

A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada: the Journals, Letters, and Art of Anne Langton Edited by Barbara Williams

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A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada: the Journals, Letters, and Art of Anne Langton

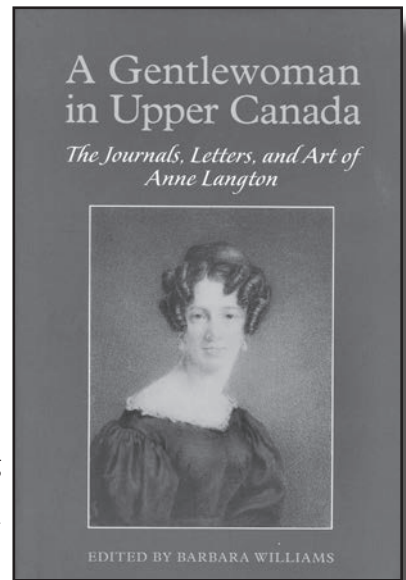
Edited by Barbara Williams

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. xxxvi + 436 pages. \$55.00
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Barbara Williams has done an excellent job of revising the 1950 edition of Anne Langton's nineteenth-century Upper Canadian letters and journals. This work is valuable for a number of reasons. Williams has substantially expanded upon the primary source material in the earlier edition by including texts deliberately left out by the previous editor (Langton's nephew Hugh Hornby Langton) and by hunting down further pieces of her writing. The editor has added to this new edition a number of Langton's paintings and drawings, most of which have not been publicly viewed before. Williams has also written a very substantial introduction (104 pages), providing a family history and positioning Langton's life, writing and art within an historical context. An afterword completes Langton's life story. Williams includes a very useful annotated list of names frequently mentioned, and also a family tree. She considers her main audience to be those readers "with an interest in social history as well as in feminist historical studies in the fields of literature and fine art." (p. xiv) She also hopes to attract a new audience to this unique, talented Upper Canadian colonist.

Anne Langton was born in England in 1804 and died in Toronto in 1893. Her letters and journals cover the years 1837 to 1847, the first decade of her life in colonial Upper Canada. While there is now a substantial collection of early nineteenth-century, middle-class writing by women concerning this subject, Langton's work offers a valuable perspective. Unlike such better-known pioneer writers as Susannah Moodie and Catharine

Parr Traill, Anne was a single woman living under the roof of her younger brother John, near Fenelon Falls, Ontario. Although she dedicated much of her life to caring for his family, she was also actively involved in the social development of her community; her writings describe the shifting boundaries of private and public spheres. She provides fascinating descriptions of her involvement in family and community health care and education. Anne also brought with her a broader, more cosmopolitan vantage point because of the number of years her family spent travelling around Europe, during which time she had received her extensive education. Because of her close relationship with the family members remaining in England, especially her older brother William, and because of her intent to be both self-reflexive and critically observant, Anne's letters provide serious commentary concerning the development of her colonial world and the people she meets. Furthermore, I would argue that these letters are more personal and possibly less socially masked than writings intended for publication. For example, she comfortably reminds her family of an old wish of hers, growing up playing with her brothers, to have been "born of the rougher sex." (p. 183) Also, Langton comes across as having a wry sense of humour, which makes



her writing often quite entertaining as well as a useful academic source.

In her preface, Williams includes a very interesting discussion of what the nephew left out of his 1950 edition, and why he did so. For instance, Anne's niece, Ellen Josephine Philips, had printed in 1904 a limited edition of her aunt's letters and journals, to be read by family members only. The nephew "chose to omit" (p. xii) material that he thought the reading public would find uninteresting, including much of his aunt's self-reflective analysis of her own style of journal writing. Nor, he thought, would they find interest in her descriptions of day-to-day activities, including how to cope with a range of illnesses. Fortunately Williams is very aware of the value of this kind of material for a variety of academic fields. She has put in over forty years of painstaking work to piece together from various private and public collections in Canada and England not only more of Langton's own writings, but also the writings of other family members, including Anne's father, William Langton. Williams recognizes the richness of material for those scholars interested in such areas as "early Canadian emigration, settlement, education, medicine, First Peoples, community, social and cultural development, and travel and tourism." (p. xv) To this list can be added labour history. Langton provides substantial commentary on the changing relations between employer and servant during the colonial period. For instance, the more she had to depend upon young, untrained girls, the more Anne had to develop her own domestic skills and find a place for them within the codes of genteel conduct. Williams firmly states, however, that she leaves it to other scholars "to examine the significance of Langton's texts for those fields." (p. xv)

Williams is quite precise about her own interests and the focus she selected for the introduction. She intends to view Langton "as a quintessential representative of the word

'gentlewoman.'" (p. xiii) Using "key changes in critical discourse since [the] 1950s publication," Williams analyzes Langton's life and work in relation to the "societal code of genteel conduct." (p. xv). Her introductory exploration is informed by some of the major feminist historians of nineteenth-century women's lives in relation to gender, class and race formations. Regarding historical context, I particularly enjoyed Williams' discussion of the cosmopolitan education Anne received when her father took the family to live for a number of years in Switzerland, and in Paris where she trained in miniature portrait painting. Also of special interest is Williams' exploration of the impact of reduced financial circumstances upon the Langton family's ability to keep up the trappings of gentility. Such reversal of fortune ultimately resulted in their decision to emigrate, following the example of other 'genteel' families hoping to maintain their status more cheaply in the colonies. Williams uncovers a fascinating moment in Anne's pre-colonial life when, to assist her family financially, she offered to turn professional and earn a living as an artist. Her father refused, recognizing what would have been a sharp attack on the family's social status and on the gendered code of gentility. In turn, Anne fulfilled the code by submitting to her father's authority and remaining an 'amateur' artist.

Williams has prepared a beautifully-edited collection of writings and art. It will be of interest to all readers who value the role of the private individual in both recording and shaping Ontario's social history. I look forward to using *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada* with my students.

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Bibliography:

Langton, Hugh Hornby, ed. *Gentlewoman in Upper Canada: the Journals of Anne Langton*. Toronto: Irwin, 1950, 1964.