

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David A. Gerber. *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century.* New York: New York University Press, 2006. x + 422 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-3171-0; ISBN 978-0-8147-3200-7.



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Redefining Literature

When I received this book in the mail, I was both excited and apprehensive. The topic of the book was intriguing, but I was initially concerned about David Gerber's source material. There are innumerable texts that use immigrant letters as primary sources and I wondered if there was much to be learned from another examination of these letters. I was wrong. Gerber's work is fascinating in that he approaches immigrant letters from a new perspective. Rather than culling particular themes from this correspondence to reinforce findings from statistical analysis, Gerber focuses all of his attention on the letters themselves. He blends the disciplines of history and literature, showing readers that despite their sometimes deficient abilities, immigrants aimed to produce written texts with deep meaning. These were not just dry reports of current events. They were emotionally charged and highly negotiated documents used to maintain fragile relationships over great distances.

Gerber begins his work by addressing my initial concern. He writes in his introduction that "currently, immigrant letters are used mostly to provide color and drama in historical narratives, or to document societal-

level and group-level generalizations based on other primary sources" (p. 31). The first chapter of his work is a historiographical essay on the previous uses of immigrant letters, beginning in the early twentieth century and continuing to the present day. While Gerber praises some of these texts, he clearly sees deficiencies. His primary critique is that they do not address immigrants as individuals. The best of these representative works examine settlers as representatives of a particular ethnicity and the worst dismiss them as the unwashed masses, incapable of independent thought. Gerber shows that, through their letters, we can see immigrants as highly complex people with their own agendas, shaped both by the experience of immigration as well as by their relationships with friends and family who stayed behind. One important observation he makes is that although we assume it was difficult for immigrants to leave these relationships behind, many settlers came to North America specifically to avoid certain people, particularly creditors, but possibly even an overbearing parent or, in some cases, a spouse. As Gerber notes, an immigrant writing to a dubious parent might be on the defensive and therefore hesitant to write critically about their new home. It is

these aspects of relationships that Gerber elucidates and this is what makes his book so useful.

Authors of Their Lives is organized into two sections. The first section is a more general discussion of the nature of immigrant correspondence. Here, Gerber writes about the work of previous historians. He also includes a chapter in which he examines the ways that immigrants created their own identities. According to Gerber, “emigration puts a singular strain on personal identity, because it is a radical challenge to continuity” (p. 67). It is through letter-writing that settlers created identities. The theoretical underpinning of Gerber’s work is that, by writing these autobiographical narratives, immigrants were able to remain the same people they were before resettlement, while adapting to new homes. In chapter 3, Gerber explains that these letters were not just casual scribbles, but instead they were the result of deliberate negotiations between both parties involved in the exchange. As Gerber demonstrates, immigrants and their writing partners had to agree first that both desired to maintain correspondence. This was not to be taken for granted in an era when the mails were both unreliable and expensive. After both parties assented to this, they had to determine the nature of this correspondence. There were certain topics that were of great interest to readers and other which became taboo. Both the writer and the recipient had to agree as to the nature of these texts in order for the dialogue to continue. Chapter 4 of *Authors of Their Lives* examines in greater detail the postal systems of the time and demonstrates the challenges of intercontinental letter-writing in the nineteenth century. In chapter 5, Gerber demonstrates that immigrants had to develop a voice over time and that the nature of these letters was not predetermined. The final chapter in this section illustrates the ways in which immigrant correspondents came to their conclusions.

