

**Decoding the Life Lines of Almira Bell's  
1833-1836  
Diaries: Barrington, Nova Scotia**

**by: Nicole Rafuse**

This thesis is presented to the Faculty of Arts of Saint Mary's University in Halifax as partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in Atlantic Canada Studies.

c. Nicole M. Rafuse 1997

Halifax, Nova Scotia

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## Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Dedication	
Map	
Illustrations	
Chapter I Introduction.....	1
Chapter II Diaries as Research Tools: Setting the Stage for Almira Bell's Debut.....	10
Chapter III Almira Bell: The Woman.....	47
Chapter IV Almira Bell's Community Revealed: Barrington, Nova Scotia.....	97
Conclusion.....	164
Bibliography.....	180

**Abstract**  
**Decoding the Life Lines of Almira Bell's 1833-1836**  
**Diaries: Barrington, Nova Scotia**

**Nicole Rafuse**  
**April 10, 1997**

The diary, whether it is a record of travel, of public events, of religious experience or personal activities, is a document of interest and value for the historian, genealogist, sociologist, literary critic and even the geographer. The diary brings to life the past as seen through the eyes of and as expressed by the diarist. It can transport the reader back in time with some degree of intimacy and immediacy.

Because of what diaries may reveal about a person in his/her time and place, diaries are invaluable as supplementary research tools and as primary tools for historical reconstruction. This is especially true for those seeking to document and evaluate the lives of women in Canadian society. Women's diaries are one of the few substantive forms of documentation shaped and conditioned by the lives of those who wrote them. These are the voices of women speaking directly from the past to the present, voices recounting what women did, what they thought, who they were and how they shaped and were shaped by their environments and relationships.

The diary of Almira Bell, a young unmarried school teacher living in Barrington, Nova Scotia during the 1830s is one such personal document. It enables one to reconstruct the history of a rural pre-industrial Maritime community and to map the inner and outer life of a private individual. With the exception of several short gaps, the diary of Almira Bell covers the years beginning July 19, 1833 to October 28, 1836. At present, a portion of the diary is held at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia in Halifax in microfilm form. Part of the original is at the Shelburne County Museum and the remainder is in the hands of a family member. The original diaries are small booklets measuring 19.5 cm x 13.5 cm. The transcribed version comprises approximately 170 typed pages. The writing is in ink and, on the whole, is very legible. A few pages are torn leaving some small sections incomplete.

The focus of this study has been to examine the diaries of Almira Bell for the purposes of historical reconstruction. Three kinds of historical reconstruction have been attempted; the social and cultural history of Barrington in the 1830s; the history of women in a given time and place; and the story of Almira Bell's personal life between 1833 and 1836. Historical reconstruction is the piecing together of an event, of an environment, of a person's life or of a community, based on bits of evidence drawn from documents created in the past. The diary is one such source, providing clues and actual data to be inserted into the historian's puzzle. By placing the diary clues into their political, social, economic, and cultural contexts, based on evidence drawn from other more traditional primary and secondary sources, the historians can reconstruct the past, and thereby, gain an understanding of what took place and why.



Almira Bell was never famous. However, she was one of those "millions" of crucial women who shaped Canadian society. Her diary is a small, but valuable piece, in the history of Canadian women. Almira Bell has left to history a relatively full picture of herself, the inner and outer woman, during a three year period. She wrote about what she did, what she believed, what she aspired to, what she expected and what she feared. She described and evaluated her relationships with men, as well as women. Unknowingly, she left to history clues as to how women were perceived and treated in a rural Maritime community in the 1830s. Her diary covers a variety of social and cultural topics including the impact of shipping and shipbuilding on the community of Barrington, healthcare, customs, forms of entertainment, class and ethnic makeup and other community demographics, attitudes towards basic education, and the place of the Protestant church in community life. Almira may have thought she was only scribbling trivial happenings but to the researcher, she was doing much more. Her diary is a yet unexploited resource for modern day historical reconstruction and interpretation, particularly in the areas of women's history and community history of the Maritime region.

### Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis has been a long process that I could not have finished without the help of a number of people. My thesis advisor, Dr. Della Stanley has been a constant source of advice and support throughout the writing of this thesis. She helped me to focus my study and was a directing force in its completion. I would like to thank her for the many hours spent rereading and conferencing with me during the past year. It was truly a pleasure working with her.

I would like to thank Dr. Kenneth MacKinnon of Saint Mary's University for his help in finding background materials for this study. I would like to acknowledge Margaret Conrad and John Reid's contribution to this thesis as members of my reading committee. Their comments and suggestions were very much appreciated.

I completed much of the primary research for this thesis at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia in Halifax. The staff there were extremely helpful in showing me where to find materials and in giving suggestions as to where to locate others. My research also took me to the Shelburne County Museum in Shelburne. Finn Bower, the curator of the museum, was particularly helpful in finding materials that augmented the research about Almira Bell that I had already found at PANS. I was also able to find another portion of the diary at the museum that Finn Bower helped to locate. Her kind words and knowledge of the area were of great assistance to me in my research.

I also interviewed Macie Bruce of Shelburne who is the wife of Almira Bell's nephew. She spoke with me about her knowledge of Almira Bell and was generous enough to show me original poems and letters that Almira Bell had written.

I wish to thank my parents, grandparents and brother for their constant encouragement and support over the past few years. I also wish to express my appreciation and thanks to Jeff who helped me to persevere and keep writing during the

iv.

times when I did not think that I could. His love and support were the deciding factors in the final completion of this work. For the help and encouragement of everyone around me, I will always be grateful.

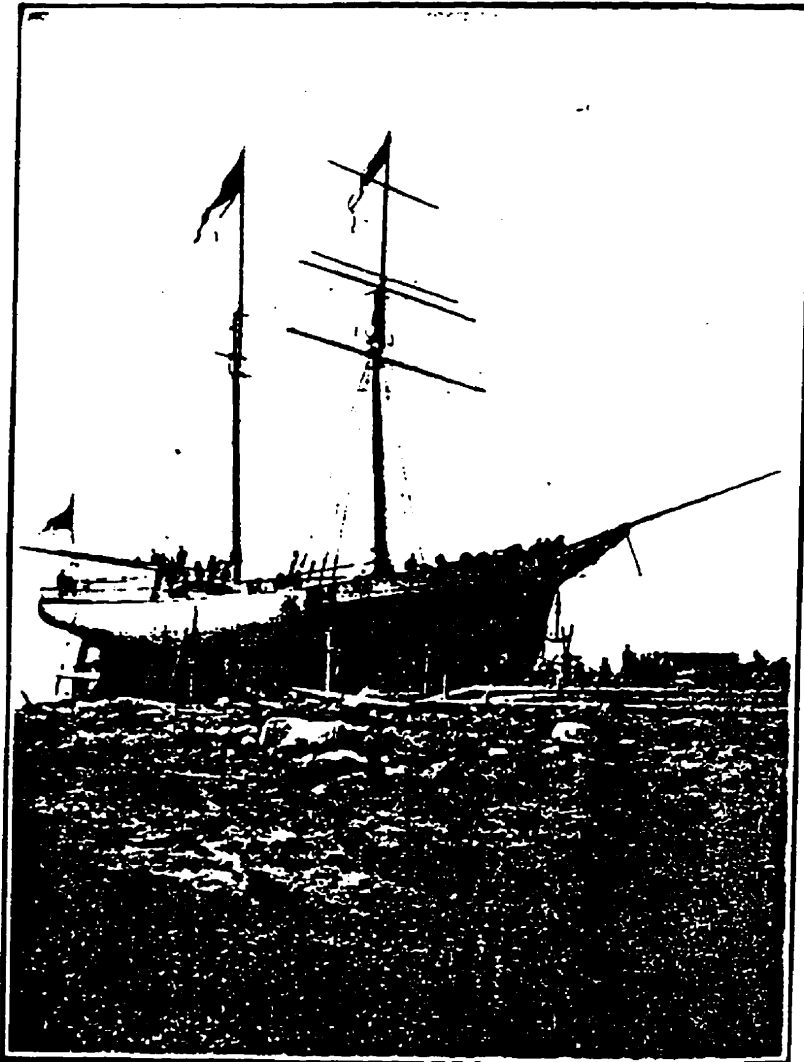
Nicole Rafuse

*~DEDICATION~*

*To my father, Patrick  
My inspiration in all that I do.*

# Barrington Township





**TYPICAL TOPSAIL SCHOONER AND LAUNCHING.**

**Barrington Rig, built at Warren Doane's Yard.**



**HON. ROBERT ROBERTSON.**  
b. 1817. Many years M.P.P. for Shelburne Co.



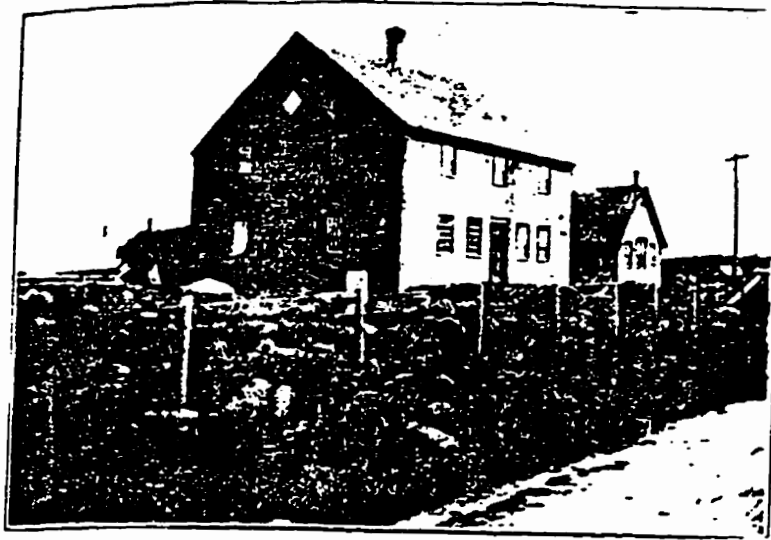
**REV. CHARLES KNOWLES.**



**REV. W. W. ASHLEY.**



**REV. THEODORE S. HARDING.**  
1773-1855, son of grantee of the same name.

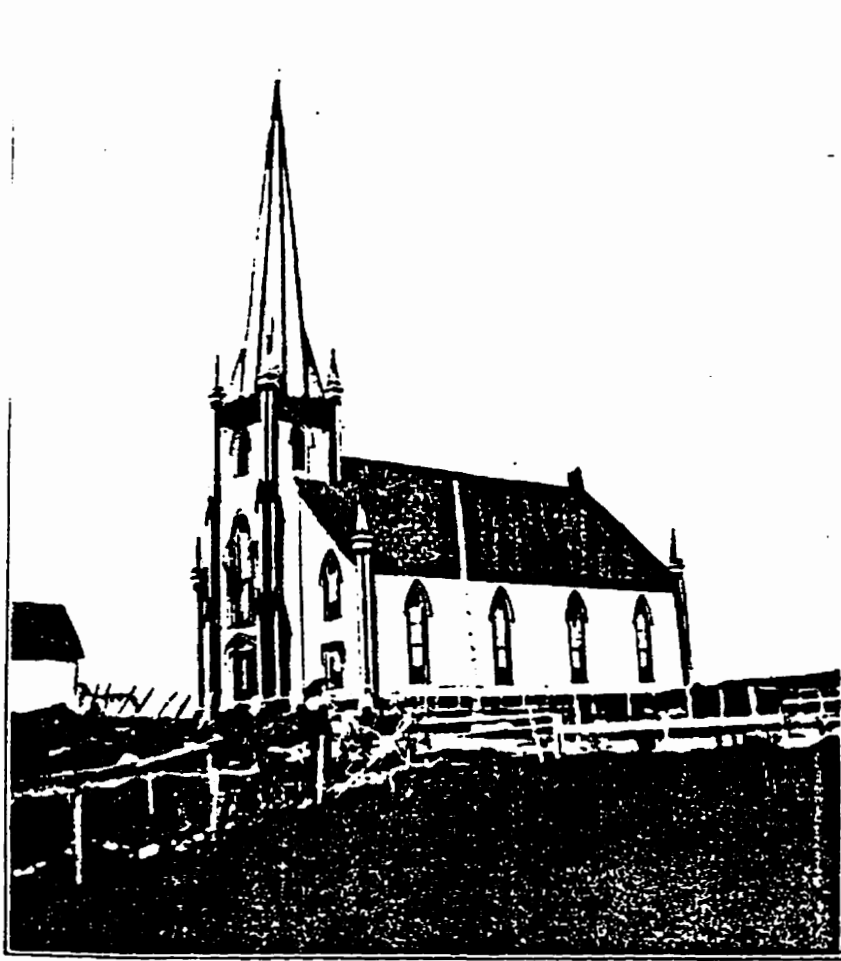


1) OLD MEETING HOUSE:  
The Head Built in 1760.  
2) TEMPERANCE HALL, c. 1850.

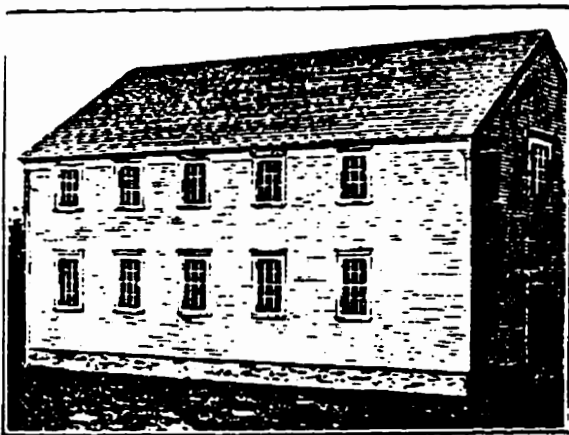


**Old Meeting House**





FREE BAPTIST CHURCH.  
Clark's Harbor.



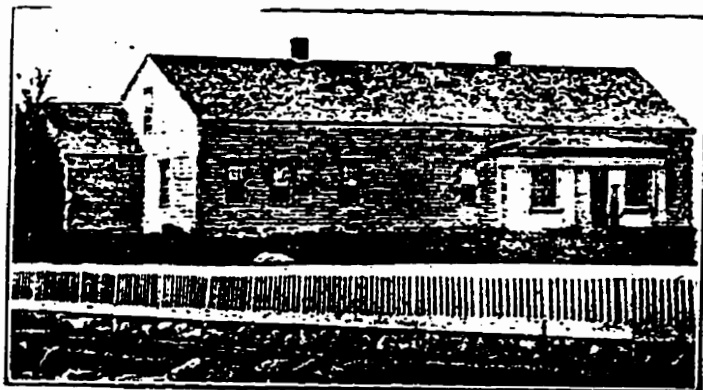
THE ISLAND MEETING HOUSE, built c. 1780, rebuilt 1811, enlarged in 1841.  
See page 272.



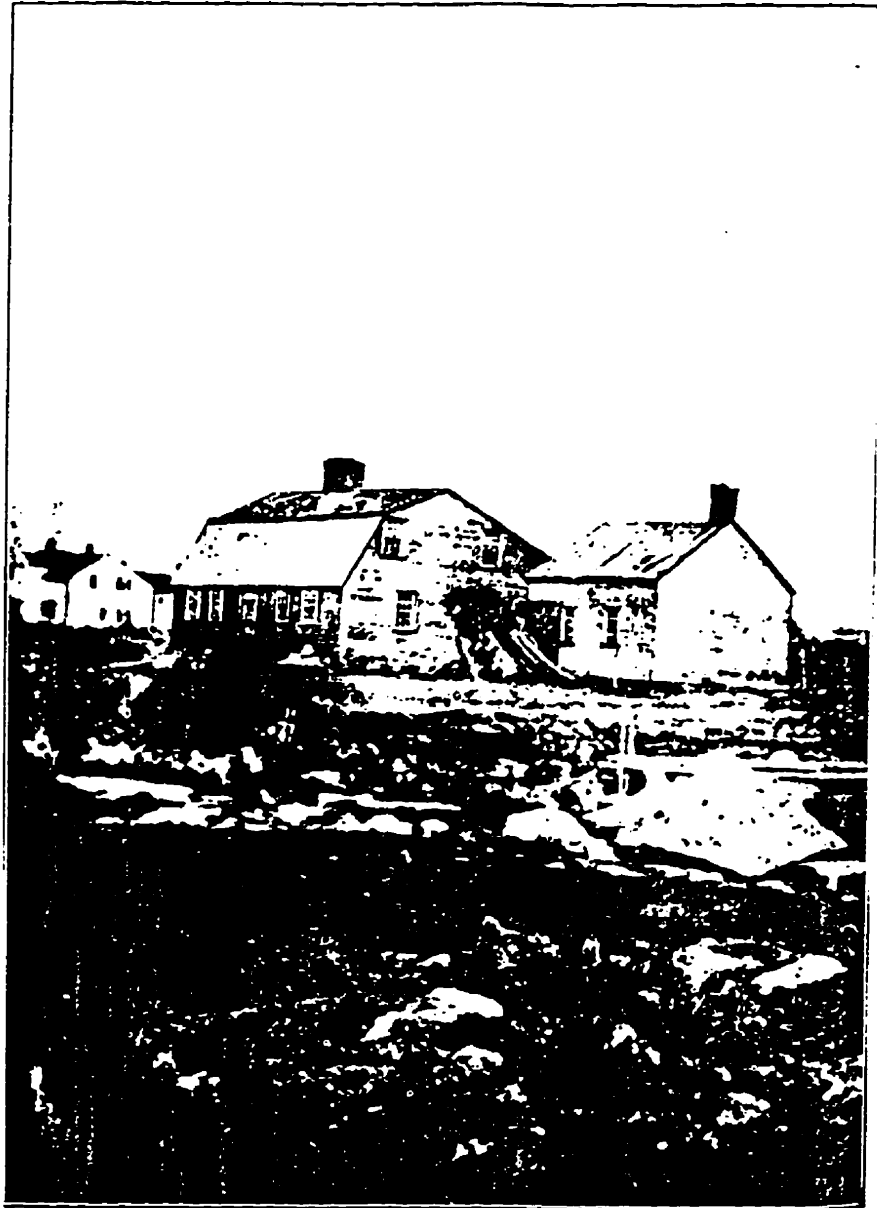
METHODIST CHURCH, BARRINGTON HEAD.



