

Revisiting “Our Forest Home”: The Immigrant Letters of Frances Stewart Edited by Jodi Lee Aoki

Patrick J. Connor

Volume 104, Number 1, Spring 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065402ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065402ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Connor, P. J. (2012). Review of [*Revisiting “Our Forest Home”: The Immigrant Letters of Frances Stewart* Edited by Jodi Lee Aoki]. *Ontario History*, 104(1), 217–220. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065402ar>

“how individuals made decisions” (xxix) on the Essex frontier, rather than contribute in any clear way to current scholarship on frontier culture.

In fact, five of Clarke’s nine chapters concern frontier settlement practices: clearing, cultivating, growing crops, raising livestock, employing animal and mechanized labour, among other tasks. Again, while *The Ordinary People of Essex* does provide a comprehensive examination of the county’s population in context of the local environment and economy, Clarke’s “ordinary people” are represented mostly in tabular and map form. His data is supplied by the “single, complete cross section” of the county provided by the 1851/52 census, supplemented by information from township assessment roles (xxxi). Only in his concluding chapter does Clarke provide a section entitled “Methodology for Representing the General in the Particular” (451). Here, under the heading “Family Insights” (452-49), he employs several named examples of the “ordinary people of Essex” in a form that most historians would recognize as cultural history.

Significantly, Clarke’s work raises a question he leaves mostly unanswered: What does *The Ordinary People of Essex* tell us that might be applicable to the study of “ordinary people” in frontier societies beyond Essex County’s borders? At the end

of two weighty volumes, it should not be unreasonable to expect that Clarke might make firm conclusions as to whether the settlers of Essex were ordinary or extraordinary in relation to the wider early nineteenth-century settlement experiences in Upper Canada and elsewhere. Although he provides a lengthy concluding chapter, only at its very end does Clarke cast his gaze beyond the Essex borders to provide just three paragraphs that assess the wider significance of his study and suggest avenues for future research.

In spite of its shortcomings pertaining to an analysis of the culture of Essex County’s ordinary people, it must be said that Clarke’s study—in combination with his *Land, Power, and Economics*—stands as an incredibly detailed exploration into settler life in the county. In important ways, it is lamentable that his study stands mostly alone. Were similarly intensive and exhaustive studies conducted by historical geographers for each county of Upper Canada, the depth and breadth of research produced would provide the foundation of a true cultural history of “ordinary” Upper Canadians. One can only echo Clarke’s concluding statement: “Such work is to be welcomed.” (470)

Ross Fair
Department of History
Ryerson University

Revisiting “Our Forest Home” The Immigrant Letters of Frances Stewart

Edited by Jodi Lee Aoki

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011. 288 pages. \$35.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-55488-776-7 (www.dundurn.com)

It has been well over a century since the Upper Canadian letters of Frances Stewart (1794-1872) were first published. Originally compiled in a confusing and erratically-edited volume by Stewart’s daugh-

ter, the 1899 collection proved cumbersome and increasingly elusive for modern readers, and editor Jodi Lee Aoki’s fresh rendering of the correspondence is a necessary and most welcome restoration of an

important and original voice from the history of early Ontario.

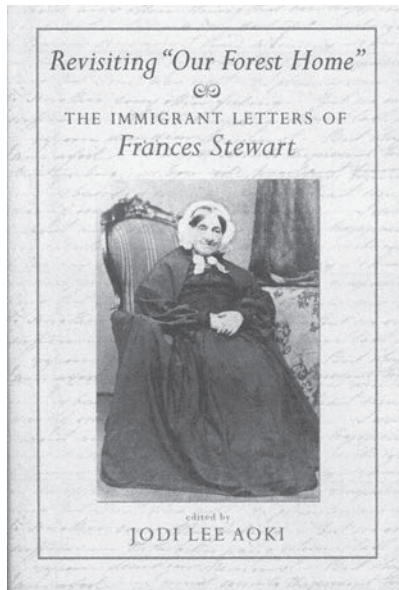
Born in Ireland to a well-off and well-connected family, Stewart was part of a post-war moderate gentry “whose income and status were endangered by a declining standard of living as a result of the post-war depression” (52). Relocation to the Upper Canadian frontier seemed to offer the chance for future prosperity and in 1822 Stewart, with her husband Thomas and a collection of children and servants, established herself as one of the earliest settlers of the Peterborough district. For the family, as indeed for nearly all immigrants, the experience of trans-Atlantic migration represented an almost complete break with everything familiar. The move was not only a change of worlds, but often necessitated a re-consideration of world-views, as those anchors of self such as home, family, and other touchstones of identity were replaced by a new and unfamiliar environment.

