THE DIARY OF A COUNTRY CLERGYMAN, 1848–1851: JAMES REID

by M.E. Reisner, ed.
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In 1924 editor John Beresford described the diary of an eighteenth-century English country parson as follows:

> Reading the Diary of the Reverend James Woodforde is like embarking on a long voyage down a very tranquil stream. There is no grand or exciting scenery; there are no rapids, nor is there any expectation of the sea. But there are green fields on either side, and trees, and a very pleasant murmuring of water; there is the harmony which comes only from controlled movement, and there is peace.1

This is the pastoral vision that attracted genteel British settlers to the Eastern Townships in the early nineteenth century,[2] but the reality would prove to be much harsher. For example, while Lucy Peel's diary never ceased to express admiration for the natural beauties of her environment, even in winter, she and her husband gave up after less than four years and returned to England.[3]

Of more humble origins in Perthshire, Scotland, the Reverend James Reid did not have the same option, and his substantial British subsidy of £200 per year held him to the one parish of St Armand East from his ordination as an Anglican cleric in 1815 until his death in 1865. During that half century Reid produced a remarkable diary of thirty-six volumes, a written record that would have provided us with an unparalleled window onto everyday life in a nineteenth-century Canadian community, had all the volumes survived. Unfortunately, in a fit of depression Reid destroyed thirty-two volumes in 1864, though this did not prevent him from producing two more before he died. The surviving four volumes, deposited in the Montreal Diocesan Archives, were largely ignored by historians until M.E. Reisner transcribed and edited the first two, covering 1848 to 1851, as her Laval doctoral dissertation. This largely unrevised dissertation

will now find a larger audience with its publication by McGill-Queen's University Press.[4]

It was clearly a labour of love, for while Reid's careful handwriting presents few challenges to the transcriber, Dr Reisner has devoted a remarkable amount of energy to footnoting his more obscure references and particularly to identifying the local people he refers to. Appended are useful biographies of the principle characters in the diary. While all this detail may be of more interest to descendants of these families than to the general reader or historian, it does clarify the picture of village life that emerges from Reid's diary.

And that picture is not nearly as bucolic as the one painted in the Reverend Woodforde's journal, much as Reid longed to live the life of the idealized English country parson. To begin with, the village of Frelighsburg, lying close to the American border, was peopled largely by families of Puritan Yankee descent. Many of these practical-minded people were quite content to belong to the Anglican Church while it provided them with baptisms, marriages, and funerals, as well as Sunday sermons and even a church building, with very little financial sacrifice on their part. But few of them appear to have established a close identity with Anglicanism, or a strong attachment to the dour Reverend Reid. For the historian of religion, Reid's journal serves as a useful reminder not to put too much stock in the essentially positive reports that were submitted to the SPG. Reid described how some of his colleagues succeeded in pulling the wool over the eyes of visiting church officials—indeed, the reports from his own parish are much more positive than the image that emerges from his diary. In a sense, though, the Anglican Church could be said to have accomplished what its imperialist British sponsors wished. As the largest Protestant denomination in the Eastern Townships, it had obviously contributed to the region's increasingly conservative religious and political culture, as comparison with the situation on the other side of the forty-ninth parallel would attest. While Reid's home lay only a few miles from Vermont, however, Reisner's introduction generally avoids the broader cross-border context, as it does a discussion of where Reid himself sat within the doctrinal spectrum of the Church of England.[5]

Reid may have been a rather bitter and lonely septuagenarian when he was recording the thoughts that are published in the two journals published here, but he was involved intimately enough with the community to report on its persistent infighting and frequent scandals. As Reisner notes, during this three-year period the Frelighsburg area saw smuggling, counterfeiting, night-raiding,

bigamy, burglary, breach of trust, horse theft, riot and tumult, assault, and murder.[6] Particularly remarkable were the events unleashed by Richard Freligh, who owned most of the village's land, when he signed a will disinheriting his daughter shortly before his death. The flamboyant and feisty Jane Freligh challenged this will on the grounds that it illegally ignored that of her previously-deceased mother. Reid's diary consequently includes many interesting pages on women's property rights, the machinations of an unprincipled trustee, and the bitter but fruitless fight that Jane engaged in to claim her inheritance. In a final angry gesture, Jane's gravestone denounced the "destroyers of [her] heritage," and threatened "revenge" upon them. Because it was rejected by Reid, she still lies in an unmarked grave.