**The Joseph Bell home, built 1783-1784.**



**THE GEDDES HOUSE, THE HEAD**



**SARGENT HOUSE, BARRINGTON HEAD.**

Main house built before 1769, by John Porter, grantee; sold at that date to Capt. David Smith, by him to John Sargent in 1783. It had an oak frame. The Porch was brought from Shelburne and added later.

## Chapter I Introduction

I began the research for this thesis three years ago. My interest in diaries began during my undergraduate work at Mount Saint Vincent University and Saint Mary's University. Most of my work focused on the area of women's history. The study of women's diaries incorporated the two nicely. While searching through the women's diaries held at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, I came across part of Almira Bell's diary dated July 19, 1833 to October 28, 1836. Fortunately, Almira had excellent penmanship, and I was able to read the entries quite easily. It did not take long for me to find I was becoming very interested in this young single school teacher who resided in Barrington, approximately 45 miles west of my home town of Liverpool. I was attracted not only to the variety of information the diary contained but to the woman herself and her turn of phrase.

On one hand, she was shy and unsure of herself, always questioning whether she was a good Christian. Almira's religious devotion showed when others took the Lord's name in vain and on September 18, 1833 she wrote, "they spoke of Mr. Lord, and his name was a subject of mirth to them--oh! how my blood curdled at their remarks--sinner that I am, I cannot bear to hear that name made a subject for jesting." Even though Almira showed great respect for God she still labeled herself a sinner. She wrote often about her concern for death, her disappointments in love and friendship and her dislike for her job as a school teacher. After a friend's death she wrote on September 17, 1833 about her concerns for her own death, "yet, at no distant day, I, too, shall have become a disembodied spirit, and shall have been made acquainted with those secrets that Death alone can reveal. Awful, awful thoughts, oh, my soul! may'st thou be prepared for an event so tremendous--and so certain!" Likewise, her feelings about friendships and love were often as negative and sad. On August 2, 1833 she wrote of her hopes for friendship that were later dispelled, "the cold world would smile at my sorrows--and brand me with

the epithet of "romantic" but I am not romantic--once I was, for I fondly deemed that there existed in the world a thing called Friendship--and oh folly--even imagined I had obtained its blessings--vain delusion!" Similarly, she often felt truly unhappy about her teaching position, as she wrote on August 2, 1833, "I feel very unwell this morning-- better to be in my bed, than to undergo the drudgery of school keeping."

On the other hand, she was amusing, outspoken, and judgemental about her community and its residents. On November 10, 1833 she wrote about a wedding reception that was more enjoyable for some than others, "Emma and I were at the wedding yesterday--they were married at three o'clock--we spent a quite agreeable evening and it would have been still more so had it not been for Mr. C. who got as drunk as a coot and made himself mighty ridiculous." Almira did not hide her opinions in her writing and expressed herself quite openly about such events in the community. Almira was also a poet-not a great poet, but she found satisfaction in writing poetry. It was a lifelong love and census records indicate that she was referred to as a poetess in her later years. Her chief themes were a reflection of her self doubts and fears.

I also found Almira Bell's character to be full and dynamic. I believed the diary could be a valuable addition to the ever growing diary literature being used to study the lives of Canadian women. The authors of No Place Like Home have said of using women's diaries and personal documents as primary sources for reconstructing women's history, "...what we have in these documents is history as it is experienced by most men and women. Yet, there is a particular female eye through which events are viewed and which suggests that women's position in society, their roles and their values in the period chronicled here, give them a unique angle of vision and common preoccupations."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Conrad, Toni Laidlaw and Donna Smyth, No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women 1771-1938 (Halifax: Formac Publishing Company Limited, 1988) 4.

In preparation for what I conceived as an exercise in historical reconstruction, I transcribed the diary held at PANS. While in Shelburne at the museum researching the family background of Almira Bell, I discovered that there was another portion of the diary covering September 15, 1833 to December 27, 1833. This had been transcribed by a local resident at an earlier time. In total, the length is about 170 typed pages. The original diaries were small booklets measuring 19.5 cm x 13.5 cm that appear to have been unedited by Almira Bell. The writing is in ink and on the whole is very legible. A few pages are torn leaving small sections incomplete. Almira generally wrote in full sentences and rarely consciously hid the identity of people mentioned. She did, however, use initials fairly regularly but more as a way of shortening her writing than to hide their identity.

As part of my preparation, I read books on the subject of diaries as research tools including Betty Wylie's Reading Between the Lines: The Diaries of Women. I also consulted Arthur Ponsonby's English Diaries: A Review of English Diaries from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century that provided an introduction on diary writing that was very helpful. A look at Robert Fothergill's Private Chronicles: A Study of English Diaries provided background material on diary study. Andrew Hassam's article "Reading Other People's Diaries" allowed me to consider the implications of using women's diaries to reconstruct history. I established that a diary was defined as an informal daily recording, written in the past tense, of the day's activities and the author's thoughts on that day as they relate to the diarist personally. Almira Bell's diary fell into the category of an introspective diary as it explained the inner person of Almira Bell. She defined her purpose for keeping a diary in her first entry:

in my dreariest moment, writing has ever been a solace and amusement to me-- Often when my heart has been torn by conflicting emotions, have I retired and passed forth its feelings upon paper, and this without any design to obtain sympathy by showing these efforts to any person, and I had seldom failed to lay aside my pen with a heart disburdened of half its weight.

Therefore, uninteresting tho the matter may be with which I shall fill the following pages, still, if I begin a few of my lonely hours by doing so, I will not account it mispent time, that I shall have devoted to this employment.<sup>2</sup>

Almira Bell kept her diary to fill in time, but she also used the diary as a means of therapeutic relief and comfort. In it she wrote her innermost feelings and fears, consoling herself as she wrote.

The diary, however, goes well beyond Almira Bell's personal objectives for writing. As Betty Wylie says a diary is, "useful to the person who keeps it, dull to the contemporary who reads it, invaluable to the student centuries afterwards, who treasures it!"<sup>3</sup> and as Veronica Strong-Boag argues, "diaries intersect with existing data drawn from traditional documentation."<sup>4</sup> Almira Bell's diary is one such document.

I looked at local Maritime connections before I attempted to decode the diary and place it into a context. I researched women's lives in rural Maritime communities through published women's diaries of the time period, and women's histories such as Alison Prentice's Canadian Women: A History. I consulted such texts as No Place Like Home written by Margaret Conrad, Toni Laidlaw and Donna Smyth which provided me with a background in Maritime women's history, as well as diary study. Valuable reference articles dealing with rural Maritime women's diaries included G.G. Campbell's article entitled "Susan Dunlap: Her Diary", Susan Flewwelling's articles entitled "The Diary of Mary Ann Norris", and L.K. Sweeney's article "The Journal of Helen Sophia Perry: Winter of 1909-1910". These articles provided glimpses into the lives of other rural Maritime women through the examination of their diary entries. I also consulted newspapers of the 1830s to get a feeling for the time and place that I was researching. I

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<sup>2</sup> Diary entry from July 19, 1833.

<sup>3</sup> Betty Wylie, Reading Between the Lines: The Diaries of Women (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1995) 1.

<sup>4</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Canadian Women's History (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1986) 3.

consulted such materials as Edwin Crowell's The History of the Township of Barrington as well as other writings from Benjamin Doane, Frank Doane and local historian Hattie Perry. From these sources I was able to learn how community life existed in Barrington in the 1830s. Aspects of community life such as religion, education, customs, entertainments and life events including births and deaths were researched through the histories of Barrington, newspapers and other books like Janet Guilford's Separate Spheres, which provided information on teaching and education in the early 1800s. From reviewing this material about women's history, as well as information about the community, I was able to place Barrington into a context that I could relate it to the diary.

Archival materials were also valuable sources in the reconstructing of the time and place of this study. From archival material including letters written to Dr. Geddes in 1832 from the Health Officer, I was able to understand the degree of fear felt by the people of Halifax about the cholera epidemic that they were facing, and of the impending danger of the epidemic spreading to Barrington and the surrounding areas. School records revealed that Almira Bell was paid for her teaching services in 1836 and 1837, and census data for 1871 and 1881 listed Almira Bell's occupation to be that of a poetess. I was able to gather archival data concerning the construction of buildings for educational and religious services as well.

With the contextual material covered, I could then read the diary with greater knowledge and understanding of the people and the places mentioned, the attitudes expressed and the activities undertaken. Decoding of the diary involved such things as putting names with the initials, piecing together who each person was in relation to families in the area and locating places mentioned. I took what I knew about Barrington and connected it to references made by Almira such as going to Robertson's store for combs. In other words, I had to read between the lines and fill in the gaps to make connections that were not obvious from just a simple reading of the diary.



The focus of this study has been to examine the diaries of Almira Bell for the purposes of historical reconstruction. Three kinds of historical reconstruction have been attempted; the social and cultural history of Barrington in the 1830s; the history of women in a given time and place; and the story of Almira Bell's personal life between 1833 and 1836. Historical reconstruction is the piecing together of an event, of an environment, of a person's life or of a community, based on bits of evidence drawn from documents created in the past. The diary is one such source, providing clues and actual data to be inserted into the historian's puzzle. By placing the diary clues into the political, social, economic, and cultural contexts, based on evidence drawn from other more traditional primary and secondary sources, the historians can reconstruct the past, and thereby, gain an understanding of what took place and why.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter discusses using diaries as research tools in the reconstruction of history. According to James Cummings, an American diary scholar, the entries in the dairy are written down, "in the random, non thematic fashion of real life."<sup>5</sup> The fact that they were not public records, and therefore not expected to be subject to public scrutiny, meant that they did not fall into the traditional categories of academic verification and evaluation. Also, the fact that they dealt largely with mundane, domestic activities convinced many scholars that diaries contributed little in the way of valuable information to the understanding of the development of great cultures and societies. Thus, women's diaries experienced an upsurge of interest with the development of women's history as a recognized area of scholarly study in the 1970s and 1980s. As Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita C. Fellman wrote in their book on the rise of interest in women's history in Canada, Rethinking Canada, if, "history is the telling of human experience," then to leave out the female

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<sup>5</sup> L. Arksey et al., American Diaries: An Annotated Bibliography of Published American Diaries and Journals: vol.1 Diaries Written from 1492 to 1844 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1983) vii.

perspective of events, people and places was to produce a "distorted history."<sup>6</sup> Women's diaries are not second best sources, they are a part of the body of primary material available to the researcher, social historian, geographer, sociologist, psychologist or literary scholar.

The second chapter attempts to recreate the picture of Almira Bell from her own writing, including her poetry. Her daily recordings provide historians with a glimpse into community life in rural Nova Scotia in the first half of the nineteenth century, but they have left to posterity a picture of Almira Bell herself. The researcher can reconstruct a picture of this young woman, including not only her physical characteristics and dress but also her attitudes, hopes and disappointments. Writing poetry was one of her greatest pleasures and she wrote about such themes as death, unrequited love and the beauty of nature. After admiring the moon she wrote, "My own loved light / That every soft and solemn spirit worships / That lovers love so well--strange joy is thine/ Whose influence o'er all tides of soul hath pow'r." She wrote of her lost love in the poem "Cast Aside", "Cast aside! what a fair unspotted name!/ And, oh how recklessly! As well, Almira Bell wrote these lines on the death of her beloved friend Mary Bongay, "...none but the afflicted can my sorrows share;/ and sympathizing shed the friendly tear." As Margo Culley has observed, "Most diaries...are a series of surprises to writer and reader alike."<sup>7</sup> This of course, accounts for the immediacy and freshness of one day's entry to the next. She was unpredictable. This was because her feelings and life were evolving and changing. Almira was truly a woman of contradictions.

The third chapter is the reconstruction of Almira Bell's community of Barrington. By piecing together events that happened in the area, along with other written sources of information, the picture of Barrington in the 1830s is drawn. Almira Bell's recordings

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<sup>6</sup> Strong-Boag, Rethinking Canada 1.

<sup>7</sup> Margo Culley, A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present (New York: Feminist Press, 1985) 21.

provide the personal views of a woman about the history of her own community. In this chapter one would have some idea how the community was laid out, what the family relationships were, what the economic activities were, who the social elite were, what people ate, what they did for entertainment, what they believed and how they expressed their beliefs and what were some of their social concerns. And, because Almira Bell was writing from a female perspective, one can gain some insight into what it was like for a young single woman living in Barrington at the time.

The final chapter concludes the thesis and discusses the importance of using women's diaries in the reconstruction of women's history and Maritime communities. The value of diaries as research tools is stressed. This thesis attempts to bring to the forefront, a Maritime woman who, until now had virtually been unknown to anyone but her family members. Through decoding Almira Bell's diaries, she is able to speak for herself about her own life and her life as a woman in the community of Barrington between 1833 and 1836.

This thesis is a valuable contribution to the present literature about women's diaries and women's lives because it is about a young, single woman who was left to support herself in a rural Nova Scotia community during the 1830s. She may have been atypical in terms of her level of education, the fact she did not live at home and was not married by the age of 28, but most other ways she was typical of her age. She had relationships with men. She relied on them for protection, for example, when Thomas pulled her from the lake in the winter time to save her from drowning. She accepted a degree of dependence on men, in terms of being able to travel to her hometown of Shelburne, and she was as concerned as others about her own mortality. She did not have a husband to support her so she had to work in an occupation that she did not enjoy. Her private writings tell the researcher much about her own feelings, as well as her community's lifestyle and happenings. Her diary provides a useful portrait of Barrington during this time period including the importance of the sea in shaping the lives, customs

and activities of its residents. The men were away at sea for long periods of time and the women were left alone to care for the families, shipwrecks meant that rescued people had to be cared for by local residents and the isolation of Barrington was broken periodically by those who visited from other places or who returned from distant shores, bringing with them tales of other places and peoples. There is not a great deal of literature about this community in the 1830s, although some other sources exist. Other sources such as Benjamin Doane's Following the Sea text does not discuss much about the community of Barrington itself, but it does provide information about seafaring in the 1800s. The local histories provide glimpses into the life of Barrington during the 1800s but only a glimpse. Almira Bell's diary supplements the research that is already present and fills in some gaps in the history of women's lives in Barrington.

As this is a study about both women's history and the history of a community, my thesis tries to provide the researcher with material about women's lives and a rural Maritime community that has virtually been neglected in academic research up until this point. By including this thesis research with the other materials already available, the picture of life in Barrington is much fuller.

Diaries are an essential tool of historical reconstruction and interpretation. They chronicle facts and details from the past, ones that often do not appear in more traditional public documents. They describe how women lived, what they did, why they did it and how they felt about it. Through the diary the historical time is revealed, the events and their place in a nation's development. Diaries reveal much about how technological development and public institutions like church, school and the law, affected the lives of women and how women shaped them. As Strong-Boag puts it, diaries, in part, help the historian to study, "Canadian women as actors rather than as those being acted upon by others."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Strong-Boag, Rethinking Canada 5.

## Chapter II

### Diaries as Research Tools: Setting the Stage for Almira Bell's Debut

In vernacular speech the word diary is often used interchangeably with such words as chronicle, journal, daybook and commonplace book. The common thread linking these terms is the fact that each is a recording of events, activities, environmental conditions and/or personal thoughts as experienced by the writer. While the average person may make little, if any, distinction between such forms of literary record keeping, scholars do. Since diaries are being used increasingly as sources of academic research, it is important to establish some kind of academic parameters for the term diary. In this way, it becomes easier to undertake critical analysis of the literary and/or historical value of the diary form.

Clues as to the format and content of a diary, in the academic sense, can be found in the epistemology of the word. "Diary" comes from the Latin word for "ration for a day", or "a daily record", -"diarium", which in turn, traces its roots to the Latin word "dies", meaning "day".<sup>1</sup> Hence, a "diarium" evolved into a document that recorded events on a day by day basis. It is this aspect of "dailyness" which is the first distinctive characteristic of the diary. However, it is also a feature of the daybook and the journal. For instance, the word journal comes from the French words "jour", meaning day and "journal", meaning a daily newspaper.<sup>2</sup> Although strictly speaking, the diary, journal and daybook contain day by day entries, in practice, there may be lapses in the daily recordings. Generally, however, entries are made with a degree of regularity over a certain period of time, thus leaving a record of the time that has passed.

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<sup>1</sup> Betty J. Wylie, Reading Between the Lines: The Diaries of Women (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1995) 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> Wylie 12-13.

Because of their contemporary, daily nature, diaries, journals and daybooks have an immediacy that is missing in other types of personal literary records including biographies and memoirs. The latter are often written from the perspective of hindsight and are, therefore, more retrospective in tone. Whereas the daily entries of the diary are unencumbered by the editing processes of time and personal concern about how the information contained within will be evaluated by others; memoirs, and autobiographies are selective compilations of past events and thoughts, conditioned by what the writer wishes posterity to know.

What then distinguishes the diary from the journal or daybook? In many ways very little. In fact, only the diarist really knows if any formal distinction was made at the time of writing. That is the dilemma for the researcher who is studying the document. The researcher is bound by scholarly and academic conventions and definitions, but the diarist is not. The researcher must, consequently, determine the nature of the document as intended by the diarist and then evaluate it in the context of academic terminologies. As these forms of literary expression have gained academic respectability among scholars, more precise definitions have evolved. For the scholar, the differences lie in the regularity of recording and the nature of the content material.

The diary is regarded as an informal daily recording, written in the present tense, of the day's activities and the author's thoughts on that day as they relate to the diarist personally. According to James Cummings, an American diary scholar, the entries in the diary are written down, "in the random, non thematic fashion of real life."<sup>3</sup> The journal, in contrast, is a more formal document, not necessarily maintained on a daily basis. Instead, the journal records, with more attention to literary expression and subject

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<sup>3</sup> L. Arksey et al., American Diaries: An Annotated Bibliography of Published American Diaries and Journals: vol. I: Diaries Written From 1492 to 1844 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1983) vii.

content. "observations on particular events, situations or preoccupations of the writer."<sup>4</sup> Using academic parameters then, it can be said that the diary is a more subjective document, maintained on a more consistent, daily basis than the journal. It must be remembered that most diarists and journal writers did not make such academic distinctions but the modern day scholar can, by examining the document according to these definitions, determine into which academic category it falls.

