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Many “Perfect” Days

***In the Interval of the Wave: Prince Edward Island Women’s Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Life Writing* by MARY MCDONALD-RISSANEN**

McGill-Queen’s UP, 2014 \$95.00

Reviewed by **JOSHUA BARTLETT**

In the Interval of the Wave begins by invoking the familiar presence of PEI’s most iconic literary figure: Lucy Maud Montgomery. Rather than dwelling in Montgomery’s considerable shadow, however, author Mary McDonald-Rissanen “peer[s] into the spectacle of very ordinary lives” via dozens of unpublished diaries. Considering the intimate nature of this archive, it’s fitting that McDonald-Rissanen, an Islander herself, cites the discovery of the “Line A Day” diary kept by her own grandmother, Amy Darby Tanton Andrew, as the project’s initial inspiration. But her study is more than a general introduction to these unfamiliar stories. By combining careful textual analysis with historical context, *In the Interval of the Wave* explores how women used writing to negotiate both the “transplanted Victorianism” of nineteenth-century PEI and the regular tensions of their everyday lives.

Some of the diaries span hundreds of pages, charting daily routines over the course of a lifetime; others, such as Mercy Ann Coles’s account of her trip to the Quebec Conference in the fall of 1864, focus on significant moments and events within those lifetimes. Via the apt metaphor of sandstone, “the only stone PEI knows,” *In the Interval of the Wave* reads these diaries as heteroglossic—“a collection of pieces, big and small, unevenly shaped and fused on the page, like the sandstone taking its

form from nature’s force on the beach”—and cleverly organizes the diarists, eighteen in all, into broad types: the “pioneer subject,” the “urban bourgeois,” the “farm wife,” and so on. In some cases, a chapter will focus on a single diarist such as “modern professional woman” Lucy Bardon Palmer, a teacher in the Island communities of Bonshaw and Malpeque from 1884 to 1890. At other times, McDonald-Rissanen combines several texts within the same section; a fascinating chapter on “travelling women,” for example, juxtaposes the “escapades” of five diarists who, at various points in their lives, journey across Canada and throughout the British Empire, from Toronto to Ottawa and from London to Bermuda. Although *In the Interval of the Wave* is somewhat limited by the nature of its archive itself—McDonald-Rissanen notes that “these diarists represent a select group of women of Protestant faith who cannot speak for their Catholic sisters or for women from the Native and Acadian communities”—the breadth of its survey is nonetheless impressive.

Throughout *In the Interval of the Wave*, McDonald-Rissanen argues for the “subversive” potential of these diaries. In one sense, she claims, diaries offered discursive spaces in which PEI women could both experiment with personal identity and assert individual agency. But the act of diary writing itself could also be subversive. Within a society delineated by a rigid sense of propriety and restrictive demands of convention, “the moment of inscription,” with its implicit assertion of a right to privacy, was “one of the precious intervals during a woman’s daily routines,” one of the few instances when a woman’s time was almost her own.

Because the “life writing” of the book’s title refers in particular to these

original unpublished manuscripts, rather than to the broader genre of autobiography alone, McDonald-Rissanen specifically privileges “the idiosyncratic material qualities of diary, paper, and handwriting” in her analysis. With attention reminiscent of recent work on Emily Dickinson, each chapter of *In the Interval of the Wave* is deeply invested in “the pressure . . . put on the pencil . . . sketches of birds in the margins, the empty space here and there.”¹ Sometimes a question of materiality will focus on the diary’s construction itself. Amy Darby Tanton Andrew’s “Line A Day,” for example, was designed to hold five years of diary writing, with each page divided into five sections of five lines each. Thus, in addition to the spatial constraints for the diarist herself, the physical form of the “Line A Day” suggests multiple reading strategies with unique interpretive implications—reading chronologically, for example, as opposed to tracing the history of a single date over several years. At other times, reading a diary poses particular graphological questions. In the case of Lucy Palmer, the diarist fond of sketching birds, McDonald-Rissanen contrasts the “free-flowing” script of her early diaries with the “hurried handwriting and abrupt entries” of the 1890s, the decade in which Palmer gave birth to her five children.

McDonald-Rissanen also pays careful attention to the interactions between her diarists and the natural world. “Nature,” she writes, “represent[ed] one significant sphere for the woman subject to work and play within” and offered “access to a vocabulary and a process of diary keeping that otherwise couldn’t be articulated.” *In the Interval of the Wave* continually stresses this influence of nature on “daily rhythms . . . moods [and] feelings,” noting, for example, the frequent

recording of the planting and harvest patterns essential to PEI’s agricultural economy and highlighting the curious case of Maud Jones, who filled her early diary entries with lists of bird sightings: “First Robin,” “Yellow Hammer,” “Blackbirds.”

One of the most compelling aspects of McDonald-Rissanen’s discussion of the natural world is her careful attention to what she calls “the subtle nuances of weather discourses.” Many of the diary entries begin with a brief account of the weather: “Lovely fine day” or “Very wet day, raining heavy from noon until evening” or “One of the veriest cold days.” But rather than indicating a generic convention or signifying detachment from the particularities of the natural world, this commonality demonstrates how “[n]ature, in spectacles big and small, gives the woman writer a point of departure for recording her stories.” Even “for urban women,” for whom “the weather was at best an impediment” to social functions, “still the weather gives an opening and closing for [the] diary voice, just as the rural woman’s agrarian rhythms and diary records flow with the climate.” An example: Multiple diarists, rural and urban, regularly characterize weather as “perfect.” But “perfect” weather doesn’t have a defined content; as such, describing a day as “perfect” is always already speaking in relational, not absolute, terms. “Perfect” means simply that natural conditions are appropriate within a seasonal context, suitable for particular agricultural needs, amenable to personal preference, and so on—a sunny summer afternoon is just as “perfect” as a cold winter morning.

In her conclusion, McDonald-Rissanen argues that present-day idealization of PEI’s Victorian past both excludes Island women’s voices and

obscures the actual conditions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Island life. One of the major contributions of her study, then, is its offer of a critical narrative “beyond . . . Confederation, the Northumberland Strait, and *Anne of Green Gables*.” In its attention to the materiality of writing, as well as its focus on the daily presence and challenge of the natural world, it offers an interdisciplinary approach to the genre of “life writing.” And through its archive of unpublished diaries, *In the Interval of the Wave* explores the unique experiences of PEI women—as “urban bourgeois” and “farm wives,” as mothers and teachers, as pioneers and

travelers—while insisting on the importance of each “ordinary” voice and the value of each “ordinary” life.

¹ See, for example, Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), Sharon Cameron’s *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson’s Fascicles* (1993), Marta Werner’s *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* (1995), Jen Bervin’s *The Dickinson Composites* (2010) and *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson’s Envelope-Poems* (with Marta Werner, 2012), and Alexandra Socarides’s *Dickinson Unbound: Paper, Process, Poetics* (2012).

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