Unlike the unmarried Woodforde, Reid's sizeable family introduced the hard reality of economic concerns into his diary, as well as pulling him into the personal lives and affairs of the community. His four sons had left the household by the time the first of the surviving journals begins, but their establishment had cost him a good deal of money and much of his journal writing records his incessant worries about them. The eldest son, Charles Peter, was the incumbent of Compton by this time, but the Anglican Church was struggling in this parish, and he was prone to severe headaches and depression. Malcolm, the favourite son, had become bankrupt in Montreal after his father had given him a substantial sum to establish a business. Having moved to New Orleans in an attempt to regain some of this money, Malcolm died there of cholera, leaving his father distraught and guilt-ridden as the second diary volume closes. The black sheep of the family, John, had drifted to the western states, and appeared to be settling down to married life, but Reid's last volume would record his death in the Civil War's infamous Andersonville internment camp. The fourth son, James, was a local farmer who continued to be dependent on his father's financial assistance. As for the two daughters, Jane and Nancy, they were the chief comfort in Reid's life. His diary is unstinting in their praise while also making it clear that his interference prevented either of them from marrying.

There is much fodder here for historians of gender and of the family, but Reisner's introduction fails to make reference to any of the extensive and important literature on these themes,[7] or to the published letters of three other Eastern Townships families of this era.[8] Interesting comparisons could, in addition, be made with Reid's Congregationalist contemporary, Reverend Ammi Parker, who also

served an Eastern Townships parish throughout his lengthy life.[9] While Reid was intimately involved in local public schooling and the temperance movement, and his diary makes frequent comments about the annexation movement and provincial politics, Reisner has also ignored all the studies on these subjects, including one on Reid's own parish of St Armand.[10]

Missing as well is any reference to the extensive literature on early American spiritual autobiography or to the history of diaries in general.[11] G.A. Starr writes that: "A diary not only supplied the prospective autobiographer with a record of his spiritual fortunes, it developed in him the habit of observing and interpreting every outward and inward occurence for the sake of its spiritual significance. For these and other reasons, diary-keeping was a highly recommended spiritual exercise."[12] Unlike the Outlet's religiously radical Ralph Merry IV, however, Reid did not write to keep a record of his spiritual experiences.[13] Despite his own Calvinist background, he seldom expressed doubts about the state of his soul, though Reisner speculates that he may have adopted the habit of keeping a diary while studying in the Haldane brothers' Congregational seminary in Edinburgh.

Reid's diary ressembles the more worldly letter-journal of Lucy Peel, though he could afford to be more frank than her because his only audience was himself. On the most basic level, Reid's journal was like that of others who farmed (including Merry and Peel) in that it kept a useful record of what date certain certain crops were planted, what the price of livestock was in previous years, when the first and last frosts hit, and so on. But Reid went far beyond these mundane observations, and the detail and care taken is so great that one can only assume that it served some inner need. Starr writes that those interested in gaining psychological insights from spiritual diaries are likely to be disappointed because of their formulaic nature,[14] but, paradoxically again, Reid's essentially non-spiritual diary provides many clues to his psychological motivations. One of those motivations was quite clearly to help compensate in his own mind for his obscurity as (to use his words) a "backwoods" clergyman. Reid was not without ambition, for he was an assiduous reader of books on religion and other topics, and he subscribed to newspapers from Montreal, New York and London. He also published quite extensively, as Reisner's very useful bibliography of his works reveals.

Reisner suggests that Reid "possessed neither the gift nor the inclination" to assume administrative roles in the diocese, but his long-

standing leadership role in the local schools system suggests that he was quite a competent manager. One might speculate, then, that his sense of family obligation may have kept him from seeking positions that would take him away on a regular basis while his children were at home. Or perhaps he felt diffident about his lack of the Oxford education that a number of his colleagues had. Whatever the reasons for Reid's persistence in a single rural community at a time when clergymen were increasingly mobile,[15] his diary makes a number of references to his resentment at being underappreciated by the church's hierarchy and the younger generation of clergy. Reisner points out that Reid burned his diaries after the new bishop had mistakenly reported that a neighbouring minister was stationed in Reid's parish. Feeling that fifty years of labour had gone unrecognized and unappreciated, Reid's destruction of most of the volumes represented a symbolic (and literal, as well) wiping out of his own past.