While the regularity of recording is one way to define a diary, perhaps a more telling feature is the actual or implied use of the salutation "Dear Diary". Only occasionally does a writer address entries in a journal in such a personal way. In affect, the diary is a much more intimate document. There exists a special bond between the writer and her diary, one which may not exist between the writer and her journal. In fact, the diary, for many, is a friend, a very real companion, who knows and understands the writer and who, like any true friend, is a good listener and does not divulge secrets. In fact, the image of the diary as the all knowing friend is borne out by the use of short forms, allusions and the emphasis on secrecy and privacy. The journal, conversely, is usually a more impersonal record and commentary of events. The writer does not assume that the journal knows all about the writer and understands what is implied rather than explicitly stated.

Of course, there are exceptions. Consider the personal relationship that Sarah Hallen Drinkwater, of Penetang, Upper Canada, had with her journal. Writing in 1840, two months after her marriage at age 22, she wrote, "Alas poor journal, it is now two months since I wrote in you. I shall put down in as brief a way as I can what little events have occurred...".<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, in general, the diary is a more personal literary genre than the journal. Such closeness and friendship is seen in the diary of eighteen year old

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<sup>4</sup> Arksey vii.

<sup>5</sup> Copy of entries from the diary of S.H. Drinkwater, Penetang, 1840, McLaughlin Museum, Grass Creek, Ontario.

Kate Shannon of Halifax, who writing her last entry for 1892 bid her friend farewell, "Good night diary and goodbye, to old fellow for its the last time I'll make an entry in you this year...". She added, "It will be too bad if anyone gets hold of these loose sheets and reads them!"<sup>6</sup>

The private nature of the diary accounts, in part, for the limited use that has been made, until recently, of diaries as research documents. Most were hidden from contemporaries, their privacy guarded through time by descendants who destroyed them or stored them away for family viewing alone. The lack of verification and the subjectivity of the diary raised doubts in the minds of academics as to the value and reliability of the material contained within. Generally, diaries were ignored, demeaned as private, unscholarly documents that were incompatible with academic methodologies. The fact that they were not public records, and therefore not expected to be subject to public scrutiny, meant that they did not fall into the traditional categories of academic verification and evaluation. Also, the fact that they dealt largely with mundane, domestic activities convinced many scholars that diaries contributed little in the way of valuable information to the understanding of the development of great cultures and societies.

The variations in style, content and literary quality of diaries left scholars with the impression that most were of limited use other than as items of mild curiosity and intriguing revelation. However, it was the aspect of revelation that inspired some historians to examine diaries written by so-called famous individuals, or by someone with close connections to such a person; a wife, a lover, a child, a sibling, or a colleague. In the 1920s, the British historian Arthur Ponsonby, argued that diaries and journals often held the key to understanding the people behind the great events or decision-making of history. He examined five centuries of diaries to prove his point.<sup>7</sup> While the diaries

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<sup>6</sup> D.M.M. Stanley (ed.), A Victorian Lady's Album: Kate Shannon's Halifax and Boston Diary of 1892 (Halifax: Formac Publishing Company Limited, 1994) 116.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Ponsonby, English Diaries: A Review of English Diaries from the



themselves were given little scholarly respect, either as literary or historical documents, any content shedding light on a famous person's life, attitudes and activities was, at least, acknowledged. In fact, it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that scholars in Canada, as well as the rest of the world, began to exploit the research potential of diaries.

The 1960s witnessed the emergence of a new approach to historical analysis known as Social History. This shift was international in scope and had a lasting impact on the writing of history in Canada. Social historians did not totally reject the value of the conventional approaches to historical evaluation and interpretation, which were rooted in political and economic documentation. Nor did they deny the need for historical studies of large national units. But, they believed that much had been ignored and overlooked because of these approaches. Social historians argued that the study of the development and maturing of societies and nations must include the examination of differing groups within national units, groups based on ethnic origin, economic activity, class, and gender. They sought to study the social manifestations of political events, environmental conditions and economic involvement as expressed and experienced by the parts of the whole, as well as the whole.<sup>8</sup>

In Canada, social historians in the late 1960s and early 1970s maintained that the traditional studies of Canada in terms of its evolution from colony to nation had failed to examine national institutions from a critical enough perspective and had, thus, overlooked or denigrated the contributions and influences of the average Canadian on Canadian society. Carl Berger observed at the end of his study of English Canadian historiography, published in 1976, The Writing of Canadian History 1900-1970, that the

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Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century with an Introduction on Diary Writing (Michigan: Gryphon Books, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> Carl Berger, The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing: 1900 to 1970 (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976) 263-264.

1960s gave birth to scholarly research in the area of regional history, cultural expression, class and labor movements, and women's history. He wrote that the new breed of historian in Canada desired, "...a more authentic description and analysis of ordinary everyday life and the material regularities that shape group existence."<sup>9</sup>

Social historians not only had to develop new concepts, new methods and new approaches to analysis and interpretation, but they had to turn to previously underused or ignored sources. Information about the average Canadian, attitudes, values, activities and aspirations, simply was insufficient if the historians were to depend on traditional public records and manuscripts. Since social history involved the study of average, day to day life for all levels of society, diaries became a valued new source for social historians. By their very nature, diaries provided an uniquely personal, intimate daily picture of the life and times of earlier generations. Diaries, therefore, began to emerge from trunks, boxes and drawers. As Laurie Alexander noted in her 1989 study of three women's diaries from the Maritime Provinces, "...works on the history and theory of diaries and the employment of diaries to expound social, psychological and other theories all expanded at a phenomenal rate."<sup>10</sup>

Much of the early scholarly use of diaries began in Britain and the United States. As early as 1942, the American psychologist, G.W. Allport, surveyed diaries for information on how people in the past had responded to stress, loneliness, and tragedy.<sup>11</sup> The American social historian Cynthia G. Wolfe, in 1968, published work based on her

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<sup>9</sup> Berger 264.

<sup>10</sup> Laurie Alexander, An Interdisciplinary Approach to Maritime Women's Diaries: Laura Wood, Victoria Ross, and L.M. Montgomery (unpublished M.A. thesis for Atlantic Canada Studies Program, Saint Mary's University, 1989) 15.

<sup>11</sup> G.W. Allport, The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1942).

See also: P. Rosenblatt (ed.), Bitter, Bitter Tears: Nineteenth Century Diarists and Twentieth Century Grief Theories (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

use of diaries that examined the impact of Puritan values on American life and attitudes.<sup>12</sup> In the mid 1970s, American Carol Smith-Rosenberg studied through diary entries how nineteenth century American women developed relationships with males and females.<sup>13</sup> Canadians also recognized the value of using diaries in their research. One interesting use of diaries, known as reconstructive history, was undertaken by Canadian historical geographer, Eric Ross. In 1969, he published Beyond the River and the Bay, a history of the Canadian Northwest, reconstructed from the diaries of fur traders and explorers.<sup>14</sup> Historian, Elaine Silverman in the early 1980s used diaries to explore the theory of the so-called "separate spheres" of male and female endeavor on the Alberta frontier between 1880 and 1930.<sup>15</sup>

Initially, the use of diaries kept by females was not as widespread and academically acceptable as that of men's diaries. Laurie Alexander noted in her diary study that in Canada prior to 1965, forty-five male diaries had been deemed worthy of publication and only three female diaries.<sup>16</sup> She also observed that there was a regional as well as gender discrepancy that discriminated against Maritime materials. However, women's diaries experienced an upsurge of interest with the development of women's history as a recognized area of scholarly study in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>17</sup> Until then, most diaries of women were examined only for what they contributed to the understanding of great men and important events. Occasionally the diary by a woman of

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<sup>12</sup> C.G. Wolff, "Literary Reflections of the Puritan Character," Journal of the History of Ideas 29 (1968): 13-32.

<sup>13</sup> C. Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Rituals: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 1 (1975): 1-29.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Ross, Beyond the River and the Bay (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> E.L. Silverman, "Writing Canadian Women's History 1970-1982: An Historical Analysis," Canadian Historical Review LXII, 4 Dec. 1982: 513-533.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander 7-8.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander 1.

public note, a pioneer in the political arena or one of the professions, an artist or an author, was included in that elite area of scholarly examination. But, as Jean Strouse wrote in her article, "Semi-private Lives", women's diaries until the 1970s, were given scant academic acknowledgement unless, "...some thought they might contribute to the understanding of great men."<sup>18</sup>

For those wishing to delve into the research of women's diaries there was the problem of finding them. The philosophy of separate spheres of influence and activity based gender, often meant that women from Western, Middle Eastern and Oriental societies, for example, had neither the literacy or the time to maintain a daily chronicle. A lack of paper, pens and ink, which were too expensive for some or simply unavailable to those in frontier environments, meant that keeping a diary posed some difficulty. Also, because the value of women's diaries was unrecognized, they were destroyed or lost. Nevertheless, some women have managed, through time, to write and pass on daily records of their lives.

The oldest surviving form of female diary is what is called a pillow book.<sup>19</sup> In the early tenth century, several upper class Japanese court ladies kept records of their private thoughts. As well, a few pieces of writing on papyrus that have survived to modern times suggest that literate women living in the Hellenistic era in Greece and the late Republican and early Imperial eras in Rome, may have kept some kind of personal records.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, by the 1600s, upper-class European women were keeping daily chronicles of their spiritual development and their domestic activities. On October 5, 1603, Lady Margaret Hoby, for instance, wrote in her diary, "Mr. Hoby, my Mother and my selfe went to the dalls [sic] this day."<sup>21</sup> Some women even confided very private concerns to

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<sup>18</sup> J. Strouse, "Semi-private Lives," *Studies in Biography* Ed. D. Aaron, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978, 115.

<sup>19</sup> Wylie 6.

<sup>20</sup> Wylie 7.

<sup>21</sup> Wylie 9.

their diaries. Lady Anne Gilford, who had discovered her husband's unfaithfulness wrote on April 23, 1617, "...This night my Lord should have lain with me, but he and I fell out about matters...".<sup>22</sup>

As curiosity about the part played by women in the development of society became more prominent in academic circles, and as the place of women in Western society began to approach one of equality with men, documents about and produced by women became more and more important to researchers, particularly historians, sociologists and literary scholars. In addition to the usual mainstream public documents such as legal records, newspapers, letters and political papers, less exploited private documents now had to be examined. It was from diaries, journals, scrapbooks, cookbooks, autograph books and other kinds of female artifacts that those studying the lives and times of women from the past could best glean information about such things as female domestic activities, health concerns, relationships, attitudes and social expectations.

The re-emergence of Canadian feminism in the public forum in the 1960s coincided with the gaining of respectability of social history as an academic field of study.<sup>23</sup> Much influenced by American feminist expression and the civil rights movement, many Canadian women assumed a more public and militant collective voice promoting female issues and concerns. In February 1967, the federal government agreed to examine the treatment and place of women in Canadian society by appointing a Royal Commission on the Status of Women. The search was on then for information about the lives of women, past and present. The history books were woefully lacking in such information. It was clear that the collection of information and the publication of material

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<sup>22</sup> Wylie 10.

<sup>23</sup> M.G. Cohen, "The Canadian Women's Movement," Canadian Women's Issues vol.1: Strong Voices R. R. Pierson et al (ed) (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1993) 1-27.

Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Canadian Women's History (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1986) 1.

pertaining to women in Canada was essential in order to promote the legitimacy of women's complaints and grievances. A number of collection programmes were instituted in the 1970s to address this need including the Women's Education Resource Centre at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and the Canadian Women's Movement Archives Collection.<sup>24</sup> The National Archives also initiated a project to collect women's materials thereby giving formal academic recognition to the value of gathering and preserving documents recording the lives of women regardless of age, ethnicity, religion, and economic and social status.<sup>25</sup>

The growing interest in private female documents in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in the publication of a number of bibliographies and anthologies of women's diaries. In 1974, Mary Jane Moffat and Charlotte Painter of the United States published Revelations: Diaries of Women. Harriet Blodgett published the book entitled Centuries of Female Days: Englishwomen's Private Diaries in 1988, the same year that Margaret Conrad, Toni Laidlaw and Donna Smyth published No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women 1771-1938 a collection of women's diaries from the province of Nova Scotia arranged in one collection.

Collecting and cataloguing material was one thing but gaining acceptance for its use in scholarly endeavors was quite another. Those, historians and literary critics included, who were accustomed to viewing the development of a nation and its people only through the eyes of those who were deemed to have made a "real difference", who were important, who were decision-makers, the great and influential, were doubtful that the ordinary Canadian had any place in scholarly evaluation. This was left to the amateur historians and journalists. It was especially true that the place of women in Canadian society had been conditioned by Victorian gender values that placed men and women in

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<sup>24</sup> Cohen 16.

<sup>25</sup> J. Dean and D. Fraser, Women's Archives Guide: Manuscript Sources for the History of Women (Ottawa: National Archives of Canada, 1991) 1.

separate spheres, men in the public arena of the workplace and women in the private venue of the home.<sup>26</sup> Men, by being public figures, were regarded as the true leaders and formulators of society. Historians studied and recorded the thoughts and actions of men for the future generations as a way of coming to understand the here and now of their society and nation. But, the experiences of the ordinary citizen, especially those of women, remained in the shadows, downplayed or ignored altogether. However, the work of social historians made it clear that the roles of all Canadians, male and female, the important and not so important, had to be studied if a complete picture of the evolution of Canadian society and culture was to be written. As Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita C. Fellman wrote in their book on the rise of interest in women's history in Canada, Rethinking Canada, if, "history is the telling of human experience," then to leave out the female perspective of events, people and places was to produce a "distorted history."<sup>27</sup>

Largely due to the rise of social history as a scholarly pursuit and the revitalization of the Feminist Movement at about the same time, the weaknesses and inadequacies of "great men" and "great event" history came to be recognized and the need for increased academic study in the field of women's history acknowledged. Strong-Boag and Fellman continued by observing:

Pushed by the contemporary women's movement to become more conscious of gender as a category of analysis, and aided by a resurgence of interest in social history, which broadened the range of legitimate historical

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<sup>26</sup> Margaret Conrad, "Sundays Always Make Me Think of Home: Time and Place in Canadian Women's History," Rethinking Canada ed. Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1986) 67-69.

See also Janet Guilford and Suzanne Morton, Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the 19th-Century Maritimes (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1986) 1.

topics, researchers have begun exploring the history of Canadian women.<sup>28</sup>

The process of locating and accumulating materials has been a long and arduous one. However, by 1991, when the National Archives published its Women's Archives Guide: Manuscript Sources for the History of Women, the editors were able to claim. "as this Guide makes its appearance it is safe to say that women's history has firmly established itself in the Canadian historical scene."<sup>29</sup> Those researching women's history no longer have to preface their work with an explanation justifying the validity of their research or its scholarly value. The editors of the National Archives Guide continued by commenting, "as with other approaches to social history, such as class, ethnic origin and region, there is now widespread acceptance of the legitimacy of gender as historical analysis."<sup>30</sup>

The historical study of Canadian women having claimed a rightful place in academic circles, now had to develop new approaches and employ new materials in order to fully record and evaluate the role of women in the evolution of Canadian society. Like all social historians, women's history scholars had to move beyond traditional forms of historical evidence and methodology. As Maritime historian, Margaret Conrad, wrote in the mid 1980s:

In taking up the issue of women's culture we are addressing the fundamental question of sources and methodology. We are shifting the focus of analysis from the world of men to that of women. If public and published documents are few and macro studies difficult then we must investigate personal and private sources with greater seriousness.<sup>31</sup>

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28 Boag 1-2.

29 Dean 1.

30 Dean 1.

31 Conrad 69.



Conrad concluded that personal and private documents were crucial materials for those attempting to record, examine, and reconstruct the place of women in Canadian history. She, like many other pioneers in the areas of women's history, recognized that along with private female correspondence, women's diaries were especially valuable sources of information needed to capture a full and accurate picture of the lives of ordinary, Canadian women as well as those women who had more public images. No matter how long or short, no matter how well written, no matter what the nature of the content, all diaries were worthy of consideration. What might seem "hum drum" and unenlightening to some, as was the case with G.G. Campbell's assessment of the 1910 diary of a rural Nova Scotia woman, Susan Dunlop, was anything but dull for those reconstructing women's history.<sup>32</sup>

In the opinion of Campbell, Dunlop's sixty years of diary keeping amounted to nothing more than, "...a record of the timeless trivia of a woman's days...".<sup>33</sup> For social historians, however, the very breadth of time covered by the diaries made their content valuable rather than trivial, particularly when placed in its proper social and cultural context. That very "hum drum" quality in fact, could reveal much about the kind of life a woman lived in Dunlop's time and place. Diaries, therefore, no matter how boring, were not to be discarded. As Lawrence Sweeney wrote in his study of the diary of Sophia Perry of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, written in 1909-1910, "front page articles give us the news of the times but it is the obverse side that shows us the spirit of the age...".<sup>34</sup> He continued, "...the entire document is composed of such everyday actions and observations

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<sup>32</sup> G.G. Campbell, "Susan Dunlop: Her Diary," Dalhousie Review 46 (1966) : 215.

<sup>33</sup> Campbell 222.

<sup>34</sup> L.K. Sweeney, "The Journal of Helen Sophia Perry: Winter of 1909-10," The Nova Scotia Historical Quarterly 4 (1974) : 351.

and yet when one reads it through from beginning to end the cumulative effect is one of engaging charm ... a picture of the mind of the woman who recorded her thoughts..."<sup>35</sup>

Not surprisingly because of her interests, Margaret Conrad joined forces with Toni Laidlaw and Donna Smyth, to search out and examine a number of Maritime women's diaries which were compiled and edited in a book entitled, No Place Like Home, published in 1988. Others across Canada also began to search out and edit diaries for publication. In this way a very significant primary source of documentation entered the public realm, becoming more readily accessible to scholars for the purposes of research and analysis of women's history. For example, diaries and journals were useful sources for many authors in a book on British Columbia women, entitled In Her Own Right, edited by Barbara Latham and Constance Barkhouse's book Women of the Klondike about the travels of women in the Klondike area and Cyndi Smith's book of women who climbed in the Rockies, Off the Beaten Track. Such academic studies which have made extensive use of diary sources have added much to the record of the contribution of women in Canadian society.