Stewart’s letters home detailed her growing family, and recounted their efforts to wrest a living from the bush. But the correspondence with those she had left behind was more than a mere exchange of news, it also formed a narrative of identity. In what she wrote—and how she wrote it—the letters functioned as a process of identity creation and presentation, part of Stewart’s effort to construct a workable narrative to make sense of her situation which had been radically disrupted by emigration. Like much nineteenth-century correspondence, Stewart’s letters were not static, but

were circulated, edited, and re-written to serve various purposes, and to suit different readers and circumstances. This layered correspondence allowed Stewart to control her self-image, while at the same time drawing together friends and family who interacted with her—and with each other—through the narrative she wrote. Although editor Aoki has cleaned up the textual “overlap” that made the original edition so unsatisfying, much remains to reveal Stewart’s epistolary strategy, and the communal nature of the letters is still very evident. Indeed, one great strength of this edition is the literary detective work done by Aoki in recreating the letters “as they were,” while still recognizing there is no “true” voice, unmediated by the patterns and structures from which it emerges (35-6).

The book is divided into three parts, drawing together letters written by Stewart before immigration; as a settler; and as a widow. Short and informative introductions preface each section, contextualizing the letters with background details—and well-placed illustrations from the correspondence—while also drawing upon recent scholarship on letter-writing and the immigrant experience to better position for the reader Stewart’s circumstances as a writer and a historical voice.

The letters in the first section, composed while Stewart was a student and young bride, are fascinating and one wishes there were more of them, to get a better sense of her personality before leaving Ireland at age



28. But it is the material describing her immigration and settlement experiences that are, not surprisingly, among the most interesting. The section begins with a lengthy, multi-part letter describing the voyage, written to several relatives who would obviously have had to exchange parts had they wanted the full story. Subsequent letters are descriptive accounts of the neighbours, the Canadian climate, clothing, holidays, and social events (or the lack thereof).

The letters cover the minutia of everyday life—the shortage of good servants, or a daughter's bout with "worm fever" (87)—but also describe larger triumphs and tragedies of life in the bush. Stewart's long and emotional account of the death of her two-year-old daughter (104) is eloquent in its grief, while her detailed description of the construction and furnishing of her forest homestead (100) is fascinating—and an interesting contrast to male-authored accounts typically concentrating on acres cleared and fences built. Pioneer women were materially connected to the home, but the emotional importance is also underlined by Stewart as the headers on her letters change from "Duoro Lighthouse" to "Duoro Cottage!!!" Of course, she may have been trying to convince herself, as much as her relatives, that immigration had been the right choice. Stewart's outlook was mostly optimistic, but there were also long letters home expressing doubts that she had made the correct decision (118-19), sometimes even written behind the back of her husband (who had doubts of his own).

As widow, Stewart's letters assume a slightly different tone. Increasingly reconciled to being a Canadian, Stewart "in retirement" appears with a life more settled, her own family dispersed and now writing letters to her not unlike those she herself had sent home to those left behind. But even after a life in Canada, Stewart was still tied to

that world. Indeed, she continued to receive Irish newspapers fifty years after leaving, and her description of the arrival of the annual "Dublin box" from relatives overseas (168) gives almost as much joy to the reader as it apparently did to the family.

