

Book Reviews

The Challenge of Writing Women's Lives

Henry & Self: The Private Life of Sarah Crease, 1826-1922. Kathryn Bridge. Victoria, BC: Sono Nis Press, 1996; illustrations; 216 pages; ISBN 1-55039-071-6; \$19.95.

My Dearest Wife: The Private and Public Lives of James David Edgar and Matilda Ridout Edgar. Maud J. McLean and Robert M. Stamp. Toronto: Natural Heritage/Natural History Inc., 1998; illustrations; 296 pages; ISBN 1-896219-36-5; \$21.95.

The Life and Letters of Annie Leake Tuttle: Working for the Best. Marilyn F. Whitely, editor. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1999; illustrations; ix+ 147 pgs.; ISBN 0-88920-330X; \$29.95.

Writing women's lives has become increasingly risky. There is not only the search for sources, sometimes a very despairing activity, but also the myriad of prescriptions as to how the process should proceed. Women's lives, we are reminded, have been far more complex than their externals might suggest. So are our own selves. The extent to which we enter the text as authors, both consciously and despite ourselves, has itself become a writing industry. These layers of interrogation and reflection with which we must contend have the potential to render us mute.

Fortunately, Kathryn Bridge, Maude J. McLean and Robert M. Stamp, and Marilyn Fardig Whiteley have not been stifled. Working from varied bodies of data and approaches, they have made visible three quite different Canadian women of the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The daughter of a distinguished English botanist, Sarah Lindley (1826-1922) was early taught to write and to draw, skills that she pursued throughout her lifetime in the form of letter writing, journal keeping, and sketching and water colour painting. In London she married lawyer Henry Crease, who had already ventured to Canada West seeking to improve his financial circumstances and, pursued by creditors, soon headed off there again.

The British Columbia gold rush opened up the possibility of a judicial appointment, whereupon the errant Henry sent for his wife and three young daughters. Arriving in Victoria in February 1860, Sarah guided a family, eventually numbering four daughters and two sons, to the top of the provincial capital's social hierarchy.

Born into a prominent Toronto family ensconced in the Family Compact, Matilda Ridout (1844-1910) was, like Sarah Lindley, educated into the art of letter. Matilda similarly married down, to an ambitious self-made lawyer whose story is, in *My Dearest Wife*, interwoven with, and to a considerable extent allowed to overshadow, her own. Accepting her "roles as wife and mother as natural and normal" (162), Matilda produced nine children and succeeded her husband's legal, literary, and federal political ambitions. As soon as her last child was weaned, she expanded her own horizons, publishing several histories including the only volume written by a woman in the very successful "Makers of Canada" series. As well as being a founder and early president of the Women's Canadian Historical Society, she acted as president of the National Council of Women on Lady Aberdeen's departure for Britain in 1898 and from 1906 to her death.

From a large Nova Scotian farming family, Annie Leake (1839-1934), made her own way through life. She was a teacher in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, matron in the Methodist Church's Chinese Rescue Home in Victoria, and at age 55 wife to a widower with nine children. Eventually, for lack of alternatives, she admitted herself to the Halifax Old Ladies' Home, where she wrote a memoir.

All of the authors have worked hard to give their subjects voice. Bridge interleaves long quotes and even whole letters into a fairly straightforward narrative written from Sarah Crease's perspective. Sarah's voice comes through particularly strongly in the journal she kept while accompanying her husband on an 1880 judicial circuit of the Cariboo, printed as the last third of *Henry & Self*, and in the many reproductions of Sarah's artwork and contemporary photographs. *My Dearest Wife* is explicitly, and innovatively, a joint biography of a husband and wife. Mclean's and

Stamp's principal reliance on James Edgar's daily letters to his wife Matilda, generously quoted along with some of hers to other family members, very effectively creates an intimate family ambience. So do the many photographs, albeit the end result favours his voice over hers. Whiteley is even more concerned to let her subject speak. She introduces each section of Annie Tuttle's memoir, which is then reproduced and supplemented with some two dozen extant letters.

The three books raise interesting general questions. In what should be required reading for anyone attempting a female biography (*Writing a Woman's Life* 1988), Carol Heilbrun shows how diverse women have used writing to acquire a kind of control over their lives not otherwise permitted them. Sarah Crease, Matilda Edgar, and Annie Tuttle all wrote, in part certainly to please others but also, perhaps, "to create a space" (113) for themselves, a respite from the lives in which they found themselves. In other words, the very existence of an abundance of primary material creates its own dilemmas, as does its paucity, which is so often the case for women. Not only that, Heilbrun puts considerable responsibility on biographers, perhaps too much, to move beyond the specifics into interpretation of silences across the life cycle. In *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* (Sara Alpern, ed. 1992), ten women reflect on their own experiences and in every case link their choices for inclusion, and thereby exclusion, to their own lives. The authors of these three books do the same, at least to some extent, in their introductions.

None of the three books - *Henry and Self*, *My Dearest Wife*, *Life and Letters* - is pretentious. Rather than close off discussions, they open them up. Bridge is able to give only a taste of the very extensive Crease family correspondence, in BC Archives, extending across gender and generations. Scholars can draw on the Edgar Family Papers in the Archives of Ontario to interpret Matilda Edgar's perspective on her husband's letters. Annie Tuttle's memoir more tantalizes than explains the role revealed in a ream of Methodist, Presbyterian, and Anglican church publications of the late nineteenth century on evangelical religiosity in single women's lives. We have work to do.

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She Answered Every Call: The Life of Public Health Nurse, Mona Gordon Wilson (1894-1981). Douglas O. Baldwin. Charlottetown, PEI: Indigo Press, 1997; illustrations, bibliography; xx + 318 pages, ISBN 0-9680354-4-2.

Douglas Baldwin has produced a richly descriptive narrative which tells the life story of a little known Prince Edward Island public health nurse/administrator, Mona Gordon Wilson. Although Baldwin's style and the limitations of his sources leave the reader to read between the lines in relation to the larger context of Wilson's work, this biography still adds to a fascinating new literature on the role of public health nursing in the development of the social welfare state. Wilson's long career actually parallels the transformation of the Red Cross from a humanitarian aid organization to a major player in the public health field. Wilson began her career in the post-First World War period by joining the American Red Cross. With her Johns Hopkins nursing friends, Wilson nursed in Russia and the Balkans, demonstrating that it was not only men who enlisted to experience travel, companionship and adventure. Returning to Canada in 1923, Wilson took the new University of Toronto public health nursing course and was then hired by the Red Cross to head Prince Edward Island's new public health program. In the interwar years, the Red Cross was pouring its postwar surplus resources into establishing a network of outpost hospital and nursing stations across Canada, funding university public health nursing programs, teaching home nursing courses and launching the Junior Red Cross. Mirroring Canadian Red Cross policy, Mona Wilson oversaw the transformation of the Red Cross public health program to a permanent program in the provincial government's newly created Department of Health a decade later. While the male-dominated and state-supported Red Cross helped facilitate the process, along with provincial governments, of turning public health services into the emerging social welfare state, the organization's prominent role masks the considerable contribution already made by early women's organizations that utilized the professional support of public health nurses.

Typical of public health nursing leaders, Wilson was born into an upper middle class family