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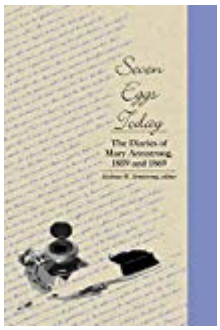
Mary J. Anderson, ed.. *The Life Writings of Mary Baker McQuesten, Victorian Matriarch.* Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2004. xxii + 337 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-88920-437-9.



Jackson W. Armstrong, ed.. *Seven Eggs Today: The Diaries of Mary Armstrong, 1859 and 1869.* Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004. xvi + 228 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-88920-440-9.

Reviewed by Alyson E. King

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These two books, *Seven Eggs Today: The Diaries of Mary Armstrong, 1859 and 1869* and *The Life Writings of Mary Baker McQuesten, Victorian Matriarch*, provide unique snapshots into the lives of two women in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ontario, using diaries and letters. The two forms provide alternative ways of looking into the lives of individual women and, therefore, different types of information. On the one hand, Mary Wickson Armstrong was decidedly middle class. Her diaries were written without the expectation that they would be read by anyone other than herself. Mary Baker McQuesten, on the other hand, was considerably more well-to-do, at least until her husband's death. Her letters were written and purposefully saved in the expectation that they would be read at least by other members of the family, and often with the forethought that the family would be restored to a prominent place in society. These books both add to the fields of life writing and Canadian history, as well as providing access to new materials for the study of Canadian women's lives in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Residing in Yorkville, just north of York (Toronto) at the time, Mary Armstrong kept diaries in part as a record of her accounts. Her diaries of 1859 and 1869 record the minutiae of daily life such as the number of eggs her hens produced each day, the price she received for them, as well as a summary of her sewing and activities outside the home. Mary McQuesten lived in

Hamilton, Ontario, and wrote regular letters to various members of her extended family and to her friends. The letters describe the daily routine of her home, the activities and health of herself and the immediate family, and her concerns about money and the family's future.

The lives of Mary Wickson Armstrong and Mary Baker McQuesten were separated by more than the distance between Yorkville and Hamilton. They were separated by their life circumstances as well as generation. Mary Wickson was born in 1819, and married Phillip Armstrong, a butcher and farmer, in 1837. They resided in Yorkville, just north of York, for almost fifty years. At the time, their farm was outside the city limits, but still within walking distance of the omnibus which went downtown regularly. Mary Armstrong's life was centred on the daily chores of her farm: milking, gathering eggs, churning butter, sewing, and knitting, in addition to caring for her home and making meals. She usually had a "girl" to help her with the chores, but Mary did as much work as any of her helpers. Even with her regular work, she often found the time to go visiting and shopping in the city.

Mary Baker was born thirty years later in 1849 into an upper-middle-class family and married Isaac B. McQuesten, a lawyer and son of a prominent and wealthy Hamilton industrialist, in 1873. Like Mary Armstrong, Mary McQuesten's expectations for her future with her new husband were good. Isaac McQuesten, however, failed to live up to those expectations. While the pair apparently had a loving marriage, McQuesten's propensity for alcohol was his undoing. Isaac inherited his family home and took over the family finances upon his father's death in 1885. In 1857, Dr. Calvin McQuesten had retired with a fortune of $500,000, plus real estate and other investments. Within three years of taking control of his father's estate, Isaac had lost the family fortune through bad management and poor health. Isaac apparently suffered from alcoholism, insomnia, and depression, which later evolved into mental illness. When Isaac died in March 1888, apparently as a result of mixing a sleeping draught with alcohol, Mary McQuesten was left with no money and six children to raise. When her husband died, Mary McQuesten was already well-known among the volunteers in the Presbyterian missionary societies of the period. In spite of her difficult circumstances, Mary McQuesten maintained her commitment to social reform, holding executive office, giving speeches, conducting meetings, and travelling for the cause.