Ellen Terry has observed, diaries are, "invaluable to the student centuries afterwards..."<sup>36</sup> This is true, in part, because diaries by women are one of the few substantive and increasingly available forms of documentation shaped and conditioned by the lives of those who wrote them. Even though many diaries may be incomplete, or do not come up to the highest standards of literary expression, nonetheless, they are the voices of women speaking directly from the past to the present, voices recounting women's joys and sorrows, dreams and nightmares, worktime and playtime. These are the voices from the past telling historians who the women were, what they did, what they thought, and how they shaped and were shaped by their environments and relationships.

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35 Sweeney 353.

36 Wylie 1.

As Betty Wylie has argued the real power of the diary is that, "someone has spoken directly to me."<sup>37</sup>

Why did the diarist keep a diary? What motivated a woman to adopt the time consuming regimen of recording on a daily basis aspects of her life, from weather to finances, from child rearing to widowhood? Certainly, as each woman is an individual, unique in herself, each had different reasons for writing "Dear Diary". However, a number of common motivations can be determined: the need to preserve a record of family for future reference or for later generations; the need to "let off steam", to vent frustrations and fears in a private environment; the need for a friend with whom to share experiences and thoughts; and, the need for a confessional or a means of achieving self understanding in a self designed context.

Daily writing in a diary is a discipline in itself. A mood is captured if it is recorded immediately. Otherwise, it may be lost or reshaped if its recording is delayed even by just a few days. Often mundane things are written down which might have been omitted if the diarist had allowed the passage of time to heighten the trivialities of the information. Yet, these seeming trivialities, as a body, create a flavor and pattern which are unique to the daily chronicle form, providing historians with a relatively accurate sense of the rhythm of life in all its ups and downs. As Louisa Collins of Dartmouth writes on September 19, 1815, "My spirits do not feel good for writing tonight; and as there is nothing new, I must wait till tomorrow."<sup>38</sup> One wonders what tidbit of information or gossip was overlooked when Louisa decided to skip a day of writing. Certainly, serious examination of women's diaries reveals that diaries were far more than "a genteel literary sideline."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Wylie xvi.

<sup>38</sup> Dale McClare, Louisa Collins and Her World: Being the 1815 Diary of Dartmouth N.S. Farm Girl: Louisa Collins of Colin Grove (Halifax: The Nova Scotia Museum, 1989) 57.

<sup>39</sup> R. Fothergill, Private Chronicles: A Study of English Diaries (London: Oxford University Press, 1974) 34.

The diarist must choose what she will write about with some care and thought because everything cannot be recorded. Diaries are, to that extent, selective offerings from the diarist's pen. Often entries are made at night before retiring to bed. Even if the day seemed uneventful, the discipline of maintaining the diary on a daily basis, would require her to record what happened. Kate Shannon's life was so repetitive and routine that she reduced her comments to three letters, NPH, standing for "Nothing particular happened." At other times, the writer might have much she wanted to say, filling a page or more with daily happenings or personal observations. The eighteen year old Kate, for instance, used up many pages describing parades and entertainments she had attended.

Some diarists write with an eye to the future. They may not expect their work to circulate in the wider public arena or to be published, but they want to leave a record of themselves for their descendants. As Virginia Wolfe once asked, "Whom do I tell when I tell a blank page?"<sup>40</sup> Like the portrait painting hanging on the wall, the diary lying in a trunk, is proof that the writer existed. Russian artist and diarist Marie Bashkirtseff's concern was that her diary would be lost or destroyed after she died. She saw her diary as a way of achieving a kind of immortality. She wrote:

What if, seized without warning by a fatal illness, I should happen to die suddenly...after my death they would rummage among my papers; they would find my journal and destroy it after having read it, and soon nothing would be left of me-nothing-nothing-nothing! This is the thought that has always terrified me.<sup>41</sup>

Diarists with a sense of history or an awareness of their own place in history, may well take measures to ensure the survival of their treasure. Such diarists tend to edit their writings at some point in order to make them more acceptable as literary works, to

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<sup>40</sup> Wylie 15.

<sup>41</sup> M.J. Moffat and Charlotte Painter, Revelations: Diaries of Women (New York: Random House, 1974) 14.

protect the innocent or to clarify the obscure. Such was the case of Lucy Maud Montgomery, the internationally loved author of the Anne of Green Gables books. Montgomery kept a diary over a period of several decades and edited them herself for posthumous publication. Recognizing her place of importance in Canadian culture, she wanted to be sure her diaries appeared before the public as she would have wanted. She did not want to leave editing to those who might misunderstand or misinterpret. She wanted to improve the quality of expression, and she strove to make her diaries into literary works that would add to, rather than detract from her body of writing.

Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote that the, "...intention to publish destroys the charm proper to diaries."<sup>42</sup> Also lost may be those moments of introspection and self revelation which are so important to the scholar trying to reconstruct the lives of women. Fortunately, most women's diaries were written by those who intended their works to be for their eyes only. Elizabeth Smith, one of Canada's first female doctors, maintained a diary from the age of 13. On March 30, 1873, she wrote, "Well I think ... I had better not have written tonight for if anyone should see it (which I hope to goodness will never happen) they would think, but never mind what they would think..."<sup>43</sup> In fact, the diarist usually tells no one of the existence of her diary. If she does, it is in the strictest confidence. As a result, there is some concern for the writer that the diary might fall into the hands of someone else. Kate Shannon's brother liked to tease his sister by picking up her diary and taunting her that he had it and could read it.<sup>44</sup> Some diarists may decide, as they get older, to systematically destroy their diaries, or to tear out pages, to ensure eternal privacy. On November 25, 1881, Helen W. Brandreth of New York confided to her diary, "I fear old book I will have to burn you in the end for you hold too many

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<sup>42</sup> Ponsonby 5.

<sup>43</sup> Wylie 18.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley 18.

dangerous secrets."<sup>45</sup> Lucy M. Montgomery destroyed her first diary because she thought it said nothing of importance, but she later regretted that action.<sup>46</sup> Fortunately for historians, many do not destroy their daily missives, if only because it would feel like one was destroying part of one's self.

Arthur Ponsonby noted that once a diary existed the possibility arose that someone would read it some time in the future.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, most women from the past, unless they regarded their diaries as records for posterity, wrote in an unrestrained way. Anonymity might be achieved through the use of initials and shortforms or codes. Through the use of these techniques the unique openness of the diary allowed the personality of the diarist to rise from the pages. Diaries permit the historian to study the unedited, spontaneous, open interpretations of the diarist. As Ponsonby so elegantly wrote: "all restraints can be lifted and in the open field of fact and fancy the diarist can browse, repose or gallop along at his own sweet will."<sup>48</sup> Virginia Wolff, similarly said of her style of diary writing, "...I am struck by the rapid haphazard gallop at which it swings along, sometimes jerking almost intolerably over the cobbles...".<sup>49</sup> Unfettered by concerns for public scrutiny the diarist reveals what she wants without the usual literary restraints. The diarist is completely free to write at will and say almost anything without fear of ridicule or legal suit. There is no need to be concerned with the opinions of others. Personal observations, therefore, need not be softened.

What is contained within a diary is largely conditioned by the diarist's reasons for writing and her ability to express her thoughts. Ultimately, as Ponsonby wrote, "diary

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<sup>45</sup> Wylie 19.

<sup>46</sup> Wylie 27.

<sup>47</sup> Ponsonby 2.

For information on how the publication of a private diary changes the relationship of the diarist and the diary see: A. Hassam, "Reading Other People's Diaries," University of Toronto Quarterly 56 (1985) : 435-443.

<sup>48</sup> Ponsonby 2.

<sup>49</sup> Moffat 14.

writing does not depend upon time but intention."<sup>50</sup> The subjects of the diary are without limit. Constraints on topics discussed are more the result of social and religious environments and conditioning than the result of conscious decisions to exclude topics for fear of public viewing. Kate Shannon, for example, maintained upper class Victorian standards of refraining from discussing sexuality. She spoke of her sister's illness and need for rest but never indicated that Minetta was pregnant. The topic of sex and such related issues as childbirth were simply taboo, even in the private world of the diary.

For some, particularly during the Victorian Age, diary writing was a way of filling in time in a constructive way, believing that idle hands were the devil's playmate. Diaries were also regarded as educational tools, a means of learning how to write and to express one's self. Such is the reason behind the use of journal writing as an exercise today in Canadian elementary schools. Canadian diary scholar Betty Wylie recalled why she began a diary; "I was told, as is every student of creative writing, to be sure to keep a journal to refine my thoughts, store my images, polish my phrasing and cement memory."<sup>51</sup> Closely related to the idea of the diary as a tool to learn the importance of constructive activity and moral discipline was the concept of the diary as a spiritual exercise. Dating back to the seventeenth century, these diaries of conscience were the Christian way of "monitoring their souls and recording temptations and afflictions and how they reacted."<sup>52</sup> Robert Fothergill in Private Chronicles: A Study of English Diaries wrote that "ministers called on parishioners to compile a secret history of your heart and conduct."<sup>53</sup> In this way the devout Christian could keep track of her relationship with God. A record of one's actions and feelings might indicate one's preparedness for

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<sup>50</sup> Ponsonby 28.

<sup>51</sup> Wylie x.

<sup>52</sup> Wylie 7-9.

<sup>53</sup> Fothergill 25.

conversion or death. In the late 1980s, Nova Scotian English scholar Gwen Davies examined diaries of this type written in eighteenth century Nova Scotia.<sup>54</sup>

For others, the diary was a way to record information that might be needed at a later date, a listing of important activities and decisions, when children were born or parents died; when seeds were planted and when the harvest was collected; when the cow calved and how many eggs the chickens laid; the costs of goods and how long things lasted; recipes and remedies. Diaries can record daily tasks and domestic activities, thereby revealing the routines of life. The recording of daily tasks was not the consequence of a lack of imagination. The written evidence of work done was a kind of proof that the woman had accomplished something. As Betty Wylie described it, "the task justified the time spent; "... see, see how hard I worked."<sup>55</sup> This kind of record validated the woman's place in society, her worth. Anne Langton, an English immigrant to Upper Canada wrote in 1846, "it is much more difficult to let woman's work stand still than men's work ... no bread! no butter! no clean clothes! ...".<sup>56</sup> Even women who worked outside the home sought to validate how they had spent their day. Belle Stuart Kittredge, age 23, from Port Arthur, Ontario, recorded on December 2, 1891, "I got up daylight today, that is seven o'clock, dressed and wrote short hand for an hour... Had breakfast at half past eight and then came down to the office by half past nine... began our work...busy alternately at the typewriter until noon, when at half past twelve I left for lunch...".<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> C. Davies, "Persona in Planters Journals," They Planted Well: New England Planters in Maritime Canada M. Conrad (ed.) (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1988) 211-217.

<sup>55</sup> Wylie 109.

See also: Chapter Three "Life is So Daily," in Reading Between the Lines 93-139.

<sup>56</sup> Wylie 112.

<sup>57</sup> National Archives of Canada, Belle Stuart Kittredge Papers, MG 29 c.114.



Children also recorded their daily tasks and age appropriate activities. Sara Gammon wrote on December 12, 1888, "I began my dolls dress today...She is no shape in the world. Her waist is as big as her shoulders and such a neck...so the dress is quite a length...".<sup>58</sup> On January 24, 1890, fifteen year old Sadie Harper of Shediac, New Brunswick, wrote:

...I did not go to school today as we have no girl yet and no hopes of one. I think it is dreadful. It is run here and there, keeping pots from going dry and not letting things burn and so on...Today I cooked the meat for dinner. It was pork and had to go on about half past nine and then you had to watch that it didn't burn and kept turning it over, which was pretty hot work...This afternoon I washed out the cup towels, which is my work ...<sup>59</sup>

Young girls who kept diaries tended to write about playmates, school and games played. Fourteen year old Etheldra Chadwick confessed to her diary on April 10, 1896, "Today Charles came over when we were skipping and took my marbles and threw them in the mud. Then I threw his cap in the ice and he ran and tried to get my tam but he couldn't. Then he ran at me and fought. I hit him with the skipping rope but at last he threw me right down in the mud. My purple dress is covered with mud."<sup>60</sup> Etheldra did not record her mother's reaction. Sadie Harper wrote about her school activities. Generally she found school rather a trial but on February 7, 1890, she recalled, "... I went to school and had quite a bit of fun because a certain male member got up to read and then would not finish because we girls were laughing at a slight mistake he made. Poor boy, I felt sorry for anyone that is so bashful as that..."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Sara Gammon Papers, MG1 #1195 B xerox.

<sup>59</sup> Mary B. Peck, A Full House and Fine Singing: Diaries and Letters of Sadie Harper Allen (Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 1992) 20.

<sup>60</sup> National Archives of Canada, Etheldra Mary Chadwick Papers, MG 30 D258, vol. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Peck 23.

Some women recorded everything that they purchased and included the prices. Kate Shannon listed the Christmas gifts she gave in 1892 and wrote down the cost of each to make or purchase.<sup>62</sup> She also wrote down when she bought new boots and clothes. On November 1, 1888, young Sara Gammon, also of Halifax, wrote, "Mary and I went to the bank this morning. Then we went...and got me a pair of slippers and...a fur collerette. The slippers were lined with fur and cost 75 cents. The fur cost \$1.25..."<sup>63</sup> For many women it was important to keep track of their spending habits and their finances, not only because money was limited, but because it was a way of reminding themselves of the virtues of frugality. Mary Ann Norris, the daughter of a strict Anglican in the Annapolis Valley, kept account of every penny earned and spent.<sup>64</sup> From the back cover of her diary were recorded the various expenditures, "butchering pigs - 25 cents; 4 days thrashing \$2.00; half a bushel of lime - 25 cents; farm hand/two weeks work - \$1.13; horse bought for \$60.00; yolk of oxen - \$48.00; and sold 4 turkeys for 50 cents each."<sup>65</sup> As is clear here, Mary Ann kept record of every transaction carried out through the running of her farm. Methodical account keeping for many rural women was absolutely essential to the economic welfare of the family farm or the family's fishing business. Lists of transactions for food and grain bought and sold, for example, provided valuable records for comparison and budgeting for the next year.

There were many kinds of lists kept in diaries. Young Etheldra Chadwick kept notes on the number of marbles and alleles lost and won. She also recorded at the end of each month her number of good works done, confessions said and communions taken. Another kind of list was that kept by the Halifax midwife, Jane Soley Hamilton, who

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<sup>62</sup> Stanley 114.

<sup>63</sup> Sara Gammon Papers.

<sup>64</sup> S.F. Norris, "The Diary of Mary Ann Norris," *The Dalhousie Review* 30 (1950-52): 92.

<sup>65</sup> Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Mary Ann Norris Diary (original), MG1 #729A, 191-205.

delivered 770 babies over a forty-two year span, 1851-1893. During this time she wrote down in her diary the date of birth, the mother's name, and the baby's sex for every child she helped deliver. Most lists were more genealogical in nature, recording births, deaths, marriages, and baptisms.<sup>66</sup>

Some women kept diaries as a sort of baby book, so that their children could read about their infant years much later. Ethel Robertson Whiting began a diary in 1924 with the sole intent of recording information about her life for her grandchildren who might never know her.<sup>67</sup> The first grandchild was born six years later. More typical was Edith Merkley of Morrisburg, Ontario, who began a "baby diary" when her first and only child, Edith was born March 2, 1886. Writing on November 2, 1896, the happy mother wrote about her darling, "My little Edith is eight months old today and what a little treasure she is. She is bright and happy and smiling always. She does not walk or creep yet & has no teeth. She takes one good sleep in the afternoon and very often does not sleep any more until I put her to bed at seven or half past. Her first present was a brush from her Uncle James ...".<sup>68</sup> When her daughter died at the age of ten, Mrs. Merkely stopped writing in the diary, the purpose for it had gone. Her last entry of February 17, 1896 bore the sad explanation:

Little thought when I last wrote in this book that when I again wrote in it our little darling girl would have spent over six months in the "Paradise of God". It is all too fresh and my heart is too sore to write down those dreadful two weeks that she was sick. But on the seventh August the angels came and carried back to God the little bright and happy sunbeam that had gladdened our hearts and our home for nearly ten years...This book so lovingly kept and all the little sayings were written down that my little one might read it when she became a woman will now never be read by her but

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<sup>66</sup> J.E. Kennedy, "Jane Soley Hamilton Midwife," Nova Scotia Historical Review 2 (1982): 6-29.

<sup>67</sup> Wylie 23.

<sup>68</sup> National Archives of Canada, Merkley Family Papers, MG 29 c79.

as she lay in her bed so long she took great pleasure in reading it over and I am repaid.<sup>69</sup>

The weather is a fairly common feature of all diaries, perhaps because it provides the writer with a concrete place to begin each day. Sometimes it is a matter of considerable importance to record the weather for future reference, particularly in rural farming and fishing communities. Daily weather reports may well reveal patterns which can be used for comparisons from one year to another. Weather is an important part of the work life of all and can influence not only the activities of the day but also moods of the people. Weather is a conscious force with which to be reckoned and therefore an understandable part of the diarist's recording habits. The very standard of living of a farm family might depend upon the weather and its affects on the growth of crops and the health of livestock. The natural world, for many like Louisa Collins, living on a farm near Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, in the early nineteenth century was an all pervasive fact of life affecting everything, crops, health and social activities. On Friday, September 15, 1815, Louisa comments upon the weather saying, "The weather has been the same as usual-- disagreeable and wet. I am afraid much of our hay will spoil".<sup>70</sup> In Louisa's world every aspect of life was affected by the weather in some way, from travel to crops.

Depending upon the interest of the diarist, political and other public events might receive note, even commentary. Louisa Collins, for instance, wrote on Monday, September 4, 1815, with great relief about Napoleon's defeat even though it was a remote event that took place in a distant land. She wrote, "There is news of Bonaparte's being taken. I hope it is true. There is no punishment too great for such a wretch. How many lives have been sacrificed for his ambition."<sup>71</sup> Kate Shannon mentioned the deaths of leading local citizens as well as that of Prince Edward and Cardinal Manning, "whoever

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<sup>69</sup> Merkley Family Papers.

<sup>70</sup> McClare 57.

