

“The varieties and unsettled habits of this new land” Examining Family Strategies in Upper Canada through the Journals of Mary O’Brien

Erin Elizabeth Schuurs

Volume 108, numéro 1, spring 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050614ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050614ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Schuurs, E. E. (2016). “The varieties and unsettled habits of this new land”: Examining Family Strategies in Upper Canada through the Journals of Mary O’Brien. *Ontario History*, 108(1), 111–125. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050614ar>

Résumé de l'article

Dans cet article, nous analysons les journaux personnels de Mary O’Brien qui dévoilent les démarches stratégiques entreprises par sa famille afin d’atteindre une sécurité économique et sociale en établissant des objectifs à long terme, en visant une position sur un échelon élevé dans le voisinage et en faisant des choix quotidiens qui favorisaient ces buts et objectifs. Le récit de sa vie dans le Haut-Canada nous divulgue le fonctionnement d’une maison agricole de façon beaucoup plus personnelle qu’un recensement ou un relevé d’impôts. Les sources primaires telles que les journaux de Mary nous permettent de faire des observations à propos d’un endroit spécifique tout en examinant le contexte historique. Nous envisagerons l’expérience d’une femme de fermier dans un cadre général de colonie, classe et de main d’oeuvre dans la première moitié du 19e siècle.

“The varieties and unsettled habits of this new land”

Examining Family Strategies in Upper Canada through the Journals¹ of Mary O’Brien

by Erin Elizabeth Schuurs



Introduction

Mary Sophia Gapper O’Brien arrived in the colony of Upper Canada² with a large supply of good quality double foolscap paper. From August 1828 until July 1838, Mary filled these long sheets of paper with as much description regarding her life as a farm wife in Upper Canada as possible. These sheets were then folded, sealed with wax, and sent to Great Britain to entertain and enlighten her friends and family.³

Over a ten year span, Mary kept

this routine, recording significant life changes such as her marriage, the birth of her six children, moving from Vaughan Township to the settlement of Shanty Bay, her work as a local midwife, and an account of the Upper Canadian rebellions. Through these entries we learn something of Mary’s concerns and values, particularly her distaste for political reform, her loyalty to the British monarchy and the Anglican faith, and her prejudices towards those she deemed to be mem-

¹ Archives of Ontario, Mary O’Brien Journals [hereafter O’Brien Journals], 2 August 1830, MS 199.

² The colony was officially known as Upper Canada from 1791-1840 then became Canada West in 1841 following the union with Lower Canada upon the suggestion of the Durham Report. It was not until confederation in 1867 that the colony became known as the province of Ontario. J. David Wood, *Making Ontario: Agricultural Colonization and Landscape Re-Creation before the Railway* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), 167. For the purpose of this paper, the initial place names used by Mary in her journal will be applied. It must therefore also be noted, that upon Mary’s arrival, the city of Toronto was known as York until 6 March 1834 when the name was changed to reflect the town’s incorporation as a city. Mary referenced this change in her journal: “[b]y the way, the capital of our province is no longer to be called York but Toronto.” O’Brien Journals, 12 March 1834. The use of the name York will be maintained throughout this paper.

³ Mary’s journals are still in good condition; they were deposited at the Archives of Ontario by A. H. O’Brien, Mary O’Brien’s grandson, Audrey Saunders Miller, ed., *The Journals of Mary O’Brien, 1828-1838* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1968), xx.

Abstract

This article argues that Mary O'Brien's journals highlight her family's strategy to achieve economic and social security by establishing long-term goals, identifying an advantageous and socially superior position amongst neighbours, and making everyday choices which furthered these goals and advantages. Her account of her life in Upper Canada demonstrates the hidden workings of an agrarian household in a way that is much more personal than a census or tax record. The use of primary sources such as Mary's journals enables location specific generalizations to be made while examining a larger historical experience. This article is, therefore, concerned with placing the experiences of a farm wife within the context of settlement, class, and labour in the first half of the nineteenth-century.

Résumé: *Dans cet article, nous analysons les journaux personnels de Mary O'Brien qui dévoilent les démarches stratégiques entreprises par sa famille afin d'atteindre une sécurité économique et sociale en établissant des objectifs à long terme, en visant une position sur un échelon élevé dans le voisinage et en faisant des choix quotidiens qui favorisaient ces buts et objectifs. Le récit de sa vie dans le Haut-Canada nous divulgue le fonctionnement d'une maison agricole de façon beaucoup plus personnelle qu'un recensement ou un relevé d'impôts. Les sources primaires telles que les journaux de Mary nous permettent de faire des observations à propos d'un endroit spécifique tout en examinant le contexte historique. Nous envisagerons l'expérience d'une femme de fermier dans un cadre général de colonie, classe et de main d'œuvre dans la première moitié du 19e siècle.*

bers of the “lower orders”⁴ such as Methodists, Americans, and the Irish. Nestled between these assumptions, challenges,

and life events, however, we find the rhythms and routines of daily farm life which emphasize how various labour practices contributed to the overall success of settler households.