Although Mary Armstrong's diaries cover a fairly short period of time, the natural routine of farm life is apparent. One thing that stands out in the Armstrong diaries is the comparative independence that Mary Armstrong has within the family. Rather than relying on her husband for a household allowance and to maintain the household accounts, Mary Armstrong uses eggs "to make a little money, which I should have the pleasure of spending" (p. 121). With her own earnings, Mary Armstrong purchased the extras for the household such as the "Melodian", which she says "has been a source of endless amusement to us all" (p. 121). As well as the extras, Mary Armstrong uses her earnings to pay for any outings that she goes on, even when her husband is with her. For example, she comments "Pa was so kind as to treat Thos, and me not only to our Tickets but to the Omnibus beside" (p. 121). Even on her birthday in 1869, when her husband offered to buy her some oranges or some other thing, she declined, saying "I want to save every copper I can get for my dear & only son and I thought papa would take a note that he laid out nothing for me & put that to my account" (p. 141). She also details the household accounts at the end of each diary, recording bills paid and needlework accomplished.

Mary Armstrong generally comes across as a contented person. One day she comments "I think I could not live without work (in more sense than

one) but I do really like it" (p. 146). Later that week, she feels "disheartened" when thieves stole a dozen of her hens, but she also says "I am sure I bear no malice to the thieves, whoever they are & that is one comfort to me" (p. 147). The trials of life are well-documented in even these short diaries. She describes raising her stepson's daughter after the death of the child's mother, as well as her father's illness, ending her 1869 diary mid-sentence after her father's death. Ultimately, Mary Armstrong's diaries do not document the "great" events of early Ontario or even Toronto. But they do clearly demonstrate some of the everyday details that are not documented in other types of documents.

Mary McQuesten's letters clearly lay out her efforts at bringing her family back into the social strata to which they belonged. She ensured that her sons received an appropriate education. One daughter, Ruby, helped to provide an income and support Calvin's education, by working as a teacher, while the other two, Mary and Hilda, helped their mother in the home and with her charitable work. All her children were clearly intelligent, but at least two of them suffered from mental illness. The eldest son, Calvin, had trouble "finding himself" as we would say today. He worked as a journalist but eventually left to pursue his passion, the ministry. His troubles in this field led to depression and breakdown. Her youngest daughter, Edna, had won a scholarship in classics to Queen's but was never well enough to attend. She suffered several breakdowns and was eventually institutionalized where she underwent electric shock therapy. It was only her youngest son, Thomas, who was truly successful in redeeming the family name. He showed his promise early on, so Mary concentrated the family's resources on his education. Thomas Baker McQuesten went on to become a prominent politician in Hamilton and Ontario. He became very well-known for his participation in the Hamilton Parks Board, among other groups, and the "City Beautiful" movement. He commissioned many parks and building projects, including Gage Park and Chedoke Civic Golf Course. He was also instrumental in moving McMaster University from Toronto to Hamilton in 1931.[1]

Mary McQuesten was truly a matriarch in the sense that she maintained close control over the lives of her children. She determined their life paths, encouraged and supported them in their roles she planned for them and discouraged any straying from those paths. None of her children ever married; Mary McQuesten broke up any emerging romances. One theory for her actions is that she feared the passing down of the family's problems with mental illness. Another is that with her family's straitened circumstances no one of what she considered to be appropriate quality came forward as potential partners.

One similarity between the two women's lives is the toll that caring for the home and family took on their health. Mary Armstrong writes in January 1869, "I am not quite well enough to walk after washing and churning--so it is a great benefit to me to have my son so near for I feel certain, I shall not be able to walk about as I have done" (p. 136). A few days later, she is again feeling unwell, with an infected finger that kept her awake at night and prevented her from carrying on with her daily activities to the extent of requiring help with dressing and doing her hair (p. 137). Mary McQuesten's health was seriously undermined by the difficulties of raising her six children alone on a greatly reduced income. Her home, Whitehern, had been placed in trust by her husband and was so protected. She had a small income from the rental of another family property and a few remaining investments, but she faced severely constrained circumstances for most of her widowhood. For example, she was only able to hire outside help for heavy work, relying instead on her daughters and her own labour for maintaining her fairly large home.