<sup>71</sup> McClare 52.

he might be."<sup>72</sup> Elections sometimes warranted observation, although depending upon the historical times, women might have had little interest in politics since they were excluded from voting in Canada until the twentieth century. Nevertheless, if the woman's family was interested in politics, the diarist might well, at a minimum, record election results and issues.<sup>73</sup> Fourteen year old Etheldra Chadwick, the daughter of an Ottawa lawyer, reported to her diary on April 28, 1896, "...yesterday Mackenzie Bowell resigned. Sir Charles has taken his place."<sup>74</sup> Fifteen year old Sadie Harper noted in somewhat more detail on January 20, 1890, "Election day...The coalition ticket got half in, that is Mr. Melanson and Hanington and Stevens and Powell. Mr. Melanson was the head man, being a thousand votes above the [next] highest man...".<sup>75</sup> Lady Aberdeen, the wife of the Canadian Governor General, and a very politically astute and public women, recorded political developments in considerable detail. On July 13, 1895, she wrote, "Today the first elections at home are taking place and here we are but beginning to calm down after a week of fierce political excitement such as they have not had for twenty years or so at the time of the Pacific Scandal. It is all the outcome of this Manitoba Schools Question, which has been looming daily over our parliamentary world here during all the season."<sup>76</sup>

Social activities were much more likely to receive lengthy comment in a woman's diary since these were often the only exciting breaks in the routineness of life. Parties, quilting bees, outings, church functions, balls, political picnics; they were all written down in varying amounts of descriptive detail. Noting social encounters was a way of keeping track of who had visited whom and what was happening in the community. Diarists

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<sup>72</sup> Stanley 4.

<sup>73</sup> See also Gail Campbell, "Disenfranchised but not Quiescent," Separate Spheres Eds. Janet Guilford and Suzanne Morton. (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1994) 39-66.

<sup>74</sup> Chadwick Papers vol.1.

<sup>75</sup> Peck 19.

<sup>76</sup> J.T. Saywell (ed.), The Canadian Journal of Lady Aberdeen, 1893-1898 (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1960) July 13, 1895. p.25.

reflected their own interest by what details they chose to present to their diary friend. Belle Kittredge was fascinated by fashions and not surprisingly wrote on January 3, 1893, much about the dresses worn at a New Year's party, "Hilda wore her yellow silk. She looks sweet in it. Maria had a new cream fish net with yellow ribbons and looked very nice...Miss McNiece had a very pretty dress, white with glass beads all down the front of the skirt...".<sup>77</sup> Other diarists would concentrate on the foods eaten, the decorations, the games played or the people who attended. The best of these accounts capture the very ambiance of the social event. Consider the account of the twenty one year old Etheldra Chadwick who wrote on September 23, 1901, about her presentation to the Duke and Duchess of York in the Senate Chamber, Ottawa:

...after dinner in the evening, I dressed in my white satin, white stockings, shoes, flowers and hair ornament. Papie and I went in a cab to the Senate.. We, Papie and I, had a long wait in the hall for the Senators, their wives and daughters and all the ministers were presented before the ordinary unofficial people. The Senate Chamber was ablaze with the electric lights of different colors. At one end of the room was a raised dias of red cloth with a light where the Duke and Duchess stood with Her Excellency and Lord Minto. There was a long line of officers through which one had to pass. Then we gave our cards to Captain Bell Graham who gave them to one of the Duke's aides who called out the names. Then we slipped in front of the Duke, made a bow and shook hands with him. Then passed and did the same to the Duchess, bowed slightly to the Governor and Lady Minto and passed on. It was a lovely sight for after we were presented we went and stood at the side of the room. Everything was in mourning black or gray or white...<sup>78</sup>

As well as describing elaborate public functions, many diarists have left to history wonderful descriptions of more private, family events. Weddings and funerals were particularly likely to be described in some detail. In January 1890, Sadie Harper wrote about the marriage of the local doctor:

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<sup>77</sup> Kittredge Papers.

<sup>78</sup> Chadwick Papers

The chapel was well filled and the bride looked lovely. She was dressed in a plain green suit of a very pretty color and a very pretty hat of green plush and feathers and beaver furs of a lovely shade. The Dr. looked very nice but very pale. The bridesmaid was Miss Belliveau and the groomsman Mr. V. Bourque. The singing was very nice and the service was performed by Father Ouellet and Father Cormier. The congratulations and the presents were numerous...".<sup>79</sup>

Less happy but equally important social occasions were funerals. Margaret Young of Falmouth, Nova Scotia described the funeral of Analdah Crowell on November 2, 1890, "In the afternoon the people assembled at the funeral. The pastor presided. He read 15 Corinthians, sang and prayed...A beautiful casket with flowers inside, a wreath on her head. Everything was done with great delicacy to show respect...A procession followed the hearse to the grave...".<sup>80</sup>

In addition to writing about special occasions like weddings, baptisms, coming out parties, birthday celebrations and anniversaries, there were also meetings of various female organizations. Often women with an eye for the future would record the names of those who attended and what was discussed. Well known Canadian feminists like Nellie McClung, Lady Aberdeen, and Amelia Hoodless kept such diary records.<sup>81</sup> So too did lesser known women like Edith Ryerson of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. Miss Ryerson was instrumental in organizing the Home Circle Society in that community and her diary of 1886 provides the historian with an account of every meeting including the inaugural one. In essence, she left to posterity through her diary an unofficial set of minutes for the organization which was responsible for the setting up of the first home for aged women in the area.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Peck 17-18.

<sup>80</sup> Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Margaret Young Papers, MG1 vol.982.

<sup>81</sup> For example: J.T. Saywell (ed.). The Canadian Journal of Lady Aberdeen, 1893-1898 Toronto: Champlain Society, 1960.

<sup>82</sup> Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Edith Ryerson Papers, MFM #10982-X.

Diaries need not be maintained for years and years. There are some remarkable ones such as those kept by Lucy Maud Montgomery and Etheldra Chadwick which were maintained pretty much from their teenage years until they died. However, some women simply kept a daily record of a particular period of their lives, a short time during which something special or important to remember took place; a town visited, a child born, a boyfriend found. Some kept an account of their courtship and stopped writing after the wedding. Henriette Dessaulles of Quebec, maintained a diary about her love for a young man she was forbidden to see. Once they finally were engaged she showed him the five year old diary that focused largely on her thoughts about him and what she was feeling.<sup>83</sup> Some wrote only as long as they were on a trip and used the diary genre as a way to commit to memory the modes of travel, people met, places seen, and customs observed. Anna B. Jameson kept a travel diary of her trip to Upper Canada from England in 1837 and upon her return home published it as Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada. Some travel accounts were more than just records of events and descriptions of scenery. Bella McLean used her travel diary to record her impressions of places and her own feelings of being on her own when she left Ontario for Fort Garry in 1873. Upon her arrival in Fort Garry she wrote, September 10, "I felt so lonely, so homesick, so friendless, so completely transferred from the most comfortable and pleasant of homes to isolation...However, I soon dried my tears and moved on...".<sup>84</sup> Having recorded her feelings, she gained solace and strength and whether consciously or not, Bella had used her diary as a source of reassurance and as a friend when no other was at hand.

For many female diarists, the diary went far beyond a daily account of events, finances, weather or vital statistics. While their diaries might well contain such information, what was far more important was the special relationship they had with their

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<sup>83</sup> Wylie 23-24.

<sup>84</sup> W.J. Healy (ed.), Women of the Red River (Winnipeg: Women's Canadian Club, 1923) 239.



diaries. To many the diary was a safe place where the writer could find refuge, reassurance, even freedom. Betty Wylie recalled that her first serious diary proved to be, "...my lifeline, my paper shrink, my source book, my closest companion, my confidante, my commonplace book and my constant renewable resource."<sup>85</sup> Diaries for some writers were a kind of lifesaver, permitting them to retain their inner dignity and public composure and, at the same time, releasing their emotional turmoil and frustration in private. The very secret nature of the diary form gave women a reason for writing down their feelings. The diary is that special someone with whom the diarist can speak openly with assured privacy. Fifteen year old Fanny Burney writing in 1767, addressed her diary as Nobody, "to Nobody I can reveal every thought, every wish of my heart, with the most unlimited confidence, the most unremitting sincerity, to the end of my life!...From Nobody I have nothing to fear."<sup>86</sup>

For some diarists the daybook was a companion and friend, someone with whom to share the day's events and one's own thoughts and dreams. Thirteen year old Helen Brandreth even gave her diary a name, "I have determined to keep a journal. I shall call it Fannie Fern."<sup>87</sup> Interestingly enough for those diarists who employed the genre solely as a means of relieving loneliness or finding friendship, diary writing was abandoned as soon as friendship was found and loneliness subsided. Many young women like Elizabeth Smith stopped writing once they were married or once they had children to fill their lives. In part this was because they no longer had time on their hands for daily recording. But, in large measure, it was because they no longer needed the companionship of the diary. Others, however, discovered a new kind of loneliness in marriage and once again turned to the diary for friendship. Often in marriage, female friendships faded away and women sought a replacement in "Dear Diary".

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85 Wylie xi.

86 Wylie 15-16.

87 Wylie 19.

Modern diarist, Paris born Anais Nin, found in the diary a way to release the stress resulting from the demands of her life as, "dutiful daughter, devoted sister, mistress, protector, my father's new found illusion, Henry's needed, all purpose friend."<sup>88</sup> She sought stability and solace in her diary. She described her daybook as a kind of sounding board and, "the only steadfast friend I have, the only one which makes my life bearable;...in the journal I am at ease...I had to find one place of truth, one dialogue without falsity. This is the role of the diary."<sup>89</sup> For Nin the diary was a haven to which she could escape. Unlike most who used their diary for confessional purposes as she did, Nin actually published her diaries on a regular basis, sharing her truths with the outside world.

Mary Ann Norris also turned to the diary genre for a friend, although she had no intention of publishing her inner secrets. In her early twenties, Mary Ann lived at home with her very demanding and insensitive clergyman father. Her diary was the one place she could vent her emotions and describe the mental abuse she endured without fear of retribution. On February 2, 1822, she wrote, "I did not go downstairs for my father with his abominable conduct had completely mocked me, but it is not the first time."<sup>90</sup> On another occasion she wrote, "Mother's finding fault with me...Oh God give me patience and fortitude to bear all the trials and vicissitudes of this life...".<sup>91</sup> For Lucy Maud Montgomery the diary was "my only comfort and refuge."<sup>92</sup> Ironically, for some, even the diary was not told all. In January 1890, twenty year old Lucy Maud Montgomery wrote, "Mollie and I have made a decidedly startling discovery about some of our little

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88 Moffat 14.

89 Moffat 14.

90 PANS, Mary Ann Norris Diary, MG 729A : Entry for February 2, 1822.

91 PANS, Mary Ann Norris Diary, MG 729A : Entry for June 14, 1824.

92 Wylie 22.

personal affairs. I am not going to write it down because it is dead secret."<sup>93</sup> Some secrets simply could not risk the chance of being seen.

Kate Shannon used her diary as a way of coming to terms with her own inner conflicts and adolescent frustrations. After she had written in some detail about a verbal battle she had had with her sister, she added, "I'm sorry now I wrote all this down...it isn't a very lovely thing to read over. Only, maybe, when I don't feel so very unhappy and desolee (!) over it, I may perhaps see where I was to blame, or what the trouble was..."<sup>94</sup> Kate also reported to her diary on the evidence of the disintegration of her childhood friendships and appealed to the diary for advice and guidance as well as reassurance. She entitled this on-going chronicle, "History of the Wedge: A Sketch from Life."<sup>95</sup> From time to time she returned to the story when she felt she had another piece of information to add to the puzzle of why her friends seemed to be abandoning her. Like Belle McLean, Kate found that by writing of her woes in her diary, she felt better afterwards for having unburdened herself. Like a true friend, the diary listened without interruption. It shared the hurt, the sadness, the loneliness, and understood. And, it also passed on reassurance and confidence. As Betty Wylie suggested, the diary is a kind of "paper shrink."<sup>96</sup>

The private nature of the diary genre allows the inner person to find expression. It is not uncommon for family members and close friends to be surprised, even shocked, to discover the "other self" of their loved one when they gain access to a diary. What they find might very well be a different person than the one they thought they knew so intimately. For instance, the public persona of Kate Shannon was that of, "a sunny, cheerful, disposition..."<sup>97</sup> Yet, in the privacy of her diary, she revealed a young woman

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93 Wylie 28.

94 Stanley 88.

95 Stanley 36-38.

96 Wylie xi.

97 Stanley 12.

who was often sad, depressed, frustrated and tortured by feelings of inadequacy; "read and thought and had some awfully crazy feelings . . . I sometimes think that I won't live very long or else end my days in an insane asylum."<sup>98</sup>

Privacy also permitted the diarist to write of scandal and gossip accompanied by personal observation no matter how catty or unsubstantiated. Gossip, as Patricia Spacks has written, "is the stuff of domestic history and the very substance of female networking."<sup>99</sup> To overlook the social and cultural significance of gossip and set it aside as nothing more than trivialities, is to ignore a very key component of the female environment. Betty Wylie believes that gossip, "provides the scraps of life that are stitched at the sewing bees and the quilting parties, and the strawberry picking and also at coffee breaks, hairdressers, carpools and Home and School meetings."<sup>100</sup> She adds, "diarists are very good at gossip."<sup>101</sup> Often gossip is accompanied by a cautionary comment, a lesson to be learned from the unwed mother or the unfaithful husband. On November 11, 1823, Mary Ann Norris made such a comment regarding the upcoming wedding of a Mr. Merrit to her sister Kate. Mary Ann told her diary that she had serious doubts about the future prospects of the marriage, "Hope it will end well."<sup>102</sup> Betty Wylie stresses the importance of women's history scholars looking upon gossip with seriousness. Gossip, she maintains, provides, "the clearest picture the social historian would want of people firmly rooted in their time and society...how people lived, what they did, how they saw themselves..."<sup>103</sup>

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98 Stanley iii.

99 Wylie 44.

See also: P.M. Spacks, *Gossip* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

100 Wylie 44-45.

101 Wylie 44-45.

102 PANS, Mary Ann Norris Diary MG 729A : Entry for November 11, 1823.

103 Wylie 46-47.

It is clear that the reasons for writing diaries are as numerous and varied as the authors themselves. Kate Shannon was probably fairly typical in that her diary served a number of purposes including a chronicle of events, a listing of items purchased, a friend and a confessional. Writing on January 1, 1892, she stated, "Here I am in a new diary... perhaps I may put in a few feelings to flavor my bare record of facts and to aid me in putting my thoughts into suitable language. I wonder whether anything very shocking, terrible or sad will be chronicled in these pages?"<sup>104</sup> Eliza Ann Chipman, writing on July 20, 1823, indicated that her diary had a single purpose, "This little book was made . . . for the purpose of penning down a few exercises of my mind."<sup>105</sup> Young Anna Green Winslow kept her diary as a result of parental pressure, as, "a way of communicating with her parents and as an exercise in penmanship."<sup>106</sup> Rebecca Chase Kinsman Ells also was quite precise about her objectives in keeping a diary as a way of chronicling the domestic chores of her household and family on a commercial farm in Nova Scotia. Mary Ann Norris regarded her diary primarily as a document of self reflection and prayer and as a record of personal inner growth. And, then there was the purpose expressed by one of the most famous child diarists of all time, Anne Frank, who wrote, "the reason for my diary; it is that I have no such real friend."<sup>107</sup>

Clearly the reasons that inspired the keeping of a diary are as important to the historian as its content and literary form. What might, on first glance, appear to be a trivial, unimportant comment, may well assume greater significance when its emotional context is taken into consideration. As Virginia Wolfe once said of her own diary, "the advantage of the method is that it sweeps up accidentally stray matters...but which are the

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<sup>104</sup> Stanley 2.

<sup>105</sup> Margaret, Conrad, Toni Laidlaw and Donna Smyth, No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women 1771-1938 (Halifax: Formac Publishing Company Limited, 1988) 84.

<sup>106</sup> Conrad 84.

<sup>107</sup> Moffat 15.

diamonds of the dustheap."<sup>108</sup> It is this rambling nature of the diary genre that sets it apart as a source in the reconstruction of women's history. So it is that women's diaries, regardless of length and literary quality, all contribute something to the painting of women's history as well as the reconstruction of many other aspects of Canadian social history. Della Stanley commented in the introduction to the published version of Kate Shannon's diary, "Kate's seemingly insignificant diary provides a wealth of information... it reveals much about family and community life from the unique perspective of a young woman; how time and space were ordered; how family and community expectations were realized; how social, religious and cultural values were expressed..."<sup>109</sup> Such could be said about the value of a woman's diary. Margaret Conrad has noted that in spite of "repetition, disorder and incompleteness," diaries provide one of the few detailed sources of primary documentation on daily life.<sup>110</sup>

The literary quality of a diary is largely dependent upon the education attainment of the writer. Those women who were fortunate enough in an earlier period to be educated privately or at public school, were better able to express themselves in proper English. Those who were widely read often adopted turns of phrase and style from their favorite authors. For example, Louisa Collins' family placed considerable value on literacy but her lack of formal academic instruction was evident in her failure to conform to the conventions of written English and her use of colloquialisms and phonetic spellings.<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, her father brought her books and encouraged her to read. Her interest in the eighteenth century poets and the classical age was reflected in her more descriptive literary passages. On October 14, 1815, she penned, "I think we shall drink October's chilling tear ere Aurora with her rosy fingers opens the golden gates of

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108 Moffat 13.

109 Stanley iii.

110 Conrad, No Place Like Home 1-2.

111 McClare 22.

the East...".<sup>112</sup> The Bible was another common source of literary inspiration. On February 12, 1892, describing a terrible blizzard, Kate Shannon turned to Judges 25:1, writing, "tremendous snow and wind storm last night, snow drifted from Dan to Beer-sheba...".<sup>113</sup>

Whether a diary is a literary work of art or not, does not detract from its place in historical documentation. The history of women is not just the history of educated or sophisticated or socially and economically advantaged women; it is the history of all women. The writing of those who were less fortunate in acquiring literary skills is part of the story of the place of all women in the evolution of Canadian society and culture. Literary quality makes a diary more enjoyable to read perhaps, but no less valuable. It is part of who the diarist was and the society in which she lived.

