In Reading the Diaries of Henry Trent: The Everyday Life of a Canadian Englishman, 1842-1898, historian J.I. Little transports readers to rural Quebec, England, and British Columbia using fifty-six years’ worth of diaries kept by Henry Trent, a Protestant upper-middle-class English Canadian. Little distinguishes the story from other historical biographies because Trent “left no distinctive mark on history” (p. 12). Rather, the diaries and supplemental materials such as letters and the census track “how the historical changes of the Victorian era marked him, at different stages of his life, as someone of a particular gender, class, and ethnicity” (p. 12). Trent is an interesting case study of a privileged white male who, in some ways, embodied Victorian masculinity but also fell short of fulfilling the expectations placed on him by a society in transition.

The introduction provides brief details of Trent’s upbringing, including the ambiguity around his birth between 1825 and 1827, the loss of his mother at a young age, and the relationship with his overbearing father, George, an English half-pay officer afflicted with mental illness. The family immigrated to Canada in 1836, settling near Drummondville in Lower Canada’s Eastern Townships. Despite the advantages that came with being part of the British/Anglophone majority, the Trent family struggled to achieve the identity and status they coveted.

Little organizes the book chronologically according to what he defines as Trent’s distinct life stages. Broadly, it follows his transition from dutiful son to adventurous wanderer to husband and father. A common thread throughout the book is that Trent was a flawed individual who did not quite fit in the worlds he moved between, namely English gentry, colonial elite, and petite bourgeoisie. Especially, his extended bachelorhood, spotty education (the diary entries are littered with spelling errors), and financial woes clash with the traits associated with the idealized Victorian male. The diaries suggest Trent was aware of his faults and tried to resolve them through self-improvement initiatives, but frustration with his abilities also come through in the text. As Little mentions
in several places, the strained relationship with his father probably contributed to Henry's emotional and financial struggles. The loss of his mother in 1830 certainly had an impact on Henry's dependency and George's mental state, but this event is given minimal attention.

The first section, “Boyhood and Youth,” is organized around themes that stand out in the diary’s early years: Henry’s interest in the outdoors, “sporadic attempts at self-improvement,” and the “strongly dependent relationship with his aloof and authoritarian father” (p. 21). Section 2, “Emerging Manhood: Part 1,” details the family’s movement between Lower Canada and England, the loss of patriarch George, and Henry’s decision to seek gold and adventure in British Columbia’s Cariboo region. “Emerging Manhood: Part 2” explores Henry’s experiences on the West Coast, notably contact with and observations of local Indigenous peoples, his failure to find gold, and the decision to return to Canada East in 1864. Henry then transitions to the next stage of his life, “Manhood,” which Little defines as the period when Henry had matured enough to take on the responsibilities of marriage, fatherhood, and household management. The last section, “Old Age,” follows Henry, wife Eliza, and their children through the obstacles of illness, aging, and food insecurity, peppered with moments of pleasure from grandchildren and leisure. Finally, the conclusion offers a concise assessment of Trent’s experiences within the worlds he lived in and how the diaries fill gaps in information other sources are unable to capture.

As with most diarists, it is unclear how much of the content is curated and if Trent intended for his entries to be read. Certainly, the diaries and Little’s analysis contribute important insights that expand understandings of upper-middle-class life in both the metropole and the edges of the empire, especially how the structural shifts occurring in Victorian society affected families like the Trents with their waning money and influence. This is evident in Henry’s struggle to find a fulfilling vocation that provided a stable income; the dictates of Victorian masculinity meant that the types of labor he enjoyed and may have excelled at, such as cutting wood and trapping, were off-limits to a white male of his status.

In his examination of Henry’s role as husband and father, Little does an excellent job of unraveling some of the complications of Henry’s marriage to Eliza Caya, a Catholic French-Canadian woman who went beyond her expected role to assist the struggling Henry. Little notes how the marriage was impacted by the difficulties of living and farming in rural Quebec and the “bad luck” of having so many female children. A great deal of attention is given to the financial burdens that the couple shouldered to keep their farm, such as their reliance on neighborly networks of support, which aligns with the scholarship on rural culture and reciprocal labor. While Little suggests that Henry was not a remarkable individual, there are areas of his diary that suggest otherwise, including fathering an illegitimate child and the hellish trip that took him from England to Vancouver Island. There are few surviving nineteenth-century diaries of this length, especially from men, so that alone makes the story unique.

At times, the minutiae of the diaries can be overwhelming, and it is easy to get lost in the details. Conversely, some of the content could have benefited from additional context. While Henry’s musings about his encounters with Indigenous peoples illuminate the complexities of Indigenous-settler relations, their validity is uncertain as they are colored by a white male perspective. On several occasions, Little describes Henry as a nurturing and doting father, but it is unclear how that was demonstrated in everyday life. The children’s presence in the diary does not necessarily mean a loving relationship with their father.

For scholars studying rural, gender, environmental, Indigenous, colonial, agricultural, or immigration history, Little’s examination of Henry
Trent's diaries is a useful source for the personal details it lends to these subjects. Especially, as Little argues, “to gain a fuller understanding of rural life in general ... we must turn to first-hand qualitative sources such as personal correspondence, memories, and diaries” (p. 5). Students in a historical methods course will benefit from the questions the book poses about the advantages and limitations of personal diaries as primary sources. Overall, *Reading the Diaries of Henry Trent: The Everyday Life of a Canadian Englishman, 1842-1898* is an engaging and detailed book, especially its examination of “how fragile upper-middle-class status could be for British newcomers” like Henry Trent, who did not “conform to the triumphalist colonial narrative” (p. 151).

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