Considered a “prominent” woman, Mary’s journals do not encompass the entire female experience of Upper Canada, as most women would not have had the time nor the ability to maintain a journal or extensive correspondence. Yet, her account does highlight with great clarity, the labour required of the colony’s early settlers and enables the historian to create a practical representation of family labour strategies while examining a larger historical experience. The O’Brien’s settlement choices are viewed here as part of a liberal ideology related to land and security within which, Mary, contributed to Upper Canada’s development by labouring in both a private and public capacity thus exposing the intricacies of colonial society.⁵ Mary’s account highlights her family’s strategy to achieve economic security through the establish-

ment of colonial society.⁵ Mary’s account highlights her family’s strategy to achieve economic security through the establish-

⁴ O’Brien Journals, 8 October 1829, MS 199.

⁵ As Catherine Anne Wilson has effectively argued, “property and the way it was held was of considerable ideological and political importance” in the nineteenth century because Western culture connected the ability to acquire “privately held land” to the achievement of an individual’s “independence and power.” As Wilson has explained, the “trinity” of liberal values—property, liberty, and equality—put

ment of long-term goals, the identification of an advantageous and socially superior position amongst neighbours, and making everyday choices which upheld and furthered these goals and advantages. This article is, therefore, concerned with placing the experiences of a farm wife within the context of settlement, class, and labour in Upper Canada during the first half of the nineteenth-century.

“That we may get on with industry and economy”⁶

After coming to anchor and making arrangements with the custom house, we left the ‘Warrior’ with feelings of regret.... I now felt for the first time that I was far away from home and all that makes home dear.⁷

Travelling with her mother, brother, and her sister-in-law, Mary Gapper arrived in Upper Canada in October, 1828, to visit her two brothers—Richard and Southby—who were engaged in farming. The daughter of a rector and squire, Mary was a well-educated woman, who at the age of thirty and still unmarried, had embraced the role of helper to her sister Lucy and doting aunt to Lucy’s children. Mary was only meant to be in Upper Canada for

an extended visit. Her two brothers were half-pay officers and veterans of the Napoleonic Wars who had taken advantage of the opportunity to secure land for themselves following their military discharge. By embracing this opportunity to farm in the New World, Mary’s family took part in what has been called “the great cycle of European emigration.”⁸

Fostered in part by the plethora of travel narratives and immigration manuals commonly available during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many immigrants believed that the British North American colonies provided access to an abundance of land, offering all who were industrious and willing the opportunity to establish themselves as property owners.⁹ Local communities throughout Great Britain and Ireland—indeed most of Europe—during this time were affected by changing patterns of production and a dramatic increase in population. Individuals were challenged by unemployment, depressed markets, rent increases, decreasing opportunities and a general atmosphere of economic uncertainty.¹⁰ Facing these uncertainties was surely daunting, and many found it diffi-

forth by political philosophers at the time, upheld land as “the most fundamental element.” Settlers such as the O’Briens found themselves operating within this ideological framework. *Tenants in Time: Family Strategies, Land, and Liberalism in Upper Canada, 1799-1871* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 5.

⁶ O’Brien Journals, 26 June 1830.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4 October 1828.

⁸ Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Emigrant Worlds and Transatlantic Communities: Migration to Upper Canada in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 5.

⁹ Rusty Bitterman, “Farm Households and Wage Labour in the Northeastern Maritimes in the Early 19th Century,” *Labour/Le Travail* 31 (Spring, 1993), 13.

¹⁰ Errington, *Emigrant Worlds*, 5.

cult to attain economic security. Between 1815 and 1850, approximately two and a half million residents left their homes in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland for North America. The New World offered opportunity, adventure, and most importantly, the possibility of a secure income through the ownership of land.¹¹

Establishing a farm in the colony of Upper Canada had to be understood by settlers as a process—a long term goal—and success required that all household members demonstrate their unmitigated commitment. In turn, success not only meant that a family survived the raw environment, but the achievement of independence, economic security, and a respected social position within the surrounding community was hoped for. The attainment of this security was experienced by very few of Upper Canada's early settlers, but it was a long term goal that settlers shared in regardless of age, race, and class, as survival in the backwoods required that men and women of all ages engage in manual labour alongside people from quite different backgrounds than their own.