Historians like Veronica Strong-Boag and Margaret Conrad have shown that women's culture is different from that of men.<sup>114</sup> According to Conrad, even if men and women "shared geographical space, their interpretation of what happened in that space differed, sometimes profoundly."<sup>115</sup> For instance, until recent times, most men measured day to day life in terms of the public environment of the workplace, in terms of political events, elections and statutes, as professionals, civil servants, businessmen, and laborers. In contrast, women generally measured daily time in terms of the private environment of the home, in terms of birth, marriage, death, as daughters, wives, mothers and widows. Yet, women's life stories in their distinctiveness with respect to experience and values, are no less important to our knowledge and understanding of Canadian society and culture.

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<sup>112</sup> McClare 68.

<sup>113</sup> Stanley 8.

<sup>114</sup> Conrad, *No Place Like Home* 4.  
Strong-Boag, *Rethinking Canada* 1,67.

See also : P.M. Spacks, "Women's Stories, Women's Selves," *The Hudson Review* 30 (1977-78) : 36.

<sup>115</sup> Conrad, *No Place Like Home* 299.

Strong-Boag also notes that the private self, male and female, are very much a part of the human experience, which is the basis of history. What better sources of information on women's culture and the private female self than diaries written by women? Diaries are an essential tool of historical reconstruction and interpretation. They chronicle facts and details from the past, ones that often do not appear in more traditional public documents. They describe how women lived, what they did, why they did it and how they felt about it. Diaries provide the researcher with insights into the life and mind of the writers. Through the diary the person is revealed: her private visions, her personal discoveries and her own disappointments. Through the diary the historical time is revealed, the events and their place in a nation's development. Diaries provide information on female relationships with men, children, families, communities and other women. They reveal much about how technological development and public institutions like church, school and the law, affected the lives of women and how women shaped them. As Strong-Boag puts it, diaries, in part, help historians to study, "Canadian women as actors rather than as those being acted upon by others and forces over which they have no control."<sup>116</sup>

It is true that the diary, as a scholarly research tool, has its limitations. The contrasts of content and style, in terms of substance, quality and irregularity of entries are the source of some methodological constraint. Diaries are not authoritative and suffer from the same kind of scholarly doubts as oral documentation and journalism. The selectiveness of the author requires the historian to supplement the diary with extensive traditional research for context and verification. As well, all too many diaries have not passed through time intact. Historians are teased and frustrated by missing pages, undecipherable writing and vague short forms and initials. Nevertheless, to ignore diaries as a source of information and insight would be a serious oversight, serving only to

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<sup>116</sup> Strong-Boag, *Rethinking Canada* 5.



perpetuate the writing of "distorted history", particularly as it relates to women.<sup>117</sup> Margaret Conrad made such a case for the use of women's diaries in 1982, when in an article written for the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, she said, "failure to consult their personal documents would seriously warp the portrayal of women in history."<sup>118</sup> After all, women, regardless of social status and ethnic origin, were essentials to the settling of Canada and the establishment of social order and cultural habits. To overlook them would be to forget the story of pioneering, whether in the French Regime or under the Homestead Act. According to Laurie Alexander, "Canada's history of survival and growth is in great measure the result of women's work."<sup>119</sup> Women's diaries, therefore, are not second best sources, they are part of the body of primary material available to the researcher, social historian, geographer, sociologist, psychologist or literary scholar. As Margaret Conrad concluded in No Place Like Home, "diaries and personal letters turn traditional history inside out. Instead of forming a backdrop to 'great events', ordinary lives here occupy centre stage."<sup>120</sup>

Onto the stage walks the person of Almira Bell.

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<sup>117</sup> Strong-Boag, Rethinking Canada 1.

<sup>118</sup> Margaret Conrad, "Recording Angels: The Private Chronicles of Women from the Maritime Provinces of Canada 1750-1950," Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women's Papers 4 (1982) : 1.

<sup>119</sup> Alexander 26.

<sup>120</sup> Conrad, No Place Like Home 3-4.

### Chapter III Almira Bell: The Woman

Little is known about Almira Bell. Indeed, had parts of her diaries not been preserved, she would have remained largely unknown to most. But, for reasons lost in time, some of Almira's "lifelines" have survived and what for her was a private act has become a public document. Not only do her daily recordings provide historians with a glimpse into community life in rural Nova Scotia in the first half of the nineteenth century, but they have left to posterity a picture of Almira Bell herself. Unfortunately, the diaries do not provide as complete a biography as one might hope but with careful reading and attention to even the most seemingly inconsequential comment, the researcher can reconstruct a picture of this young woman, including not only her physical characteristics and dress but also her attitudes, values, hopes and disappointments.

Almira and her twin sister Clarissa (Clara) were born on April 4, 1804, in Shelburne, Nova Scotia.<sup>1</sup> Her father, Joseph Bell, was a local farmer. Little of Almira's father is known. Almira's grandfather, Joseph Bell, was born in England and fled from New York during the American Revolution. He went to Port Roseway in the spring of 1783 as a captain of one of the groups of Loyalists to arrive in Shelburne. Bell began the tannery and shoemaking firm of Bell and Company, manufacturing shoes and boots.<sup>2</sup> He built a home in Shelburne which still stands today. In 1792, he moved to Yarmouth where he became a major of the 2nd. Battalion of the Shelburne County Militia in 1793.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph's wife, Catherine, was the daughter of Sarah DuBois and Captain Peter Harris who came to Shelburne from New York State. They built a home in the town and

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<sup>1</sup> Statistical data found in genealogical records housed at the Shelburne Genealogical Centre in Shelburne, Nova Scotia.

<sup>2</sup> Marion Robertson, King's Bounty: A History of Early Shelburne, Nova Scotia (Halifax: Nova Scotia Museum, 1983) 194.

<sup>3</sup> Shelburne County Museum, Naomi Rouse Family History, N.R. 4a,b.

raised their family there. Catherine and Joseph were married on May 6, 1802 in Shelburne. Catherine was mother to twins Almira and Clarissa, Lucretia, Sarah Ann, and William. Clarissa or Clara and her sister were baptized on April 4, 1804 at Christ Church, Shelburne, by the resident Anglican priest, Thomas B. Rowland.<sup>4</sup>

Almira's siblings all married and lived in Shelburne with their families. Her twin sister, Clarissa, lost her young infant son and she herself, died early at the age of forty. Almira and her other family members lived long into their old age and remained in Shelburne all their lives. Almira did not marry but lived out her days in Shelburne with her pet cats. She continued to write poetry into her eighties.<sup>5</sup>

Nothing is known about Almira's childhood, although by her own admission, it must have been a happy one. In her diaries, she often spoke with fondness of her home and the love and kindness that filled it, "I thought of the happy days of childhood...oh that I could recall the cares of youth..."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, on another occasion, she wrote that while living in Barrington she was, "...far away from my own home.-with no kind mother to console me..."<sup>7</sup> The family must have been a close one, for Almira wrote home regularly after she left Shelburne, and she kept in touch with her siblings. Homesickness was a constant problem for Almira even in her late twenties, "Oh, if I could see my Mother or Clara--the only two friends this world affords me! vain wish--we are separated, and I must bear my grief alone..."<sup>8</sup> Two years later, after returning from a vacation in Shelburne, Almira wrote, "I have been thinking of home today. I left it very reluctantly."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Data found in Shelburne Christ Church (Anglican) baptismal records housed at the Shelburne Genealogical Centre in Shelburne, Nova Scotia.

<sup>5</sup> Shelburne County Museum, Naomi Rouse Family History, N.R. 4a,b.

<sup>6</sup> All diary entries from Almira Bell diaries will be noted as follows: diary entry from September 21, 1833.

<sup>7</sup> Diary entry from August 17, 1833.

<sup>8</sup> Diary entry from October 10, 1834.

<sup>9</sup> Diary entry from June 29, 1836.

Like many twins Almira was especially close to her twin, Clara, who, by 1833, when Almira first began to keep a diary, was married and had two children. Once when it was feared that Clara had contracted consumption, Almira repeatedly expressed concern for her dear sister, "I exerted myself in writing to Clara and Lucretia,...the illness of the former causes me much anxiety--Oh! for resignation to say "The Lord will be done" respecting her--I know He cannot err--yet when I think of losing a sister so beloved, every feeling of my heart rises in opposition to such a display of His will."<sup>10</sup>

Several days later, upon receiving news that her sister was recovering, she wrote in her diary, "I shed tears of joy..."<sup>11</sup>

As close as she was to Clara, Almira was always interested in what her other siblings were doing, and she was always ready to help them. In October 1834, Almira and Lucretia hurried home to Shelburne to help their mother care for William who was seriously ill. (October 17, 1834 - December 5, 1834) The next year, she assisted her sister Sarah Ann, wife of George Wilson, when Sarah had her first child, "...my sister S.A. was brought to bed of a fine girl. She sent for me..."<sup>12</sup> And, throughout 1836, Almira encouraged the blossoming relationship between her brother William and Jane Dennis of Barrington.

Although Clara married, Almira did not. Nevertheless, she was not without beaux in her youth and the local gossip was that Almira's intended, John Homer Doane, had left her in 1833 to marry another.<sup>13</sup> On July 30, 1833, Almira wrote, "...oh! where are they whom I gave my heart with all its warm and trusting affections? gone-gone..."<sup>14</sup> Seven days later she wrote again, "Once I deemed I had met with a kindred spirit... oh! ye, the

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<sup>10</sup> Diary entry from September 19, 1834.

<sup>11</sup> Diary entry from October 1, 1834.

<sup>12</sup> Diary entry from October 18, 1836.

<sup>13</sup> Data found in the Marion Robertson Papers housed at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia; File # MG1 Vol.3622 #4.

<sup>14</sup> Diary entry from July 30, 1833.

faithless friend and the perjured lover!--ye who have robbed my spirit of its lightness, and my heart of its repose."<sup>15</sup> Not only did she lose her "lover" but also his sister, Emma, who had been her best friend at the time, "I think how our affections have become alienated and estranged from each other...".<sup>16</sup>

Almira makes a number of references to J.D. in her diary. On July 29, 1834, she met the recently married Mrs. Doane. Clearly, Almira still felt strongly the hurt of betrayal, particularly since she could not see in Marris Doane what her new husband did:

Took tea this afternoon at Crowell's in company with Mrs. J.D.--I was disappointed in my [word unclear] she is a mere nothing--homely withall--it is not prejudice causes me to say so, for I am not conscious of the least degree of that towards her--Maria C. introduced me to her, all eyes were on me, but I could bear this scrutiny and was she, his choice "oh" how strangely must he be altered.<sup>17</sup>

That same day, Almira also came face to face with her once intended. She was torn by conflicting emotions on the inside but controlled herself on the outside:

In a few minutes J.D. (who had been in meeting) caught up with us. He stepped between [word unclear] and the child and taking the latter by the hand began to speak to E. I did not let go of the child for I knew many eyes were on me, but I would not like a repetition of the feelings I experienced at that moment.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that the entire community knew of their past relationship because Almira was very concerned about what people would think of their meeting. She continued:

I walked on in silence with my countenance slightly averted, as tho' I saw him not; till on Emma's calling the child by name, he turned quickly toward me and said, "Oh is this Miss Bell? I did not know you--how are you

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<sup>15</sup> Diary entry from August 6, 1833.

<sup>16</sup> Diary entry from August 19, 1833.

<sup>17</sup> Diary entry from July 29, 1834.

<sup>18</sup> Diary entry from July 29, 1834.

Miss Bell?" He held out his hand at the same time and I did not refuse mine saying, "How do you do Mr. D.?" as I gave it to him. Coldly I spoke and scornfully and he knew I did, for he looked confused and embarrassed...<sup>19</sup>

The 1830s seem to have generally marked a change in Almira's character and frame of mind. Once carefree and happy, Almira became increasingly bitter and dour. As the eldest unmarried daughter, she had many family responsibilities thrust upon her. Not the least of these was helping to supplement the family income following the death of her father. Where or how Almira received her education history does not record, but she was, for her time, well educated and well read. Using these skills, she found employment as a teacher in Barrington, Nova Scotia in 1831. Barrington was about half a day's journey by wagon from Shelburne on the South Shore. Although school boards were not legally permitted to hire female teachers in Nova Scotia until 1838,<sup>20</sup> Almira appears to have been hired in an unofficial capacity. It is interesting to note that her pay of 4 pounds in 1836 and 7.14 pounds in 1837 was sent to her mother.<sup>21</sup> But teaching was not a happy avocation for Almira: it was an economic necessity, "I must not complain--I have my livelihood to earn."<sup>22</sup> Her increasing unhappiness was recorded in her diary on August 1, 1833 when she reported that Didy Crowell had said of her, "I never saw a person so altered in their looks as Miss B., is, within the last two years, in my life...she looks no more like the girl she was two years ago--than if she were not the same person--sure she laughs--but the laughs don't seem to come from her heart as it used to do..."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Diary entry from July 29, 1834.

<sup>20</sup> See article in Janet Guilford, "Separate Spheres: The Feminization of Public School Teaching in Nova Scotia, 1838-1880," Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the 19-th Century Maritimes (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1994) 119-144.

<sup>21</sup> Data found in the Ross Thomson Papers, Shelburne housed at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia; File # MG1 Vol.912 #648, 654, 671.

<sup>22</sup> Diary entry from September 23, 1833.

<sup>23</sup> Diary entry from August 1, 1833.

During her unhappy years in Barrington, Almira kept a daily journal. It began only when she reached the point in her emotional distress that she felt the need to privately unburden herself. Her's was a "journal intime". It began on July 19, 1833, perhaps shortly after she and John Homer Doane parted company. Certainly she appears to have adopted the diary form as a way of releasing some of her pent up emotions. Moping about and daydreaming was a waste of time in Almira's puritan opinion. Wasting time was a sin, not a mortal sin, but a sin no less. Writing about her feelings, however, was not, since writing required a degree of personal discipline and ensured one was not idle. To her newly created friend and confidante she wrote, "I am now (for the first time) about commencing a journal...Often when my heart has been torn by conflicting emotions, have I retired and passed forth its feelings upon paper... therefore, uninteresting tho the matter may be with which I shall fill the following pages, still if I begin a few of my lonely hours by doing so, I will not account it mispent time..."<sup>24</sup>

The diary, as it has survived, part preserved at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia and part at the Shelburne County Museum continued until Friday, October 28, 1836.<sup>25</sup> Although Almira was relatively vigilant in maintaining her daily entries, there are gaps over the three years. In some cases, the gaps may be because parts of the original have been lost, but in most instances, Almira simply chose not to write anything down if she thought nothing worthwhile had taken place or if she was not particularly upset or needful of a talk with her confessor and confidante. This is borne out by the fact that she did not write in her diary during any of her visits home to Shelburne. Between July 1833 and October 1836 she went home for several weeks at a time on five occasions. Usually

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<sup>24</sup> Diary entry from July 19, 1833.

<sup>25</sup> The last recorded entry made by Almira Bell was on Friday, October 28, 1836. She does not end the diary in a particular way by means of finishing her story, which leads one to believe that there may have been pages that were lost. It is very possible that subsequent diaries were written years later that were lost to posterity, as she was a dedicated diary writer.

she went home for vacation time, as she did between November 1835 and January 1836. Possibly, she continued to keep a diary after 1836, since there is no indication of finality in the last entry of October 28, 1836. Nevertheless, no such copies have surfaced to date.

Records do not help much in determining how long Almira taught school in Barrington. In 1838, the Nova Scotia government passed legislation allowing public school boards to pay salaries to female employees. It is possible that Almira continued to teach for a time if only because, as she had indicated in her diary, she had to support herself somehow. But, she was not happy away from her family and hometown, and on October 17, 1836, just eleven days before her final diary entry she wrote, "I am going home tho' and unless bitter necessity compels me, never again will I return to this house as a teacher..." (Monday, October 17, 1836). Whether she did return is not certain but it is probable that as the unmarried daughter, Almira eventually returned home to Shelburne to care for her aging mother who died in 1852.

For Almira Bell, while teaching was a "bitter necessity", writing poetry was the greatest of pleasures. In her diary she often mentioned poems she had been reading. She once noted with pleasure that one of her beaux, Ansel Crowell, had recited some poetry by Robert Falconer for her. This act raised him to a higher level than most men in her estimation; "He ...quoted some beautiful lines of Falconer's...His fondness for poetry does not lessen him in my estimation" (Monday, March 16, 1835). Other young men of Barrington, such as Benjamin Doane read poetry and works of literature including those by Pope.<sup>26</sup> Writing poetry was a lifelong interest of Almira's. The Census Records of 1871 for Shelburne listed her occupation as that of poetess.<sup>27</sup> Like diary writing, poetry writing was a form of emotional release for her. Almira often slipped into lines of poetry

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<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Doane, *Following the Sea* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Limited, 1987) 5.

<sup>27</sup> The 1871 Census Record for Shelburne housed at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia lists Almira Bell's occupation as that of a poetess; (1871 Census Records; p.14).



in her diary as a way of passing time and unburdening herself, "I have been composing poetry all day--sadness is my muse--for the merit of my verses, is in proportion to the misery of my feelings."<sup>28</sup> Usually her muse struck when she was moved by the beauty of her natural surroundings or by the death of a friend or by some personal inner conflict. Early in her diary Almira wrote, "I have been composing poetry all day--sadness is my muse--for the merit of my verses is in proportion to the rising of my feelings."<sup>29</sup> Homesick for her family in Shelburne and depressed by the loss of John Homer Doane in her life, she wrote on August 14, 1833:

Tis hard to smile, when one could weep  
 To speak, when one would silent be;  
 To wake, when one should I wish to sleep,  
 And to wake to agony  
 Oh! world--world--I am weary of thee!<sup>30</sup>

Oft times, she simply inserted short poetic phrases to better express her feelings; "Today (Monday) I have felt miserable both in body and mind, "Oh! what is life--that thoughtless wish of all? A drop of honey; in a draught of gall."<sup>31</sup> Other times, Almira wrote quite extensive poetic passages such as on April 10, 1835 when she described the moon. She may have been thinking of moonlit nights shared with another, "I have been standing gazing at the moon with the feeling of enthusiasm that I always experience when looking at her--

My own loved light  
 That every soft and solemn spirit worships  
 That lovers love so well--strange joy is thine,  
 Whose influence o'er all tides of soul hath pow'r,  
 Who lands thy light to rapture, and despair;  
 The glow of hope, and wan hue of sick fancy.

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28     Diary entry from December 22, 1833.  
 29     Diary entry from December 20, 1833.  
 30     Diary entry from August 14, 1833.  
 31     Diary entry from July 29, 1833.

