually display leadership over the masses, "pour le bien public" for, as members of the elite, this is to be their destiny (p. 120). Gadoury does not fail to notice that far less attention is paid to the education of women. As a result, not a few noble women, avid for instruction, will enter one of the colony's several convents and become nuns (p. 118).

A couple's extended family was very much a part of a boy's schooling plans especially if the parents lived some distance from the school (pp 111-12). Uncles or aunts were expected to serve as surrogate parents, keeping an ever-watchful eye over junior. Generally speaking, Gadoury argues in chapter five, the extended family was very much a part of "nuclear family life" and not just

with respect to such material concerns as the education of boys. The author stresses the substantial investment of various kin in the emotional life of the family. Husbands or wives view themselves as integral parts of their spouse's family (p. 146). Cousins write to *cousines* as if they had known each other all their life even though they may have met once if at all:

" Si j'avais ma petite fortune entre mes mains, je vous jure que j'irais vous rejoindre. Quel plaisir pour moi de faire votre connaissance, vous assurer de vive voix que je vous aime. Vous me direz que je ne vous connais pas, non de vue mais beaucoup du reste, je connais votre coeur et vos qualites, et elles me seront toujours cheres" (p. 147).

Letters are the wings of rapprochement and comfort between members of like kin. One sister writes to another upon the loss of a husband, "Que ne puis-je etre moi-meme a la place de ma lettre pour pouvoir me rendre aupres de toi et t'aider a soigner ton cher mari" (p. 135). The letter is intended as a physical surrogate, a virtual presence. A sister is close enough to her brother to prompt him to write more often, with a suave twist of humour, " les choses rares dit-on sont trouvees les meilleures, en consequence j'ai trouve ta lettre excellente " (p. 148). In this world of long-distance emotional bonding the letter is not merely an extension of a relationship, it is on occasion in and of itself the relationship; Babet Lacorne writes to her brother in 1773, "Puisque nous sommes prives de nous voir, au moins ecrivons-nous par toutes les occasions que nous aurons" (p. 138).

Letters were even more powerful in as much as they were objects physical and tangible in the eyes of corresponding authors. The same Babet wrote from Paris to her Canadian brother in 1767, expressing her sense of loss at not being with the family, "si cette lettre ainsi que celle de toute la famille me sont fideles elles vous rendront

l'empreinte des larmes que je ne puis retenir" (pp. 154-55).

If the letter is a source of comfort, a strong sense of social contact also comes with it. Members of the Canadian elite are in the habit of socialising with those privileged members whom they count foremost among their immediate entourage, i.e. their family. The preference for family over other kinds of society made virtual snobs of them. Madame de Saint-Ours, the wife of a Canadian gent, thus lamented her isolation from friends and family in France: "Rien n'est si bon que la compagnie des parents et amis. Je regarde toujours comme un malheur tres grand l'eloignement dans lequel nous vivons; les etrangers ne sont supportables qu'en passant" (p. 155).

*La famille dans son intimité*, can be read on a number of levels. The extracts from the letters, of which there are many, provide a sense of the epistolary tone of the day. These people expressed themselves in writing with eloquence. In this they were unlike the majority of the population of their day, which lived life within the confines of an oral culture. Indeed they lived and thought differently when compared to ourselves, the family intervened in marriage, as well as the education of the children, especially the boys. In the absence of a sustained implication on the part of the state in social and educational institutions the family as institution was called upon to exercise a good deal of initiative in these manners. The family values of kin solidarity and family networking, were essential to the production and reproduction of the 18th century elite. One wonders if these values were not carried forward in the following century when a new elite of Papineau's, Viger's etc., sent their boys away to school, exchanging news, gossip, and social ties by post.

Notwithstanding the qualities of the book, a few criticisms are in order. Chapter six on disease, death and faith is not strong. Serge Gagnon has dug deeper into the history of death, albeit for

a different period.[5] A more detailed discussion of the care of new-born infants will be found in A. Lachance's new book.[6] The suggestion that there was no such thing as a popular religion, and that the church hierarchy had the full run of the Canadian religious mentality (p. 173) is, perhaps gratuitous. The study of popular culture in New France and Lower Canada is only just beginning; who knows what scholars in the future will come up with. The distinction between a noble and bourgeois sensibility--the latter were allegedly more formal, more moralising in their education with children may wrest on a thin body of evidence (p. 174). Finally while the author always provides us with the identity of the corresponding parties, she does not always tell us where the two were writing from. This can be a source of no small amount of frustration for the geographical enthusiast.

All in all this is a pleasant read. One in which it is easy to identify with such timeless emotions as the blues of solitude, love for one's mate, the fear and sense of loss resulting from death and the joy of raising children. Human beings spend so much of their lives wrapped up in these sorts of concerns, historians can ill afford to ignore this subject matter. Mme Gadoury invites other scholars to explore with her, the various dimensions of l'intime in Canadian history. I for one do hope that they will pick up on her invitation.

Notes:

[1]. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

[2]. James O. Robertson, *All our Yesterdays. A Century of Family Life in an American Small Town*, New York, Harper Collins, 1993.

[3]. Dirk Hoerder, *Creating Societies, Immigrant Lives in Canada*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999. For a vivid portrait of the Toronto elite during the colonial period based on family correspondence See: Katherine M.J. McKenna, *A Life of Propriety. Anne Murray Powell and Her Family, 1755-1849*, Mon-

treil and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.

[4]. Jane Harrison, *Until Next Year. Letter Writing and the Mail in the Canadas, 1640-1830*, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997.  
5 Serge Gagnon, *Mourir hier et aujourd'hui*, Quebec, Presses de l'Universite Laval, 1987.

[6]. Andre Lachance, *Vivre, aimer at mourir en Nouvelle-France. La vie quotidienne aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siecles*, Montreal, Libre Expression, 2000. The two books by Gadoury and Lachance complement one another.

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