After spending eighteen months in Upper Canada, Mary agreed to marry

Edward O'Brien and together they endeavoured to establish a prosperous and financially stable farm. Edward was a half-pay officer and a friend of Mary's brothers, who owned a plot of farm land in Vaughan Township. Mary described Edward as "very intelligent, well informed, decent, and gentlemanlike."¹² Choosing to marry Edward was a difficult decision for Mary as marriage meant putting Edward's aspirations ahead of those of her family and taking on many new duties as his wife. In her journal, Mary questioned her decision to accept Edward, scolding herself "for having allowed the happiness of another to be involved in my destinies." She nonetheless relied "on the assurances so often repeated" by family members, and convinced herself "that whatever the future may bring" she would strive to do "good and not evil" towards Edward.¹³ On Edward's part, he demonstrated his affection and admiration for his soon to be wife in a letter of introduction sent to Mary's family in Great Britain. He praised her "prudence and economy," her ability "to advise on all matters and in all difficulties," and her capacity to "instinctively understand everything."¹⁴ These skills convinced Edward that Mary

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹² O'Brien Journals, 26 April 1829.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15 April 1830. In "Options for Elite Women in Early Upper Canadian Society: The Case of the Powell Family," in *Historical Essays on Upper Canada: New Perspectives*, eds. J.K. Johnson and Bruce G. Wilson (Ottawa: Carlton University Press, 1989), 401-423, Katherine McKenna examines the lives of the three Powell daughters—a prominent Upper Canadian family—and demonstrates that the women of the early Upper Canadian elite had limited life choices available to them. The only acceptable option for such women was to marry and commit their lives to their home and children. As McKenna clearly demonstrates, to deviate from this path—to remain single—was to risk becoming a family "burden" or to be socially ostracized.

¹⁴ O'Brien Journals, 19 April 1830.

would be a supportive and trustworthy life partner and that this marriage would be the foundation for his life and the fulfillment of his duties. "My wanderings are now at an end," Edward wrote. "I feel now more and more each day that I have something to live for, that I have done all that man can do to ensure happiness in this world."¹⁵ Mary and Edward were married in a quiet church ceremony following breakfast and the completion of their farm chores on 13 May 1830.

As a couple, Mary and Edward founded their household upon the goal of establishing themselves as prosperous land owners amongst the colony's gentleman farmers. Their marriage was vital to achieving this goal as the business of marriage in the colony was not simply a matter of love, but a method to further their goal of achieving economic and social security. Following her marriage, Mary noted in her journal that her mother intended to "[advance] my inheritance which will amply suffice to make us independent that we may get on with industry and economy and the blessing of God upon our endeavours."¹⁶ Mary and Edward's union brought together Mary's inheritance and Edward's income as a half-pay officer which provided the couple with capital to invest in their farm's establishment, meaning they

could hope to achieve basic economic survival. Importantly though, economic security was not all the couple hoped to achieve, for the other element of their long term goal was to maintain—even improve—their household's social status. This required that the family establish a strategic position of advantage amongst their neighbours through the distinction of hiring labourers and domestic help. The realities of colonial life, however, meant that Mary and Edward found it necessary to engage in intense labour themselves if their goals were to be achieved. Throughout this process, the couple became responsible for not only their children and immediate relations, but also the individuals they hired. They created a household that was not a "monolithic" body but a "coalition of individuals."¹⁷

Class, Labour, and Gender Within the Household

In May 1831, Edward was offered "an appointment to superintend the settlement of Kempenfeldt" by Upper Canada's governor. The position paid ten shillings per day and while Mary was "very thankful for it" she lamented that the position would "make the summer sadly dull by taking [Edward] so much from home."¹⁸ Edward was able to achieve this position

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26 June 1830.

¹⁷ Sociologist Laurel L. Cornell has examined the usefulness of family strategy as an analytical framework and has found that examining the family household shows that families working to establish themselves did create strategies which required individuals to act in a fashion that would benefit the family's greater good. Households became the centre of relationships between individuals who may not have all been related by blood, but were joined in the collective pursuit of survival and advancement. "Where Can Family Strategies Exist?" in *Family Strategy: A Dialogue*, ed. Leslie Page Moch, *Historical Methods* 20: 3 (1987), 120-23.

¹⁸ O'Brien Journals, 16 May 1831.

through the colonial government's practice of patronage; government positions were achieved through proper social and political connections and one had to be officially appointed. Such employment opportunities were rarely extended to men from the lower class. In turn, male members of prominent families were able to capitalize on such positions as the acquisition of a combined income with farming created an economic safety net.¹⁹ The O'Briens were "genteel settlers" and were, therefore, able to profit from the practice of patronage.

