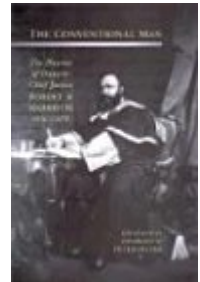


**Peter Oliver, ed..** *The Conventional Man: The Diaries of Ontario Chief Justice Robert A. Harrison, 1856-1878*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. xii + 644 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8020-8842-0.



**Reviewed by** Kurt Korneski

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Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, Canadian social historians have provided a host of richly detailed studies of marginalized men and women. However valuable these studies, scholars have been less inclined to inquire into the lives and thoughts of elites with the intention of understanding inter-, and to a lesser degree, intra-class relations from the perspective of those who occupied the upper rungs of the class ladder. Peter Oliver's *The Conventional Man*, thus, is of some value as a source. Harrison was born in Montreal on August 3, 1833. He attended Upper Canada College and at the age of sixteen began to study law. He earned his bachelor of civil law degree in 1855 and began working with such prominent men as John Ross, Robert Baldwin, and John A. Macdonald. Though he served as a municipal and federal politician, he spent most of his professional life practicing and writing about law. It was, in some sense, as an outgrowth of his professional aspirations or, more accurately, owing to the fact that he believed he was "destined for great things," that he undertook to begin a daily record of his life at the age of twenty-three (pp. 4-5).

Despite Harrison's self-congratulatory rationale for starting the diary, and even though he rarely missed an opportunity to approvingly include virtually every compliment paid to him, it is not primarily a personal testament to his own supposed greatness. In addition to expected information about prominent Ontario legal and political figures, entries range from skeletal descriptions of the events of particular days, to accounts of everything from Harrison's struggle to resist the temptation to succumb to his sexual urges following the death of his first wife, to discussions of elite Victorian courting rituals. Beyond providing insight into the life and thought of one prominent Ontario lawyer, thus, the often detailed accounts of everyday life offer an entry point into, among other things, elite religious practices, the relationships between elites and working-class men and women, gender relations, and, not surprisingly, the worlds of late-nineteenth-century law and politics in Ontario.

Although the array of subject matter found in Harrison's musings makes the diary potentially useful to a variety of scholars, those of particular interest are scattered entries dealing with work-

ing-class men and women. This observation should not be taken as suggesting that Harrison was particularly concerned with the condition of Toronto's burgeoning proletariat in the 1860s and 1870s. Nor does Harrison have much to say about the working-class men and women who appeared in his court. Nevertheless, Harrison did describe some working-class men and women, namely those who whom he hired as servants. Thus, even though the diary is centrally a source for understanding life within elite communities, it is also useful for understanding the relations between classes and the significance thereof for Victorian elites in Ontario as well.

More specifically, his means of speaking about working-class men and women indicate both the significance of and ambiguities pertaining to that relationship. His general practice of, for example, referring to working-class men and women by first name only and to his "social equals" by their full names and formal titles, suggests that class as a lived historical experience had imprinted itself on his consciousness to a significant extent. This conception also manifested itself in other ways as well. In addition to placing demands on those in his pay, for example, he also apparently thought it acceptable to call on their family members as well. On January 12, 1872, for example, Harrison's wife, Johanna, experienced difficulty in breast feeding their newly born child. Harrison's own efforts, those of two "young pups," and a breast pump failed to bring about the desired effect. The couple, having no wet nurse, thought it reasonable "to send for the gardeners's wife who about ten o'clock came to Englefield [Harrison's residence] and nursed the baby for the night" (p. 433).

Additionally, the diary provides insight into more overtly antagonistic facets of the relationships between Harrison and the workers that he employed. In particular, theft appears to have been a not uncommon way for marginalised men and women to subsidize their wages. Though of-

ten brief, many of the selections that Oliver presents include references to Harrison's dismissal of his help for their tendency to help themselves to the fruit and berries that grew in his garden, the food in his pantry, and to household items (see, for example, pp. 364, 365, 428, 464, 474).

Extensive as the 644 page volume is, it represents only about 30 percent of all of the entries that Harrison wrote over the course of 22 years. The entries themselves are organized chronologically rather than thematically. In addition to the diary entries themselves, Oliver provides a lengthy introduction in which he discusses Harrison's life, explains central aspects of the social realities in which Harrison lived, and provides his own suggestions about the possible utility of this document to researchers. In addition to this useful introduction, Oliver also provides an appendix of biographies of key men and women who figure into Harrison's entries. Both Oliver's commentary and the appendix help to deepen our understanding of Harrison's musings and, more generally speaking, to make the diary a self-contained document which allows a glimpse of the world of Victorian elites.

If there are causes for complaint, they lie with the fact that readers might grow bored with the many brief listings of the events of Harrison's day. While, clearly, some of this sort of information is useful in providing us with a feel for the rhythm of Harrison's life, portions of it probably could have been either replaced with other, more informative entries, or simply dropped. The other main criticisms that might be levelled have less to do with the diary itself and more to do with Oliver's presentation of the work. To his credit, Oliver avoids an overly celebratory accounting of Harrison and his life and achievements in what is seemingly an effort to paint a compelling portrait of a real human being--failings included. He views the fact that the diary reveals the "experience of the individual" as, in some sense, a corrective to

social historians' emphasis on "aggregates, collectivities, and statistics" (p. 9). Yet, it is not clear that this dichotomous conceptualization of "the individual" and "society" allows us to arrive at the most satisfying understanding of Harrison, or of what Harrison's case could reveal about the changing nature of the more general social reality of which he was a part. What would have been welcome is an explicit effort at placing Harrison within the politico-economic order in which he existed. As is evidenced by the fact that he lived in a mansion on Spadina Road near Queen Street, Harrison accumulated a considerable fortune during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. It would have been useful to know, for example, both the sources of and how he invested that wealth. Considering these questions would have facilitated placing Harrison within broader transformations that informed the shape of economic and social life during his lifetime. Finally, the book lacks an index. Thus, those interested in sporadically-mentioned, but nevertheless valuable subjects like Harrison's thoughts about and interactions with working-class men and women, will have to plow through a considerable amount of marginally relevant material.

In any event, Oliver has done an admirable job of presenting and making accessible a valuable document. These selections from the Harrison diaries will undoubtedly figure into the works of social, political, and legal historians in the future.

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