The social and cultural dislocations experienced by Stewart were common to many immigrants, but in some ways she was unique. Few were wealthy enough to relocate not just with their servants, but even with the family dog, and one wonders how successful Stewart was in recreating her family's class status as social leaders in the new colony. Her letters reflect a constant re-defining of status, one that she explained to her correspondents, while still clearly working it out in her own mind. Although Stewart's "cottage" contained the only piano for miles around, she also had to take part in common household chores like any other immigrant, and in doing so, notes the editor, "she walked a tightrope" (59). It was one many others in Upper Canada were walking.

Stewart's letters can usefully be read with those of other women settlers like Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill—both her virtual neighbours and the latter also her correspondent. All three faced similar challenges of adapting their British upper-middle-class literary origins to a new life characterized by deprivation, physical labour, and the oft-mentioned levelling tendencies of the colony's social structure. Stewart's experiences can also be contrasted with the life of Anne Murray Powell, briefly a Boston shop-girl, who traded her lower-middle-class American background for a position as wife of Upper Canada's Chief Justice. Powell's movement on the social scale was in the opposite direction from that experienced by Stewart. Yet Powell's letters reflect many of the same concerns as Stewart's about class and social mobility, though they were often expressed in quite different ways, and for different reasons.

The Peterborough area appears to have produced an unusually large number of settler narratives, and Stewart's letters are of indisputable value for the light they shed on the pioneer experience in early Ontario. As this new edition reminds us, they can also play an important part in illuminating the complex and ever-changing roles played by class and gender, and the manner in which

individuals sought to navigate such issues while attempting to create and understand their own narrative of identity. Aoki and Dundurn Press are to be congratulated for making such an important collection widely available once again.

Patrick J. Connor
York University

Niagara, St. Catharines and Toronto Railway (2008) and Ontario's Grand River Valley Electric Railways (2010)

by John M. Mills

Pickering, Ontario: Railfare DC Books, 2008. 256 pages. \$44.95 softcover, ISBN 1-897190-27-1; \$64.95 hardcover, ISBN 1-897190-28-X. Railfare DC Books, 2010. 244 pages. \$54.95 softcover, ISBN 1-897190-52-2; \$74.95 hardcover, ISBN 1-897190-53-0

Between 1967 and 1977 John Mills wrote three books on Southern Ontario's electric railway industry. In 2008 and 2010 Railfare DC Books published significantly updated editions of two of these books. John Mills' books actually cover two distinct but related railway technologies. The one technology is street railways such as the system still in use in Toronto today. However the main focus of these books is on electric "interurban railways," that once formed a very unique and short-lived era of North America passenger transportation history.

The interurban era mirrored the rise of automobile transportation in North America. The number of these railways expanded rapidly from the 1890s to the First World War and was distinguished by the use of high-speed, self-propelled electric railway cars providing fast, frequent services between city pairs. At the same time as they became dominant, the automobile evolved from an experimental luxury to a viable means of transportation. During the 1920s interurban railways could compete effectively with motor vehicles. But, in the

following decade the combined impact of the Depression and the convenience, flexibility and comfort of automobiles caused the interurban railway industry to collapse. Unlike the United States experience, many Canadian lines, including the two in this review, continued to operate, albeit at a reduced level, into the 1950s.

The interurban railways described in *Ontario's Grand River Valley Electric Railways* served the prosperous Grand River valley industrial towns of Kitchener, Galt (today Cambridge) and Brantford as well as the Lake Erie beach resort of Port Dover. The book also covers the isolated line between Woodstock and Ingersoll and the street railway systems of Kitchener/Waterloo, Brantford and Guelph. The *Niagara, St. Catharines and Toronto Railway* describes the interurban services to the industrial towns of St. Catharines, Thorold, Niagara Falls, Welland and Port Colborne and the beach resort of Port Dalhousie on Lake Ontario. The book also covers the street railway operations in St. Catharines and Niagara Falls, the tourist electric railway along the Niagara gorge and the