As a half-pay officer Edward was entitled to 500 acres of land; in total he was eventually granted 885 acres, located along the shore of Lake Simcoe in the settlement of Shanty Bay in Oro Township in the district of Simcoe North.²⁰ In exchange for this land, Edward was obliged to act as settlement agent for new immigrants to the area while also enforcing law and order as a magistrate.²¹ This position of authority provided Mary and Edward with some prominence within their community at Shanty Bay while also ensuring that the couple would be received by Upper Canada's first families in York.

The O'Briens were not wealthy, yet they were able to maintain their social standing through their behaviour.

Genteel settlers shared in a belief that opportunities in the New World enabled Britain's poor to be raised from lives marked by poverty to independence.²² However, it was imperative to genteel settlers that the "natural class order" be maintained and the ability to hire servants and farm labourers was a key method of status emulation used by members of the gentry.²³ The making of class became "an emphatically cultural process" structured around what J.K. Johnson has termed the "building blocks" of prominence.²⁴ Possessing wealth, land, and a position within a civil or military office were necessary for a man to be considered prominent. Holding a position within the colony's public service bureaucracy became a common practice because it enabled such men to continue farming.²⁵

From her journals, it seems clear that Mary was acutely aware of class and social structure. In June 1830, she recorded a day of work which consisted of Edward taking Mary "round his fields" after which she returned to the house

¹⁹ J.K. Johnson, *Becoming Prominent: Regional Leadership in Upper Canada, 1791-1841* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 84-85.

²⁰ Library and Archives Canada. 1871 Census, Oro, Simcoe North, Ontario. C—9964.

²¹ Ted Bigelow, *Shanty Bay: A Village Remembers*. (Charleston, South Carolina: Shanty Bay Historical Society, 2014), 15.

²² Nancy Christie, "The Plague of Servants: Female Household Labour and the Making of Classes in Upper Canada," in *Transatlantic Subjects: Ideas, Institutions, and Social Experience in Post-Revolutionary British North America*, ed. Nancy Christie (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 83-84.

²³ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 85 and Johnson, *Becoming Prominent*, 80.

²⁵ Johnson, *Becoming Prominent*, 80.

and completed her domestic work. "I also stirred a bowl of cream into butter, in which I succeeded much to my heart's content, sitting under the verandah and reading Milton all the time." Describing a seemingly idyllic scene of rural life, Mary concluded her entry by stating that her only "sorrow" was finding upon the completion of her work "that I had ground off one of my nails."²⁶ In mentioning the reading of Milton while engaging in typical household work, Mary was separating herself from those of the lower class. She was telling her friends back home that while she might be a settler in a growing colony, she had not lost her enjoyment of literature and culture, as demonstrated by her effort to combine her work with a leisurely pursuit. Numerous entries throughout her journals reflect Mary's attitude towards class boundaries. For example, she commented on her servant George who "could not keep his station" and the "lower orders" held by Methodists. Political radicals were described as "greasy farmers" and Mary made reference to her own "aristocratic prejudices as they relate to our inferiors in rank."²⁷ Mary further distinguished between the upper and lower classes through ethnicity. She relegated Americans to a position of "Yankee vulgarity" and argued that "an

Irish country town lady is a very different thing from an English one."²⁸

How then was class understood by Upper Canadian settlers? How did understandings of class play into the O'Brien's strategy to identify themselves to the community as socially influential? Often, the gentry and the labourer were equally cash poor, meaning that social status was not regulated by one's work or income but by appearance and behaviour.²⁹ Class lines within the developing colony of Upper Canada were never static but often contested, creating tension between the gentry and the labouring immigrant. Mary's understanding of class was, therefore, not related to an individual's socio-economic status. She instead utilized a two-tier "high and low" structure to determine an individual's social identity.³⁰ This reflected the reality Edward and Mary were faced with; while they owned land, they were often short monetarily and, therefore, they strived to distinguish themselves from others through their comportment.

What must be understood is that regardless of social rank, the need to feed and care for one's family coupled with the enormous cost and labour requirements to actually establish a viable farm in the colony meant that the majority of

²⁶ O'Brien Journals, 11 June 1830.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 15 February 1829, 8 October 1829, 2 February 1829, 30 April 1829.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2 August 1833.