Jackson W. Armstrong began the research into his great-great-great-grandmother's diaries in

an effort to synthesize his family's history. What started as a family project with his father evolved into the publication of his ancestor's diaries and extensive background research into the life of Mary Armstrong and the place and times in which she lived. The introductory chapters comprise as many pages as the diaries themselves. Jackson Armstrong's extensive research and detailed footnotes provide a very useful background to the diaries. He places the family events into the larger context of the province and the world. Mary's history is detailed from the time of her birth in Surrey, England. Most of Mary's childhood was spent in the unstable economic and social times of early-nineteenth-century Britain. In 1834, Mary Wickson's family left England for a new life in the new world. At fifteen years of age, Mary was the third child in a family of nine children ranging in age from eighteen to four. Only three years later, Mary started yet another new phase of her life with her marriage to Phillip Armstrong. Her new husband was raised in the more rural community of Great Corby near the city of Carlisle. Also from a large family, Phillip was the youngest son of eight children, born in 1808 after the death of his weaver father. The details of Phillip's life after his mother's death in 1824 are unclear. He probably left England sometime before 1829--his daughter Anne was born in Upper Canada in 1830. He and his first wife had three children, two of whom died in infancy. His first wife died in 1836 at age twenty-nine of consumption. A year later, he married nineteen-year-old Mary Wickson. By this time, Phillip had become a butcher.

Mary Armstrong's only child, Thomas, was born in 1838, a year after her marriage to Phillip. Her step-daughter, Anne, was eight years old by this time. During this period, Phillip and Mary's financial security seems to have been becoming more stable with the purchase in 1839 of a six-acre property on the west side of Yonge Street, a few blocks south of what is now St. Clair Avenue. The decades of the 1840s and 1850s were the ones during which Toronto (York) and Canada West saw significant changes. Huge population increases and the expansion of Toronto further north, the influx of impoverished Irish immigrants, and the political turmoil must have affected Mary and Phillip, but their views are not documented. By the time Mary started her first surviving diary in January 1859, she was thirty-nine years of age and had been married for twenty-one years. Her son Thomas was twenty years old and a medical student. Her step-granddaughter, Mary Ann Pallett, was eleven years old and had been living with Mary and Phillip since her mother Anne's death in 1855. Mary's brother, Samuel Wickson, was living with the family at Rose Hill and was Phillip's business partner. This first diary documents Mary's life for the first five months of 1859. The second diary starts up in January 1869. By this time, Mary was approaching her fiftieth birthday, and the family was more affluent. She still lived with her husband at the Rose Hill property, but her son Thomas was married with three children and was a practicing physician in York Mills, just north of Rose Hill. Her brother and step-granddaughter had also moved out of the house. This second diary ends abruptly in mid-sentence in August 1869, shortly after the death of her father. Her husband, Phillip, lived until 1869 and Mary lived until 1881, when she died of heart disease at age sixty-two.

In addition to the details about the world surrounding Mary's experiences, Jackson Armstrong explores the importance and meaning of diaries. Noting that there are relatively few published women's diaries for the period between 1840 and 1870, Armstrong argues that Mary's brief diaries provide "a rich glimpse of Canadian life in the 1850s and 1860s" (p. 15). Rather than being told from the point of view of the colonial elite, Mary's diaries detail the life of a decidedly middle-class woman. As such, this volume is a valuable primary source for women's history and private life. Why Mary decided to keep a diary is not clear, but Jackson Armstrong suggests that she seems familiar with the form; that either she or another rela-

tive may have kept a diary prior to 1859. Armstrong also suggests some possible reasons for Mary to have kept such a diary by exploring the impetus behind other women's diaries. He notes that Mary seems to have reread and edited her entries, implying a process of reflection on her narrative and on her exploration of self. Commonly, significant events such as the New Year, birthdays, or weddings prompted women to write summative entries that allowed the writer "to assess her life, count her blessings, evaluate her behaviour, and anticipate the future" (p. 19). One of Mary's first entries of the new year in 1859 stated explicitly that she intended "to take stock, and see how I stand in the world" (p. 87).