Alike reflect thy rays; alike thou lightest  
 The path of meeting or of parting love.  
 Alike on mingling or on breaking hearts  
 Thou smil'est in throned beauty...<sup>32</sup>

Lost and unrequited love were favorite topics for Almira, perhaps reflecting her own experiences. Throughout her life she continued to write poetry and these themes were often present, implicitly if not explicitly. In "Cast Aside", written in July 1854, Almira, now living in Shelburne, wrote of her own lost love. Comprising six verses of ABABCC construction, "Cast Aside" tells of how cruelly Almira's love was "cast aside". However, time and faith heal all wounds and the now mature spinster concluded that sadness and bitterness should be cast aside, that reason must rule over passion and that solace is best found in living one's life according to God's precepts. She began by speaking of love abandoned:

...  
 Cast aside! what? a loving human heart!  
 A heart that oft hath bled-  
 With fount uncurdled by the poisoned dart  
 That in it to the head  
 Was driven by one unworthy of the rare  
 And precious charges committed to his care.  
 ...  
 Alas that man should tear  
 With reckless hand such jewel from his breast  
 ...  
 Cast aside! what a fair unspotted name!  
 And, oh how recklessly!  
 ...

But, over time, the love cast aside turned to heavenly love and Almira concluded:

Cast aside! what? Oh that the high response  
 Utter'd by everyone  
 Might be--"Each weight and tyrant--sin once that  
 Whene'er I tried to run  
 The heavenly race bowed down--and hindered me."<sup>33</sup>

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32 Diary entry from April 10, 1835.

33 Poem "Cast Aside" written by Almira Bell in July, 1854.

From time to time, Almira Bell was moved to write sonnets or other short poems marking the death of a friend. She was no stranger to death. She experienced the agony of death in her youth at the age of nineteen when her best friend, Mary Bongay, died on March 18, 1813. Almira was devastated by the death of such a young friend. She turned to poetry for solace and in her youthful resentment and bitterness portrayed death as a "cruel monster", "a tyrant" and as "a cruel despot", that listened not to, "the anguish of a tender friend" and stole a "spritely youth to the unconscious tomb...." Almira shed many tears for her "sweet companion of my happiest days" and bemoaned the fact that:

...none but the afflicted can my sorrows share;  
and sympathizing shed the friendly tear.<sup>34</sup>

As the years passed Almira began to view death in a somewhat different light. Resigned to its cruelty and inevitability, she began to regard it less as a tyrant and more as a heavenly call. Prone to depression and pessimism, Almira often wrote that she actually longed for death and that she even envied those who had found eternal rest. Her concern was more that she was not ready to enter the Kingdom of Heaven than it was that she feared death itself. In "Lines" she wrote of the death of Emmaline:

...peaceful is her dreamless sleep  
within the grave's repose.  
That bed all damp and gravely  
Is soft to her as down...

Almira acknowledged that she believed Emmaline died too soon and that her own heart rebelled, refusing to accept the reality of death, "...giving O how reluctantly unto the worm's their fancy...", but it is God's will and therefore to be accepted without regret:

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<sup>34</sup> Lines from Almira Bell's poem entitled "By a Female Friend" written for her friend Mary Bongay who died at the tender age of 19 years.

...And now my Father heavenly  
 The gift divine imparts  
 Of resignation to Thy will  
 To this rebellious heart.<sup>35</sup>

In "Stanzas" Almira again wrote of the passing of another close friend, "our sweet white dove hath gone to nest." But this time Almira revealed her own inner longings:

...I envy thee so early gone  
 From paths by rude feet trod upon  
 ...  
 And she to now cannot choose but reprove  
 That thy lot sweet songbird had not been mine...<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to her poem in memory of Mary Bongay, by middle age Almira was better able to come to terms with death, perhaps because it was by now so familiar to her: "And I who have seen each friend save one, Depart neath the means of the midday's sun...". Firmly rooted in the Christian perception of the afterlife, Almira reminded all who mourn that it is selfish to wish the deceased back:

...We weep not for thee t'were wrong again  
 To wish thee back from thy native sky.<sup>37</sup>

Almira's preoccupation with the subject of death found a less personal, but no less effective expression when she wrote a lengthy, thirteen verse poem about the wreck of the steamship Hungarian off Cape Sable the night of February 20, 1860. All the crew and passengers, numbering over three hundred, perished in the wintry sea. The opening verses, in ABABCC form, outlined the events leading up to and including the sinking.

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35 Poem "Lines" written by Almira Bell.

36 Poem "Stanzas" written by Almira Bell.

37 Poem "Stanzas" written by Almira Bell.

Here Almira used her descriptive skills and powers of imagery to capture the full horror of the event:

...The waves are fiercely dashing  
Thick snow flakes fill the air  
And the wind is loudly shrieking  
The death notes of despair;  
As towards her fate mid sleet and dark  
Comes rushing on that gallant bark...<sup>38</sup>

Almira noted with particular sadness the drowning of a "young champion of the cross," "a pair whom Hymen's chains silken-like had fetted;" and Captain Jones, "one better skilled than he, /Or nobler, never steered a bark across the treacherous sea." She kept her most evocative imagery for the unnamed masses, "the seaweed-wrapped, uncoffined dead, /Sleeping on ocean's oozy bed."<sup>39</sup>

Not all of Almira Bell's poetic inspiration came from death. She would turn to humorous verse on occasion, "I have been amusing myself by writing a ludicrous copy of verses...Mr. and Mrs. Sargent read them this evening and they elicited much laughter and approbation from all present"<sup>40</sup> But Bell, only rarely, let shallow frivolity take hold both in her life and in her poetry, "This talent of mine is a mischievous one and must not be indulged."<sup>41</sup> Instead, she preferred the more sedate and lady-like muses of nature.

Almira was very sensitive to her natural surroundings. This aspect of her artistic nature was well presented in "The Bonny Broom" written in 1855. These lines described a bush called the Scottish Broom which grew in great profusion around the remains of an old house in Shelburne. This plant "in all thy golden glow", raised several questions in

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<sup>38</sup> Poem "The Hungarian" written by Almira Bell.

<sup>39</sup> Poem "The Hungarian" written by Almira Bell.

<sup>40</sup> Diary entry from October 2, 1836.

<sup>41</sup> Diary entry from October 2, 1836.

Almira's mind; who had brought the plant from Scotland and what memories did the Broom plant evoke for the planter?

...Fond eyes once watched thy budding--  
 Brought from thy native glen  
 To flourish in a foreign soil,  
 Beheld by stranger men--  
 Perchance warm tears gushed freely  
 Thy golden flowers among:  
 ...  
 Oh! Who can tell what images  
 Thy sweet buds conjur'd forth  
 ...  
 And all the treasured memories  
 That clung to "Auld Lang Syne"...<sup>42</sup>

Almira, however, could not escape the theme of death even in this poem. She found herself thinking on the mortality of humankind and the insignificance of manmade things in the face of the durability of things made by God, like the "Bonny Broom":

...Sole relic of thy planter  
 Long passed from earth away  
 Thou, thou alone art left to tell  
 Where once his garden lay...  
 Still blooming on in beauty  
 A rugged mound beside  
 Where once a goodly dwelling stood  
 Thou seemst to mock man's pride...  
 By man had raised this structure  
 Now lying in decay  
 And rains and dews that nourished thee,  
 Have mouldered it away...<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Poem "The Bonny Broom" written by Almira Bell.

<sup>43</sup> Poem "The Bonny Broom" written by Almira Bell.

The subject of Man's mortality surfaced in another lengthy poem written in 1858. In "The Old Burial Ground of Shelburne", Almira looked upon the disintegrating stones that once marked the final resting spot of Shelburne's founding settlers and concluded that only the dark spruce trees rising above the burial ground were, in the end, both "monument" and "dirge" for "those mouldering bones." She opened with a descriptive passage:

'Tis an Autumn day--but lovelier far  
 Than any bright Spring e'er could calendar;  
 For the trees are still clothed in the gorgeous dress  
 That precedeth their wintry nakedness:...

As responsive to her natural surroundings as she was, Bell quickly moved on to the purpose of her musings. She spoke of Man's pride and God's power:

...Of those stones there remaineth now not one:  
 How little once, they, the erectors thought  
 That the rough and humble granite, unbought,  
 (Withstanding the force of Time's eating rust)  
 Should remain there to mark the sleeper's dust...

Almira further reminded the reader that in death all people are equal as they are in God's eyes;

...Within thee the rich man hath found a rest  
 And for Poverty's child thou hast open'd thy breast,  
 And repositeth each in a common bed,  
 With the same broad covering o'er them spread...<sup>44</sup>

Almira Bell found heavenly repose herself in Shelburne on April 24, 1882. She was 78 years old. Unfortunately, other than her poems, which were occasionally

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<sup>44</sup> Poem "The Old Burial Ground of Shelburne" written by Almira Bell.

published in local and Halifax newspapers, and her diaries for 1833-1836, Almira Bell left little of herself to posterity. A careful examination of Nova Scotia papers at the time of her death did not produce an obituary. Almira certainly placed little value on earthly things and would not have been surprised by the absence of material evidence of her place in the world. Her diaries have received more lasting attention than she had ever intended or expected. Their value lies in the fact that so little contemporary documentation exists, particularly about the daily lives of the people of Barrington, Nova Scotia. The residents of Barrington were obviously aware of the diaries for in 1948, Frank A. Doane in his book Old Times in Barrington, made reference to Bell's diaries. It seems that local people used the diaries to validate oral claims concerning various aspects of community history. Today, the diaries can also be read with a view to learning something about the place of women in that community and something about the young diarist herself. For later generations, Almira's diary is a key to the past, a key to understanding what women did, what women thought, what women believed, what women dreamed of, what women feared, what women wore and how women perceived their place in their home and their community.

Unfortunately no photographs or portrait drawings of Almira Bell have been found. However, based on the occasional reference in the diary to her physical self, one can develop a rough sketch of what she looked like. She was small in stature and weight, and she was certainly not robust. On July 31, 1834, she, Mrs. Farrish and Sarah Knowles went to the one place in town where there was a large scale, at the local store, to see how much they weighed. Mrs. Farrish was very petite at 110 pounds but Almira was not much larger, weighing in at 123 pounds. She was rather self conscious about her tiny hands and noted on August 30, 1833, that Thomas Crowell had brought her a pair of



gloves as a gift. They were in a child's size because, "he thought it useless to get women's gloves for such foolish looking hands as mine--they fit me nicely."<sup>45</sup>

Small though she may have been, Almira must have been very fit. She obviously enjoyed running. One August afternoon a friend challenged her to a short race, "I accepted it and as I always do on such occasions, came off conqueror."<sup>46</sup> She walked everywhere in Barrington and noted on July 2, 1835, that she had walked, "9 miles without stopping to rest."<sup>47</sup> She explained her accomplishment by commenting, "there are few things impossible, both as it regards mental and corporal exertion. An energetic and enterprising spirit is all that is required."<sup>48</sup>

Sometimes, however, Almira's "energetic and enterprising spirit" was sapped by illness and depression. Not only did she greatly mind the discomfort of her monthly cycle: "I have been sick all day...I came home early this evening for I felt too ill to take any comfort in visiting..."<sup>49</sup> but she often suffered from headaches and tooth problems; "I was seized with the ague in my teeth which lasted until last evening...I suffered greatly during the attack; but I am in hopes the worst is now over, and that the violent pain will not return again."<sup>50</sup> But it did return periodically, "...I attended suffering with the tooth ache..."<sup>51</sup> Almira was resigned to recurring periods of feeling unwell noting, "Alas! What poor frail creatures we are!"<sup>52</sup> In particular, she minded the heat of summer which often left her feeling faint and disgruntled, "I have suffered greatly with the heat today. My weakness must be the cause of my feeling so sensibly."<sup>53</sup> (Tuesday, September 1, 1835).

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<sup>45</sup> Diary entry from August 30, 1833.

<sup>46</sup> Diary entry from August 6, 1834.

<sup>47</sup> Diary entry from July 2, 1835.

<sup>48</sup> Diary entry from July 2, 1835.

<sup>49</sup> Diary entry from September 6, 1833.

<sup>50</sup> Diary entry from September 15, 1833.

<sup>51</sup> Diary entry from July 21, 1834.

<sup>52</sup> Diary entry from September 11, 1835.

<sup>53</sup> Diary entry from September 1, 1835.

Almira took great care of her dress and appearance. She was not vain but she enjoyed wearing fashionable clothes now and again. She was also very practical and frugal, partly out of economic necessity and partly from Protestant conviction. She usually made her own clothes, remodeling old ones or buying material for new. "I just finished making a merino frock for myself."<sup>54</sup> In another entry she wrote, " I ran as far as Mr. Robertson's this morning and got Sarah to show me a little about making a calash, 'a penny saved is a penny earned'."<sup>55</sup> Occasionally she would purchase a dress at the store but her frugal upbringing tended to undercut the pleasure of such an extravagance, "...I have been extravagant enough to purchase two new dresses today--silk and a muslin. Oh! how little do I value them."<sup>56</sup>

On the whole, Almira placed little value on dressing "a la mode", after all, vanity was a sin. As well, she could not afford to change styles regularly and isolation from even the small urban centre of Halifax made it hard to acquire information on the latest styles. Being stylish in a rural village was not usually practical given the dirt roads and the fact that most people had to walk everywhere, "I left my pantalettes (as they were covered with mud) at Squire Crowell's...".<sup>57</sup> One rainy night she wrote, "...in order to save my new silk frock, I turned it over my shoulder."<sup>58</sup> Another evening she borrowed; "an old gown and pelisse of Maria's as I was unwilling to spoil the light silk dress I wore. They all laughed heartily at the figure I made in my scanty and old fashioned habitiments. I got home dripping wet...Mrs. S. commended me highly for the care I had taken of it..."<sup>59</sup>

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54 Diary entry from November 1835.

55 Diary entry from July 15, 1836.

56 Diary entry from June 23, 1834.

57 Diary entry from December 20, 1833.

58 Diary entry from October 22, 1833.

59 Diary entry from September 16, 1835.

Nevertheless, fashion did not completely escape Almira's eye. In church one morning her mind began to wander; "I could not help contrasting the present appearance of the ladies, in respect to costume, to what it was when I first came to Barrington--plain calico then and now nothing but Grande Naples and Langhorn bonnets..."<sup>60</sup> Almira, herself, enjoyed being in fashion and had a particular taste for large puffed sleeves. These attracted a certain amount of attention in the community. On Sunday, September 29, 1833 she noted her "fashionable appearance." Obviously her sleeves caught the attention of Dr. Crowell who, "laughed at my large sleeves and said I looked like some of the angels he had seen carved on old tombstones in Scotland with both wings expanded."<sup>61</sup> Another time she wrote, "the sleeves of my frock were a source of amusement...I could not help laughing myself for I knew they looked enormously large..."<sup>62</sup> She also enjoyed the rare time that a special dress was required such as for the mid-winter musical party at the home of the local musician, Mr. Wreyton, "we girls settled our dresses for the occasion--we are all to wear dark silk frocks with white ribbons..."<sup>63</sup>

One of Almira's weekly tasks was to repair her clothing. She also sewed for pleasure and to make gifts for friends, "I am working on an elegant linen cambric cap for Ralpho."<sup>64</sup> Making gifts was not only a way to be frugal and a way to occupy one's time usefully, but in Barrington there were very few places to buy gifts. On May 22, 1836 Almira recorded that she was covering a blue parasol for Flavilla Doane and a few days later she was, "employed in braiding a little frock for Willy."<sup>65</sup>

Although Almira was boarding, she still involved herself in the domestic activities of the household and those of her local acquaintances. She periodically took a day off to

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60     Diary entry from July 20, 1833.  
 61     Diary entry from September 12, 1835.  
 62     Diary entry from March 13, 1835.  
 63     Diary entry from February 19, 1834.  
 64     Diary entry from August 2, 1836.  
 65     Diary entry from June 3, 1836.

tidy her room. On August 1, 1833, she and Sarah helped Ellen put up curtains in the parlor; "Sarah and I took tea with Ellen, and assisted her in putting up window curtains in the parlour--we compelled her to take down the looking glass, besides clearing the room of several other "superficials"--and the apartment looked much more genteel at our exit than it did at our entrance."<sup>66</sup> As Almira's place of residence employed a number of servants, she was not often required to make the meals, so she mainly completed her own personal domestic chores of sewing, cleaning her room and making a light lunch for herself every now and again.

In addition to sewing, relaxation for Almira Bell included drawing, reading or going for walks. On a number of occasions she noted that she was drawing as a way to fill her vacant hours, "I have been trying to amuse myself with drawing."<sup>67</sup> Like many gentile young middle class women of her age, Almira probably worked in water colors. She must have been relatively accomplished as she was happy to give her drawings as gifts and they appeared to be warmly received, "I had been drawing a picture for Urbane and took it over this evening.--She seemed highly pleased with it."<sup>68</sup>

Reading often accompanied a dull day. One wet October day she entertained herself, "with drawing and reading..."<sup>69</sup> Another boring day she wrote, "by means of drawing I have beguiled the time a little. I have been reading a sermon for Grandma Doane."<sup>70</sup> Reading out loud to others or silently to herself brought Almira much pleasure. Just as she enjoyed writing poetry, so she also revelled in reading it. In particular, she enjoyed the works of Alexander Pope, "I have contrived to pass an hour or two quite agreeably in perusing a volume of Pope's letters--this is the sort of reading I

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<sup>66</sup> Diary entry from August 1, 1833.

<sup>67</sup> Diary entry from August 31, 1833.

<sup>68</sup> Diary entry from October 31, 1833.

<sup>69</sup> Diary entry from October 14, 1833.