Of course, Reid may have always planned to destroy the diary because of its rather frank and often bitter nature. As Reisner notes, if Reid "intended the diary to serve as a record, it was one from which he planned to draw extracts, not one to which others would have access."[16] One of the most striking features of his entries is their constant attempts at self-justification. Reid was quick to take offence, which caused him to be abrupt with others on many occasions. There was no necessity to explain such petty offences to a posterity that would otherwise have no record of them, but he may have had a subconscious need to justify his often uncharitable behaviour while venting his spleen still further in the safety of his own study. The diary kept by Reid, who was increasingly deaf by this time, quite clearly served the purpose that intimate conversation did for those of a more sociable nature or less restrictive occupation.

Reid rarely expressed contrition even in his diary, and one small example provides interesting insight into his motivation in keeping one. When one of his parishioners complained that the church was too cold during the Sunday services because the fire had not been built early enough in the morning, Reid blasted him:

> I told him that I was in Church every Sunday morning by eight of the clock, built the fires, and remained to keep them up till the people came, but that they could not expect that I would come down from the desk to put wood in the stove after divine service was begun—that if they felt cold there was wood enough present but not one of them would rise to put in a stick—that besides, almost every one left the door ajar when he came in which con-

> tributed much to keep the church cold. I told him that I did not think there was another clergyman in the Province that built fires in the churches as I did but it seems that if one does as much as ever he can that there was nothing for his pains, but ingratitude.[17]

This incident clearly continued to trouble Reid, for a week later he wrote, "I made fires in the two Stoves a little after 7 in the morning and kept by them increasing the heat until the congregation came," and he did so again on subsequent Sundays. To some degree this was probably a subconscious *mea culpa* but Reid was clearly also playing the role of Christian martyr—both to others and to himself.

If Puritan conversion narratives reflected the origins of modern individual consciousness, as some scholars have argued, Reid's preoccupation with self and family defines him essentially as a modern man—even an alienated one in some respects. Contributing to that alienation, paradoxically, was the fact that his strictly conservative views about the nature and status of the Church of England conflicted with the essentially liberal attitudes of his community. And these were attitudes he had to comply with to some extent, as when he agreed to provide a burial service for an unbaptized infant: "I only read the 39[th] Psalm, and a prayer out of Dr. Stewart's Book. Had I refused, there would have been an offence. The people think they are entitled to whatever they ask from the Clergy, but themselves bound to nothing" (p. 14). Unable to vent his real feelings in public, or seemingly even to his family, Reid retreated to his poorly-heated study where he could scratch out his frustrations and loneliness in what Reisner aptly calls his "growlery."

Personal journals will always fascinate us as avenues into what people "really" think behind the polite masks worn for the sake of social survival, but they often disappoint because of the mundane or unreflective nature of the entries. James Reid did not dig particularly deeply into his own psyche, for he was a firm believer in social and religious conformity. But the situation he found himself in led to powerful dissonances, including that between his firm belief in the apostolic succession of the episcopacy and his resentment of the autocratic role played by his bishops. In short, Reid's journal is more than an account of daily community and family routines, interesting as those may be. It also provides interesting insights into the "mentalité" of an otherwise obscure country parson. From the perspective of understanding society in the past, Reid may have been only one individual, but Felicity Nussbaum reminds us that all types of autobiographical texts issue "from the culture as much as the individual author."[18]

Limited as Reisner's introduction is in terms of the social, political, religious, cultural, and broader regional context of Reid's diary, she deserves a great deal of credit for the painstaking work that went into the preparation of these two volumes for publication, including a very useful index. Reisner's skillful and judicious clarification of the local context is based on thorough research in the census reports, notary files, and court records, as well as the local and Montreal newspapers. This book will be of interest not only to those curious about the history of St Armand and the Eastern Townships, but to anyone wishing to gain a first-hand account of family life and gender roles, the nature of class and community, religious and popular culture, and the role and outlook of the clergy in a mid-nineteenth-century rural community.

NOTES

1 John Beresford, ed., *The Diary of a Country Parson: The Reverend James Woodforde, vol. 1, 1758–1781* (Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1924, reprinted 1968), 7.

2 See J.I. Little, "Canadian Pastoral: Promotional Images of British Colonization in Lower Canada's Eastern Townships during the 1830s," forthcoming.