²⁹ Christie, "The Plague of Servants," 85. See also, Peter Russell, *Attitudes to Social Structure and Mobility in Upper Canada, 1815-1840* (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: The Edwin Miller Press, 1990) and Cecilia Morgan, *Public Men and Virtuous Women: the Gendered Languages of Religion and Politics in Upper Canada 1791-1850* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

³⁰ Christie, "The Plague of Servants," 85.

migrants found themselves engaged in wage labour. The path to security through farming was a process which required farm families to make numerous decisions regarding how to invest their time and capital effectively. Actually securing a plot of land for the family to farm largely depended on the amount of capital a family arrived with. Those with enough capital—or credit—to make a down payment could acquire land that was already, or at least partially, cleared, while others could only afford land that was still forested. For others, renting land or working as a hired hand before settling on a piece of their own property was a more affordable option.³¹ Despite the liberal ideology of the era, the acquisition of land did not ensure security and many settlers were heavily limited by the sheer start-up cost attached to farming. Once a piece of land was attained, funds were then needed to buy livestock, equipment, and to maintain the household.³²

In April 1832, Mary noted that the O'Brien's hired hands included a diverse collection of men and women. "Our own hired hands consist now of two young Yorkshire men, monthly servants, another Yorkshire of the neighbourhood hired by the day, Jackson, the negro who comes everyday he can spare from his own farm, and the Hunt [family]."³³ The diversity of these labourers demonstrates

the multi-faceted nature of labour in Upper Canada. Labour within the colony created webs of dependence whereby all settlers were reliant on one another for assistance, but the influence of class was understood by settlers, meaning labour practices were a way for class distinctions to be made within the colony.

In later years, Edward and Mary's son, William, reflected on the role of gentlemen farmers in Shanty Bay's development. "The money expended by them was of immense advantage in providing work for the poorer immigrants, thus enabling them to live until produce of their own land became sufficient to maintain them," William noted. "Many a family of now opulent farmers got its first start in life by the money earned in working for those who had something to spend."³⁴ In these reflections, one finds the importance of class to labour and farm development; gentlemen farmers were to be benefactors to their community, using their advantages for the greater good of the colony. The reality of settlement was, however, not this simple. While the O'Briens were known amongst their neighbours as being socially superior, the couple did not hire labourers out of the goodness of their heart or pity for the poor immigrant. Once in Shanty Bay, the employment of labourers was a necessity to make their farm secure, as the O'Briens found that their farm

³¹ Douglas McCalla, *Planting the Province: The Economic History of Upper Canada, 1784-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 68.

³² Bitterman, "Farm Households and Wage Labour," 18.

³³ O'Brien Journals, April 1832.

³⁴ Lt. Col. William E. O'Brien, "Early Days in Oro," in *Simcoe County Pioneer Papers—No. 1*, ed. Simcoe County Pioneer and Historical Society (Barrie: Simcoe County Historical Society, 1908), 22-23.

work continually increased over the ten year span of Mary's journals.³⁵

A major factor which limited a settler's progress was the colony's canopy of trees. The "overwhelming task" undertaken by settlers in the initial years of settlement was clearing trees, a massive challenge, which historian J. David Wood has labeled "*the* factor" in a settler's decision to abandon their farming ambitions.³⁶ Additionally, Peter A. Russell's study on Upper Canadian development emphasises that clearing rates served "as a barometer of economic progress" because "the speed with which a man cleared the forest" determined how quickly a settler could improve his economic and social status.³⁷ Working alone, an adult male could on average clear one to one and a half acres of land per year.³⁸ At this rate, for Edward O'Brien, because he had no grown sons to help, clearing fifteen acres of land would have taken him ten years. Certainly Edward worked "very hard pulling on stumps" and both Mary and her mother joined him in this task. "I am as busy as I can be, and, after having finished our work within, take Mama to the field to burn stumps," Mary noted in August 1830.³⁹ But Edward also had hired help and the O'Briens relied on

these labourers to speed up the clearing process. Edward's success was therefore tied to his ability to hire labourers, and this depended on Edward's proficiency to find workers and pay their wages.

However, Upper Canada experienced a constant shortage of agricultural labourers.⁴⁰ Recent immigrants were often encountered by the O'Briens; for example, on 31 July 1830, Mary "had a visit from four Scotchmen in search of land." Edward had sent them to the house for a meal with the "hope of detaining some of them to work for us." "Unluckily" Mary wrote, "they had too much money in their pockets."⁴¹ To circumvent this shortage, some farmers chose to hire an entire family, usually one labouring to save enough to eventually buy their own land. The O'Brien's adopted this strategy numerous times; one particularly successful instance occurred when the O'Brien's established a rental agreement with the Campbell family in 1833.