Although the 1869 diary covers a longer period of time, it is the shorter of the two. Armstrong postulates that by 1869 Mary had achieved a level of serenity and had less need to work through her anxieties about life and her mortality. The first diary contains several entries related to illness and death that are longer than most of the entries. By the writing of her second diary, there is less of a focus on death and dying. Some women used diaries as a means for working through their grief and loss, and Mary seems to have done so as well. At the same time, the death of a family member could cause the diarist to stop writing completely; Mary ends her second diary in the middle of a description of her father's death. Mary's diaries are, in many ways, a typical example of the life writing of Anglo-American women of her period.

Mary Anderson began her research into the letters of Mary McQuesten after a chance visit to Whitehern Museum in Hamilton, Ontario. There, she found that some 10,000 pages of personal letters dating from 1819 to 1968 had been preserved. The book grew from Anderson's research on the letters for her doctoral dissertation at McMaster University. At the same time that the book was in formation, she and her daughter, Janelle Baldwin, began a project to digitize a larger number of the family letters. Funded by Canada's Digital Collections (Industry Canada), a searchable website of the family's writings is now available to the public. The book provides a concise narrative about the McQuesten family and the website http://www.whitehern.ca complements it by making available a larger body of some 3,000 letters, writings and photographs by three generations of the extended McQuesten family. For the book, Anderson selected about 150 letters and life writings from the approximately one thousand letters written by Mary McQuesten between 1873 and 1934 that highlighted key moments in McQuesten's life.

For teachers of women's history and Canadian history, the combination of the book, the digitized documents, and the Whitehern Museum provides the potential for developing assignments using all three resources. Anderson's introductory chapters examine Mary Baker McQuesten's life from childhood until her death, her work with the Presbyterian missionary societies, and the place of letters as literature and life-writing. Access to the extensive digitized collection of family letters provides the opportunity to introduce students to research with primary documents without needing to visit an archive. For those located in the Hamilton area, a visit to the gracious Whitehern, home to the McQuesten family for 116 years before it was deeded to the city of Hamilton upon the death of the final member of the family Rev. Calvin McQuesten in 1968, is like a trip back in time. Because the family was impoverished in 1888, very little was changed beyond some redecorating and the addition of electricity and indoor plumbing. The garden has also been maintained a closely as possible in its 1930s state. Visitors are even greeted at the door by a "butler" in period dress.[2]

Both Armstrong and Anderson are successful in establishing the importance of their subjects' lives in the context of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ontario. With relatively few published diaries or letters from the mid- to late-nine-

teenth century women's point of view, these books fill an important niche in the history of women in Ontario. Both books have solid introductions and are well documented. Armstrong and Anderson both describe the intricacies of the family relationships and friendships and set the context of what life was like in their subjects' respective periods, elaborating on the trials and tribulations that both women would have faced. There are extensive footnotes throughout the letters and diaries that clarify and elaborate on the people, places, and events that are mentioned. Researchers of family life and women's history will find these books useful resources. Teachers of Canadian history will also find them useful in exposing students to the value of life writing in understanding the history of women's lives.

Notes

[1]. There have been two published biographies of Thomas McQuesten. Roland Barnsley, *Thomas B. McQuesten* (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1987) and John Best, *Thomas Baker McQuesten: Public Works. Politics and Imagination* (Hamilton: Corinth Press, 1991).

[2]. Visit to Whitehern Museum, July 10, 2004.