3 J.I. Little, ed., *Love Strong As Death: Lucy Peel's Canadian Journal, 1833–1836* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001).

4 M.E. Reisner, ed., *The Diary of a Country Clergyman, 1848–1851: James Reid* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

5 On the American context, see Randolph A. Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Curtis D. Johnson, *Islands of Holiness: Rural Religion in Upstate New York, 1790–1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1989). A very useful study from the perspective of the Episcopal Church as well as popular religion is Jonathan Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). The Eastern Townships was certainly not entirely immune to American religious enthusiasm. See Denis Fortin, "'The World Turned Upside Down': Millerism in the Eastern Townships, 1835–1845," *Journal of Eastern Townships Studies*, 11 (Fall 1997): 39–59. To gain insight into Reid's essentially orthodox High Church stance within the Anglican Church, see Peter Nockles, "Church Parties in the Pre-

Tractarian Church of England 1750–1833: the 'Orthodox'—Some Problems of Definition and Identity," in John Walsh, Colin Haydon, and Stephen Taylor, eds. The Church of England c.1689 – c.1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

6 Reisner, *The Diary*, l–li.

7 Two of the classic studies on these themes are Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). And particularly useful from the Anglican Evangelical perspective that clearly influenced Reid is David Newsome, *The Parting of Friends: A Study of the Wilberforces and Henry Manning* (London: John Murray, 1966). From the Canadian perspective, see Katherine McKenna, *A Life of Propriety: Anne Murray Powell and Her Family, 1775–1849* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); and Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Wives and Mothers, School Mistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada, 1790–1840* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995).

8 Jane Vansittart, ed., *Lifelines: The Stacey Letters, 1836–1858* (London: Peter Davies 1976); Françoise Noël, "'My Dear Eliza': The Letters of Robert Hoyle (1831–1844)," *Histoire sociale — Social History* 26 (1993): 115-30; J.I. Little, ed., *The Child Letters: Public and Private Life in a Canadian Merchant-Politician's Family, 1841–1845* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1995). On Reid and the family, see J.I. Little, "The Fireside Kingdom: A Mid-Nineteenth-Century Anglican Perspective on Marriage and Parenthood," in Nancy Christie, ed., *Households of Faith: Family, Gender, and Community in Canada, 1760–1969* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, forthcoming 2002).

9 See J.I. Little, "Serving 'the North East Corner of Creation': The Community Role of a Rural Clergyman in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, 1829–1870," *Histoire sociale - Social History*, 30 (1997): 21–54.

10 See J.I. Little, "The Short Life of a Local Protest Movement: The Annexation Crisis of 1849–50 in the Eastern Townships," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, NS no. 2 (1992), 45–67; "A Moral Engine of Such Incalculable Power: The Temperance Movement in the Eastern Townships, 1830–52," *Journal of Eastern Townships Studies, 11* (Fall 1997): 5–38; J.I. Little, "School Reform and Community Control in the 1840s: A Case Study from the Eastern Townships," *Historical Studies in Education*, 9 (1997):

153–64; J.I. Little, *State and Society in Transition: The Politics of Institutional Change in the Eastern Townships, 1838–52* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997). Reisner (*The Diary*, lii-liii) also fails to appreciate the Eastern Townships context of Reid's lack of enthusiasm for Confederation, as expressed in his last journal. See J.I. Little, "Watching the Frontier Disappear: English-Speaking Reaction to French-Canadian Colonization in the Eastern Townships, 1844–1890," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 14, 4 (1980–81): 98-103.

11 See, for example, Robert A. Fothergill, *Private Chronicles: A Study of English Diaries* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); and Rodger M. Payne, *The Self and the Sacred: Conversion and Autobiography in Early American Protestantism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998).

12 G.A. Starr, *Defoe & Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 6.

13 See J.I. Little, "The Mental World of Ralph Merry: A Case Study of Popular Religion in the Eastern Townships of Lower Canada, 1786–1863," presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, 2001.

14 Starr, *Defoe*, 17.

15 See Donald Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry, 1750–1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978); and R.D. Gidney and W.P.J. Millar, *Professional Gentlemen: The Professions in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

16 Reisner*, The Diary*, lvii.

17 Reisner, *The Diary*, 135.

18 Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1989), 28.