Janet Campbell, a widow from Islay, Scotland, immigrated to Upper Canada with her five sons and three daughters in 1831. The family arrived in Shanty Bay in June, 1833 and the family rented a shanty from the O'Briens until the spring of 1835. Janet's twin sons—Archibald and

³⁵ O'Brien Journals; for example, see 13 July 1830: "We have finished our first season of hay-making, but work seems to increase upon us. Edward now begins to find the labour of his two men insufficient."

³⁶ Wood, *Making Ontario*, 85.

³⁷ Peter A. Russell, "Forests into Farmland: Upper Canadian Clearing Rates, 1822-1839," in *Historical Essays on Upper Canada: New Perspectives*, ed. J. K. Johnson and Bruce G. Wilson (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 132.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

³⁹ O'Brien Journals, 5 June 1830 and 18 August 1830.

⁴⁰ Wood, *Making Ontario*, 101.

⁴¹ O'Brien Journals, 31 July 1830.

Alexander—were trained carpenters and worked their trade in the community while supplementing their income working as bushmen and boatmen. Eventually, the Campbell family saved enough to buy a 400-acre block of land from Edward. Alexander then bought a quarter of this land from his family and established Woodlea farm.⁴² The Campbells succeeded in part, because the O'Briens could afford to hire members of the family as day labourers and thus provided the Campbells with the opportunity to save their wages and eventually invest in land.

As the relationship between the Campbells and the O'Briens demonstrates, the push for settler survival created necessary webs of dependence between households. Furthermore, within these households, family members were reliant on each other, with each member contributing to the family's long term goals. Mary's journals importantly emphasize how female labour contributed to the overall success of settler households. Douglas McCalla has argued that large amounts of female labour went into the household production of food and clothing but as this labour did not pass through the marketplace it "was not captured by standard statistics," making it difficult for the prodigious scale of women's work to be fully quantified.⁴³ The exami-

nation of Mary's daily non-wage labour and her experiences employing domestic "helps" demonstrates her unmitigated commitment to her family's survival and establishment, thereby highlighting how everyday female activity could further their household's long term goals.

**"To shift my character from
cook to gentlewoman"⁴⁴**

Mary's personal contribution to her family's survival through her daily domestic labour should not be underestimated. Numerous journal entries take us into Mary's world in a way that a census or tax record never could, by emphasizing the enormous amount of labour required of Mary. For example, in an entry from July 1830, Mary recorded a typical day. "I have made two puddings and a pie, baked two loaves and a cake, and made two pounds of butter." In addition, Mary completed her "usual routine duties of preparing two dinners and keeping [the] house in order."⁴⁵ Mary would have also been responsible for ensuring that her children were cared for and the milking, gardening, and laundry was completed.⁴⁶ Her entries further introduce the seasonal labour rotation Mary was expected to keep up with. November for example was referred to as the "meat harvest" and Mary recorded "making bacon"

⁴² Bigelow, *A Village Remembers*, 74-75. Woodlea farm is still owned by Alexander Campbell's ancestors; Robert and Carolyn Campbell are the fifth generation of Campbells to live on the farm.

⁴³ McCalla, *Planting the Province*, 113.

⁴⁴ **O'Brien Journals, 6 November 1830.**

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1 July 1830.

⁴⁶ Miller, *Journals of Mary O'Brien*, 288. Mary gave birth to three sons and three daughters over a nine year period: William Edward (1831), Lucius Richard (1832), Mary Anne (1834), Henry (1836), Fanny (1838) and Lucy (1840).

and salting and packing meat for winter provisions.⁴⁷ Mary prided herself on “being able to put more [meat] into a barrel than anybody else... though this part of the business is usually the province of the man.”⁴⁸ March was maple syrup season, a time when the entire neighbourhood was “busy in preparation for sugar making,” while June was “hatching season” and Mary would oversee the hatching of the farm’s baby chicks.⁴⁹ Not all such labours were viewed as tedious chores; for example, Mary was able to combine labour with leisure through “strawberry picking expeditions,” which provided Mary and her children with “enjoyable” outings.⁵⁰

Clearly, Mary carried a heavy workload, one which often included Edward’s work as well her own. Edward periodically left the farm under Mary’s charge for varying amounts of time during the period covered by her journals. When Edward was away overseeing the opening of the Kempenfeldt settlement, Mary filled the role of husband, meaning her labour expanded beyond the domestic realm to encompass the management of the entire farm.