The second section of Gerber’s book consists of four case studies of immigrants whose letters illustrate important aspects of his thesis. In this segment he profiles two men and two women who wrote letters to friends and family in Britain. The first chapter focuses on Thomas Spencer Niblock, who immigrated to Canada in the 1840s and seems to have been ill-prepared for immigration. Niblock can only be said to have failed as he eventually went back to Britain and then on to Australia where he had attempted to settle before his relocation to Delaware, Canada West. His correspondence with his sister and her husband was clearly colored by the fact that his brother-in-law financed his failed attempt at farming. Consequently Niblock’s letters attempted to persuade the cou-

ple that he was competent and that his failings were due to forces beyond his control. Chapter 8 is about Catherine Grayston Bond, who came to the United States from England in 1869. Initially Bond worked as a domestic servant in Connecticut, but by the late 1870s she and her husband had their own farm in Kansas. Bond describes herself as a failure in her letters to her brother and his wife, despite the fact that the Bonds appear to have been affluent. The source of Bond’s dissatisfaction was not financial, but rather social. She felt isolated from her community, especially after the death of her oldest daughter. As Gerber notes, “Bond’s surviving letters give us access to a number of dimensions that clarify that material dream ‘the immigrant’s first project’ and suggest its limitations as an exclusive guide to our understanding” (p. 280). Bond’s letters are emotional and her observations on American life would be difficult to quantify statistically.

Mary Ann Wodrow Archbald, who came from Scotland to central New York in 1807, wrote on themes similar to those in the letters of Catherine Grayston Bond, although she was a more proficient writer. Both women focused on loss in their correspondence, although Archbald seems to have formed this particular world view prior to her immigration. It is impossible to know if these letters genuinely illustrate the beliefs of their writers, or if they wrote this way because they believed it was what their recipients across the ocean wanted to read. It is possible that both women focused on the negative aspects of life in the United States as a way to comfort relatives who could not contemplate immigration themselves. By contrast, the last writer profiled by Gerber is Dr. Thomas Steel, whose letters to his father and sister are much more positive. Steel clearly wanted to encourage his family to join him in Wisconsin and consequently his letters are more positive than those of Archbald and Bond. Like Niblock, Steel relied on money from relatives, in this case his father, and this may have been a source of tension. Unlike the former, however, Steel was ultimately successful in North America and eventually he was able to convince his family to follow him. Like all of the writers whom Gerber discusses, Steel was most concerned with maintaining and even strengthening his relationships and consequently his letters were highly emotional.

From my perspective, the most important point that Gerber makes in this work is to question the centrality of ethnicity to the immigrant experience. He argues that previous studies have “privileged ethnicity at the expense of understanding issues of personal identity” (p. 64). This, he says, is unfortunate because it led historians

to view immigrants only as members of larger communities and not as individual actors with their own agendas. Throughout this text, Gerber attempts to show the ways in which settlers in North America defined themselves, and he finds that few of them wrote explicitly of strong ethnic identities. He attributes this partially to the fact that he writes about British immigrants.

It may occur to H-Canada readers to ask why this particular book is being reviewed on this listserv. The title does make reference to North America, but Gerber seems to have chosen to include Canada in his study because of the availability of primary sources. He does not illustrate many differences between the experiences of settlers in Canada and those in the United States. Personally, I have no problem with this decision. His focus is on the immigrants as individuals and consequently it makes little difference whether they settled north or south of the border. This is, in some sense, as much a history of Britain as it is of North America, in that their British origins are the ties that bind all of these immigrants. Gerber could prob-

ably have included letters written by British settlers in other countries, such as Australia and South Africa, had he chosen, and still made his essential points. Nonetheless, if you are looking for a nationalist history of Canada, you will want to look elsewhere.

This book was an enjoyable read I am certain that I will frequently refer to it in my own writing, but if I was forced to find fault with it perhaps Gerber's lack of a conclusion is his weakest point. Personally I find conclusions to be the most difficult to write and can sympathize with any author who blanches at the thought of summing up ideas that they carefully fleshed out throughout their text, but as a reader it is useful to have the main ideas of the book restated. Gerber's conclusion comes in the form of four paragraphs at the end of his final chapter and it would have been better to have a few pages of review instead. This is a relatively minor flaw, and one that I am more than happy to overlook, because Gerber's conclusions are so interesting.

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