While acting as Edward’s substitute, Mary noted the various challenges she faced. In July 1831, she sensed an air of resentment when giving orders to Edward’s

labourers. She wrote, “they look rather disposed to laugh at my interference, so I took care to look as undismayed as possible.” Mary was determined “to establish [her] character of being a good managing body” and eventually succeeded in winning the respect of the workers.⁵¹ During Edward’s absences, Mary would rise at dawn and give orders to the hired men and then attend to her work in the dairy, feed and dress her children, and conduct morning prayers. The day continued with preparing meals, periodic visits to the barn and fields, churning butter, giving school lessons to her niece, sewing, and caring for livestock.⁵² Edward’s absences could often occur at inopportune moments, such as his absence in August 1832. Less than two weeks after Mary gave birth to the couple’s second child, this absence also coincided with the farm’s harvest time meaning an intense increase in labour and the hiring of numerous temporary labourers. “Edward is gone,” Mary wrote, “It yet wants a day of a fortnight since my confinement and I have been all day superintending not only the household affairs but the labours of seven or eight men, besides nursing my babies.”⁵³ Through these labours women contributed to the colony’s economic growth.⁵⁴ Mary’s willingness to work and her abil-

⁴⁷ O’Brien Journals, 28 November 1831.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 13 November 1830.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, March 1837 and 8 June 1835.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 June 1835.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2 July 1831.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2 September 1831.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 28 August, 1832.

⁵⁴ See Marjorie Griffin Cohen, *Women’s Work, Markets, and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), for an in-depth analysis of this topic.

ity to rise to the occasion were skills shared by many Upper Canadian women and were crucial to the farm family's success. However, the analysis of Mary's labour requirements emphasizes the necessity to hire female domestics—usually a local girl or widowed woman—to join the household and assist Mary with her daily tasks.

In a rural setting, “helps” were often local neighbours who expected a degree of respect from their employers and refused to accept the label of “servant.”⁵⁵ While the majority of lower class single women fully understood the necessity to engage in domestic employment, female domestics knew they had an advantage due to the colony's labour shortage.⁵⁶ Mary often wrote of the difficulty in finding a female domestic worker; she sought advice from family and friends and even employed a young woman she happened to meet in the street.⁵⁷ Hired girls profited from this labour shortage in large part because they knew that this lack offered them more autonomy when looking for a position.⁵⁸ Mary was highly aware of this independent spirit and complained that female domestics addressed “their masters in a tone of perfect equality,” which both challenged and displeased Mary.⁵⁹ Yet the sheer volume of work that Mary had to undertake meant that having help

was necessary, and a “good” female domestic was highly valued.

This understanding reflected a class based difference of opinion; the employer was influenced by her assumptions while the employee upheld her own expectations. Mary's understanding of “help” was very much in keeping with the idea that she employed “servants” and Mary viewed her ability to hire help as a way to assert her social status. These assumptions clashed with the expectations of Mary's employees who anticipated working alongside her, not beneath her, and insisted “to be called girls as a more dignified appellation than servant.”⁶⁰ While Mary and her hired girls worked side by side in the domestic workplace completing shared women's work, there was a paradox in that Mary's employees earned wages while Mary did not. Mary's working relationship with her employee Flora serves to highlight these complexities.

Flora joined the O'Briens in early February, 1831. Mary recorded arriving home to find “a damsel from the Isle of Mull waiting to offer her services.” A recent arrival to Upper Canada, Flora spoke “imperfect” English; yet “finding that there was a chance of her being more efficient than the child” that Mary already had, Mary decided to consider Flora's offer.⁶¹ After consulting Wilson, Edward's

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Wives and Mothers, Schoolmistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada, 1790-1840* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 108.

⁵⁶ Christie, “The Plague of Servants,” 99-100.

⁵⁷ O'Brien Journals, 8 October 1833.

⁵⁸ Errington, *Wives and Mothers*, 108.

⁵⁹ O'Brien Journals, 17 October 1829.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 16 October 1828.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 31 January 1831.

hired man, regarding Flora's reputation and after speaking to Flora's mother, the O'Briens eventually negotiated the hiring of both Flora and her brother.⁶²

Based on Mary's journals, the two women worked well together and developed a reciprocal work relationship.⁶³ Mary was impressed with Flora; she wrote that Flora was "so active that I am not only obliged to resign to her all my accustomed share of the housework, but to teach her to read lest she should suffer from ennui."⁶⁴ Flora's skills and industriousness made her a valuable asset; in Mary's eyes Flora was a versatile worker and was able to garden, cook, clean, do the milking and care for Mary's children.⁶⁵ All of these tasks were required of Mary as well with the distinct difference that Flora received wages for this work and Mary did not. In doing this labour, both women strove to establish security for themselves within the colony. Mary's non-waged domestic work was her contribution to gaining security for her family while Flora worked with the intention of saving for marriage.

Mary and Flora's relationship moved beyond an employer-employee arrangement and developed into a friendship as Flora became part of the O'Brien household. When Flora was first hired, Mary was concerned because Flora did not

speak English well. However, as their relationship developed, Mary was able to move past being strictly an employer, to accepting and offering Flora friendship. When Flora became ill in June 1831, for example, Mary recorded the event without complaint. "To-day I have had quite another tale for Flora has fallen ill & I have to nurse her," she wrote.⁶⁶ Instead of sending Flora home, Mary accepted the responsibility of ensuring Flora's well-being. Mary's experience with Flora challenged her understanding of hired workers. When Flora permanently left her place with the O'Briens in September, 1832, Mary was sorry to lose her.

While very little is actually known about the women who worked as hired help, recent scholarship has provided a more thorough understanding of female labour within the colony, and the examination of Mary's journals confirms that women were industrious providers who willingly engaged in a vast collection of tasks. Mary noted early in her journals that "amongst the varieties and unsettled habits of this new land the employments of the women are remarkable." She reflected that females living "generally in the remoter situations" like the "uncorrupted Dutch or rather German tribes," as well the "Scots" were responsible not only for gardening but also "sheep shear-

⁶² *Ibid.*, 7 February 1831.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 22 August 1831. This passage illustrates that the two women split the housework; while Flora did the laundry, Mary engaged in other tasks.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 18 February 1831.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2 September 1831. This entry provides an example of the variety of work that Flora would complete in a day. Mary noted that Flora cleaned the house, cared for Mary's baby, cooked breakfast, did the milking and helped make butter.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 29 June 1831.

ing & in harvesting, sugar-making and as I have just heard logging—the most laborious of all employments they take their share with the men.”⁶⁷ While rural women frequently engaged in farm work for their fathers, husbands, and brothers, farmers were reluctant to actually hire women to work in their fields and would often only do so out of desperation.⁶⁸ In 1832, the O’Brien’s hired “a great tall black girl” to dig potatoes. “It is the first time we have ever had female Canadians as farm servants, though in my farming days I got some day’s work at odd times from some English girls who were living on the farm, but this rather as a freak than anything else.”⁶⁹ Mary’s comment seems not to be about the girl’s race, but her gender.

Whether in a position to manage workers and a household or labouring for wages as a female domestic, women significantly contributed to their families’ long term goals through their labour. Idealized as the “angel in the house” whose lives were centered on the home, women of this period found this understanding of femininity challenged by Upper Canada’s social and economic reality.⁷⁰ Daily, the choices which both males and females made were challenged by the un-

expected reality of colonial settlement which tested the unwritten codes structuring their understandings of class and gender as they laboured to establish prosperous households.

Conclusion

Despite Mary’s and Edward’s goals, labour, and advantages, the O’Brien’s were unable to fully support their household through farming alone and chose to leave Shanty Bay for York in 1845. In York, Edward filled numerous secretarial positions for companies such as the Provincial Mutual and General Insurance Co. Later, he also bought a newspaper—the *Toronto Patriot*—in 1848.⁷¹ Mary and Edward retired to their home in Shanty Bay in 1858 and were buried behind St. Thomas Anglican Church.⁷²

It is unknown why Mary’s journals abruptly ended in 1838. Likely caring for six children and fulfilling her duties as a wife left her with little time to write. Fortunately, Mary’s writing has been preserved through the Archives of Ontario and will continue to provide insight into the dynamics of household labour. Households were indeed “coalitions of individuals”⁷³ bound by co-operative strategies which could be challenged by

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 August 1830.

⁶⁸ Errington, *Wives and Mothers*, 109-110.

⁶⁹ O’Brien Journals, 30 October 1832.

⁷⁰ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women in the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 29-30.

⁷¹ Bigelow, *A Village Remembers*, 78. Edward later sold this paper to Orangeman Ogle Robert Gow-an.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 78. Edward died on 8 September 1875 and Mary died a year later in 1876.

⁷³ Cornell, “Where Can Family Strategies Exist?” 121.

conventions of gender and class. Success was never guaranteed and settlers constantly had to balance risks and returns and needed to make numerous choices in their search for personal and family security.⁷⁴ Mary's journals provide an orientation to the settlement of Upper Canada while demonstrating how an individual's values and assumptions could be chal-

lenged by the intricate and complex realities of frontier life. Containing a wealth of information regarding the texture of life in Upper Canada during the first half of the nineteenth-century, Mary's journals allow us to nuance larger historical debates by examining the experiences of a farm wife within the context of settlement, class, and labour.

⁷⁴ McCalla, *Planting the Province*, 113.