<sup>70</sup> Diary entry from September 5, 1833.

prefer."<sup>71</sup> She also read the occasional romance novel although with some self doubts as to their suitability for a well brought up, Christian lady, "I have been reading aloud to Mrs. S. this afternoon, a romantic story...Oh my evil nature! Would I have read the blessed Bible with half the pleasure!"<sup>72</sup> A very solitary person at times, Almira was able to escape the dullness and sadness of her life by reading of other worlds, "My thoughts and books are my best companions."<sup>73</sup> Her reading interests were eclectic it seems, including "Mrs. Trollope's Domestic Manners of the Americans", "Female Policy" and "Alonzo and Melissa" and "Robinson Crusoe".<sup>74</sup> Not all her reading experiences were positive ones, however:

Thomas came home with me. He appeared very anxious to know if I had seen a book he had lost lately. I told him I had not but could see he did not believe me; I felt determined he should not remain under such an impression and therefore told him all I knew about the book, only concealing my knowledge of the horrid title--he appeared agitated and angry--vehemently asserting he had never seen the contents himself. I was certain this was false but affected to believe him. In order to clear myself and the girls from the imputation of having seen it, I was obliged to tell him who took it out of his trunk--he then appeared satisfied of our innocence...still I am glad the shocking trash is no longer in his possession...<sup>75</sup>

Almira found other ways to relax and to share with her acquaintances in some of the local activities and entertainments. Long before electricity, the gramophone or the radio, entertainment in Barrington took the form of things like quilting parties, picnics, berry picking expeditions, evening parties and games. Almira shared in each of these kinds of activities from time to time. On August 14, 1834, she described a blueberry picking trip undertaken with seven friends. On May 17, 1836, Sarah Ann, her sister, had

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<sup>71</sup> Diary entry from August 27, 1833.

<sup>72</sup> Diary entry from September 16, 1835.

<sup>73</sup> Diary entry from October 2, 1833.

<sup>74</sup> Diary entry May 3, 1833.

<sup>75</sup> Diary entry from October 14, 1833.

a sewing party to which three women were invited. On October 24, 1833, Urbane had a quilting party, "there was quite a large party", which included nine women and five young men, "We sat and sewed nearly all evening. I was pleased at this but the men appeared to sit very uneasily...".<sup>76</sup> Later that same year in November, Hannah Crowell had a quilting party of some considerable size, "...Emma and I were at it...There were no less than twenty ladies and only two gentlemen--a sad disproportion in numbers."<sup>77</sup>

Taking tea was a particularly common way of relaxing and getting caught up on the news of the community. In fact, it was virtually a daily activity which could be quite formal or very spur of the moment and informal. Almira often stopped to tea at a friend's on her way to and/or from going for the mail or going to Chapel, "I have been up to Sarah Ann's where I staid to tea."<sup>78</sup> While she enjoyed the company of informal tea times, she did not like more formal tea parties. In particular, she disliked pouring tea, "if I had been home the task of doing the hours of the tea-table would have dissolved on me and it is rather a fatiguing business."<sup>79</sup>

As well as formal tea parties attended by invitation, staying for tea seemed to take several forms including staying for lunch and/or staying the evening til morning. The degree of friendship and the nature of the weather often determined the form of tea taken; "I took tea at Mr. Robertson's yesterday. The Misses K. were there with H.C., A.C. and also Thomas. I staid all night as it was near twelve when the party broke up...I staid to breakfast and it was near ten o'clock before I got home this morning."<sup>80</sup> On Sunday, August 11, 1835, she wrote; "I went to the Island meeting house...I took dinner with Urbane after which we went to Uncle Nezer's to see if Hannah would go to The Head with us--when we went in they were just at dinner and there were no less than ten

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<sup>76</sup> Diary entry from October 24, 1833.

<sup>77</sup> Diary entry from November 6, 1833.

<sup>78</sup> Diary entry from July 14, 1835.

<sup>79</sup> Diary entry from January 15, 1834.

<sup>80</sup> Diary entry from October 23, 1833.

visitors, exclusive of three children, sitting around the table--I think they have more company than any other family in Barrington."<sup>81</sup>

There were also formal dinners and parties. Almira found the former a bit of a trial. On July 16, 1835, Col. Marshall, "a stern martial looking man," who had lost an arm in the Battle of Waterloo, visited the Sargents, the family with whom Almira was boarding at the time. Anxious to show her off, Mrs. Sargent, "insisted on my making myself look as nice as I could and going down to dinner."<sup>82</sup> Almira was relieved to get away when dinner was finished, although she noted, "the dinner time passed off quite pleasantly, tho' I should imagine the gentlemen felt the effects of their wine."<sup>83</sup>

Parties of various kinds relieved the monotony of daily life and the long winters in the rural community. Almira seemed to attend her fair share. On February 1, 1834, she went to a party at the Robertson's, "enjoyed myself very well...we broke up at near 2 o'clock."<sup>84</sup> Three days later another party was held at the Robertson's and Almira was in attendance, "Wreyton played the flute for us and we danced, hunted the squirrel..."<sup>85</sup> Most parties included singing, dancing and games, "after a game of 'how do you like it' we broke up."<sup>86</sup> Almira took part in most of the activities, but she was quite uncomfortable when it came to card playing, "I was prevailed upon to play in spite of the remonstrances of my conscience."<sup>87</sup> She succumbed to card playing but she could not fire a gun. At the beach party on July 30, 1835 she refused to put a gun to her shoulder; "While we were on the beach the girls amused themselves with firing off guns, charged only with power but for my part, I was not amazon enough to engage in such sport."<sup>88</sup>

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81 Diary entry from August 11, 1835.

82 Diary entry from July 16, 1835.

83 Diary entry from July 16, 1835.

84 Diary entry from February 1, 1834.

85 Diary entry from February 4, 1834.

86 Diary entry from October 25, 1833.

87 Diary entry from December 20, 1833.

88 Diary entry from July 30, 1835.

She preferred the more lady-like activity of sitting on a swing, "we amused ourselves with swinging."<sup>89</sup>

Some parties were held just to relieve boredom while others were held to mark special occasions like weddings and baptisms. Almira seemed to attend most of the weddings held in the village. About fifty people attended the wedding of Hannah Osborne on January 2, 1835. For Almira this crowd was "too great a number for comfort." Dr. Wilson's marriage to Matilda W. took place on April 6, 1836. Forty attended this wedding, including Almira. To Urbane's wedding on November 19, 1833, twenty-six were invited. Almira thought this was more a suitable number. She always noted the number of people who attended a wedding perhaps because the number reflected one's place on the social hierarchy and one's popularity.

Almira's happiest outings seemed to be those outdoors; picnics, beach trips, long walks and berry picking; "After dinner S. and I ran up to see Maria Coffin and spent an agreeable hour rambling about the field with her. We seated ourselves by a large rock and I read to them out of a good little book which S. had in her hand when we left the Dr.'s...".<sup>90</sup> Almira loved nature, the flora and fauna that surrounded her. One very special outing was that to Seal Island lighthouse on September 18, 1835 with a large group of friends. Ansel Crowell accompanied her on a moonlit walk along the shore. Such closeness with nature always awakened her soul and imagination, "closing my eyes I almost fancied I could hear supernatural voices mingling with the roar of the ocean...I could have lingered on the shore for hours...".<sup>91</sup> On another moonlit night in August 1833, she wrote:

...we had a pleasant walk back--the air was like balm...I never gaze on the glorious stars without experiencing a feeling which I cannot describe--a mixture

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<sup>89</sup> Diary entry from July 31, 1834.

<sup>90</sup> Diary entry from May 10, 1834.

<sup>91</sup> Diary entry from September 18, 1835.



of admiration, awe and humility, while I look at them with delight; a sense of the Almightyness of the great Being who formed those ponderous orbs by the 'word of his power', and suspending them in liquid ether, assigned to each its respective orbit..."<sup>92</sup>

Bell was absolutely enthralled when she looked at the night sky. The beauty of the stars filled her with feelings almost too powerful to describe. She attributed this wondrous phenomenon to God which in turn led her to question Man's existence in the whole scheme of things. Bell's philosophical thoughts revealed her intelligence and curiosity of things that seemed to be beyond her understanding.

As seen in her poetry, Almira felt a particular closeness to nature. She often took time in her diary to note some particular thing she had seen or had admired on one of her walks. She found comfort in the things of nature, even the weather. Of the rainy day in October 1834 she wrote; "...I have been sitting during the last half hour at my open chamber window, looking at the driving sleet and listening to the wind moaning among the trees of the forest that surrounds my dwelling place,...I love such weather..."<sup>93</sup> Bell's empathy with her natural surroundings seemed to affect her inner feelings and attitudes, "...the wind is moaning and whistling alternately--and I could almost do the same, so wild and contradictory are my feelings..."<sup>94</sup>

Almira felt a similar closeness with animals. In July 1835, she awoke in the morning to find a little squirrel running around in her bedroom. It managed to escape her room and hide behind a bureau in the children's room. Mr. Sargent was awakened by the screaming of the children and proceeded to figure out a way to get rid of the critter. Almira felt great concern and compassion for the frightened squirrel but Mr. Sargent did not. He tried to kill it with a stick and Almira concluded, "Man by nature is a cruel animal...I stood inside my room door and begged for its life, but in vain for Mr. S. only

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<sup>92</sup> Diary entry from August 6, 1833.

<sup>93</sup> Diary entry from October 2, 1834.

<sup>94</sup> Diary entry from November 22, 1833.

laughed at me. I was in my bedgown or should I have sullied forth in its defence...".<sup>95</sup> In the end Mr.S. gave up when he could no longer find the animal but Almira quietly worked out a way for its safe escape:

After breakfast I came up and...first opening a window near which I placed a chair, awoke Squirrel who walked leisurely along the room, several times stopping to look at me with his beautiful bright eyes...he at length sprang out of the window...I have heard and read that animals have an instinctive feeling which enable them to distinguish a friend from a foe and I always smiled at the idea, but I feel tempted to believe it...<sup>96</sup>

Perhaps Almira could identify with the sad creature for she too often felt trapped and alone. Certainly Almira Bell felt a closeness to God when she observed God's animals and natural creations.

By profession Almira was a teacher, but she did not appear to enjoy this vocation. Students such as Benjamin Doane who were attending school in Barrington during this time did not like school days either.<sup>97</sup> Maybe it was the environment in which she lived and her homesickness which colored her attitudes. Whatever the reason, she seemed to derive no sense of accomplishment or fulfillment from being a teacher. She often referred to the "drudgery" of teaching.<sup>98</sup> She did not teach according to the ten month pattern known today (September-June). It seems as though she rarely taught through December, January, and February and that she went home again for part of June and July. The actual school term is unclear and it does not appear to have followed a strict pattern. It is also unclear whether she taught in the local school house or whether she taught in private homes including the house where she was boarding. On one occasion, she refers to "my

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<sup>95</sup> Diary entry from July 14, 1836.

<sup>96</sup> Diary entry from July 14, 1836.

<sup>97</sup> Doane, Following the Sea 4.

<sup>98</sup> Diary entry from August 2, 1833.

lonely schoolroom unblest by the sight of not one sympathetic countenance."<sup>99</sup> On another occasion she mentions "I am keeping school down stairs as the weather is too cold to admit of any writing in my own room."<sup>100</sup> Teaching was an economic necessity for Almira, not a love, "I have my livelihood to earn."<sup>101</sup> In February 1836, she noted that she had not been teaching since November and was much happier as a result, "I have not kept school this winter and my health and spirits are much the better for it."<sup>102</sup> She did not start again until April 3, 1836.

Almira Bell did not speak often in her diary about her school teaching. This may be due to the separate spheres that existed between men and women during the early 1800s. The woman's sphere was involved with the domestic activities surrounding the family unit. The ultimate goal for a woman during this time period was to be a mother. As Almira was not a mother or wife, she may not have received the same degree of respect that other women did in her community. There was no admiration given for a working woman because the ultimate goal was to have a family to care for. As a result, Almira Bell may not have written about her career because it was not a source of enjoyment and respect for her personally. She was originally from an elite Loyalist family and her loss of economic status after her father's death may have affected her personal identity. Her dependence on others for her income would leave her feeling self conscious about her social position in Barrington society.

One wonders what kind of a teacher she was if she was so unhappy with her job. Not that she disliked children. On the contrary, she seemed to like children, "I have been amusing myself in playing with the children--a body must relax sometimes..."<sup>103</sup> One afternoon Almira took all four of the Sargent children for a walk, "I took Sophia,

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<sup>99</sup> Diary entry from May 11, 1835.

<sup>100</sup> Diary entry from November 1835.

<sup>101</sup> Diary entry from September 23, 1833.

<sup>102</sup> Diary entry from February 1836.

<sup>103</sup> Diary entry from November 1, 1833.

Margaret, Bessy and Isabella a rambling with me in the woods a short time before tea and this was the bright spot in the day."<sup>104</sup> She also showed concern for children who were ill or who had experienced the loss of a parent. When her friend, Mrs. Sargent who lived on the [Sherose] Island died on August 1, 1835, Almira was concerned about the children; "Sarah wept bitterly when she saw her Mama lying alas! pale and cold in her coffin. The sight almost overwhelmed me. I took her back with me and she cried all the way, poor little thing..."<sup>105</sup>

Perhaps the worst feature of being a teacher for Almira was that she had to board with strangers and that she had very little privacy. Over the three years of the diary, she lived in a number of homes but none of them played the role of surrogate family for Almira. She generally felt ignored, demeaned or exploited at one time or another; "the home of my childhood is distant far--and I dwell in the halls of a stranger--no kindred voices fall sweetly on mine ear--and there are none to whom I can look for sympathy or consolation..."<sup>106</sup> At first she lived with a family on the Island but by November 1833 she was living in Barrington in the home of Mr. J. Geddes and hating it; "My residence here, has been bearable, hitherto, tho' at no time agreeable, but at present the disagreeableness of my situation is almost insupportable. Mr. J.G. is a very disagreeable person to reside with and I feel just now as if I never can bear to come back again, when I once quit his house, which I hope I am now on the eve of doing..."<sup>107</sup> She moved but, "to a house almost equally unpleasant..."<sup>108</sup> This was the home of the local Justice of the Peace, John Sargent. Her fears were realized, although she remained with the Sargents and their seven daughters until the end of the diary period, 1836. On one occasion she wrote that she was left to walk to town while Mr. Sargent and his daughter

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<sup>104</sup> Diary entry from September 8, 1835.

<sup>105</sup> Diary entry from August 6, 1835.

<sup>106</sup> Diary entry from August 2, 1833.

<sup>107</sup> Diary entry from November 23, 1833.

<sup>108</sup> Diary entry from November 23, 1833.

Bessy passed her by in the waggon; "...I thought he might have offered me a seat as both he and Mrs. S. knew how unwell I felt. S.R., Janet and myself dined at Mr. Geddes. They all expressed astonishment that I had been permitted to walk by Mr. S....I could have told them it was only a piece with other treatment I have met with. I felt too mortified to say much on the subject."<sup>109</sup> She particularly resented her lack of privacy and personal freedom and the Sargents did little to make her feel welcome or at home. Her opinion of Mrs. Sargent was none too high; "I have allowed myself to be irritated and put out of humor today by Mrs. S., weak-minded and variable tempered woman that she is. I feel myself above her in all riches' with a mind which I feel to be superior to my station..."<sup>110</sup> On October 17, 1836, Almira took her leave of the Sargents, hoping never to return; "I find I have been surrounded by a complete set of spies and no action, however trivial, has escaped its comment. A poor reward for the pains I have taken and the privations I have undergone. I am going home tho' and unless bitter necessity compels me, never again will I return to this house as a teacher."<sup>111</sup>

In so many ways, Almira Bell was an unhappy person. By her own admission, she was a pessimist, "I always fear the worst which is very foolish in me."<sup>112</sup> Life was a burden to her and she often felt despondent and bored. She had lost childhood friends like Mary Bongay to death and on Saturday, November 16, 1834, she spoke of another; "it is the anniversary of the death of my beloved friend & past scenes have been harrowing my soul--five years have elapsed since he died, yet it seems but as yesterday--very dear were you unto me my friend and my bleeding heart still cherishes thy memory."<sup>113</sup> She had lost her love to another, she had had to leave her beloved home out of economic necessity and she disliked her job. So miserable was she at times that

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<sup>109</sup> Diary entry from September 7, 1834.

<sup>110</sup> Diary entry from April 6, 1835.

<sup>111</sup> Diary entry from October 17, 1836.

<sup>112</sup> Diary entry from October 9, 1835.

<sup>113</sup> Diary entry from November 16, 1834.

she indicated once that she understood why someone might commit suicide such as a young man in Barrington did in December 1833:

Today I have felt miserably dejected--comfort and happiness seem to have flown from me forever and life appears a burden--surely it is such feelings that tempt poor wretches to commit suicide--well it is we have salutary dread of an hereafter! I have shed tears and they have cased my bursting heart.<sup>114</sup>

Bell would probably never have gone so far as to commit suicide if only because it was both unchristian and anti-social, but she certainly harbored those kinds of feelings at times.

Homesickness was a constant source of depression and discouragement for Almira. Never was this more so than when she was feeling ill or when she was missing a special family gathering in Shelburne. Easter weekend in 1835 she succumbed to self pity and wrote:

This is Good Friday, a holy day at home (my own home) but none to me. I do feel unhappy and I cannot help it. None--not one to speak a kind word or affectionate word to me and not one to whom I can impart my feelings--"I must be silent; But O! a reined tongue and bursting heart are hard at once to bear."<sup>115</sup>

Almira's loneliness might have been lessened if she had had a close friend, other than her diary, to turn to. But, she had trouble developing and fostering such friendships. Certainly her closest friends were her immediate family, people like Clara whom she trusted and who loved her unconditionally. Almira had had close friends like Mary Bongay, when she had been growing up in Shelburne but in Barrington Almira always felt alone. She met regularly with some of the young women of the community, and she even set up a signaling system between their homes so that they could get in touch with each

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<sup>114</sup> Diary entry from December 9, 1833.

<sup>115</sup> Diary entry from April 17, 1835.

other, but Almira never let them become too close to her heart. Almira was convinced that whenever she made a friend they either died or were untrue to her. She had good reason to think this. Her dearest friends in Barrington were two older women, a Mrs. Sargent who lived on the Island and Aunt Didy Crowell in Barrington. Both died in 1835 and Almira's depression and resignation to loneliness seemed to deepen. Of Mrs. Sargent she wrote, "She is a person I am sincerely attached to."<sup>116</sup> Almira admired her goodness and firmly believed Mrs. Sargent would pass into Heaven, "surely a being so inoffensive cannot be otherwise!"<sup>117</sup> Aunt Didy who died just a few weeks after Mrs. Sargent was viewed in much the same way, "If she has not gone to Heaven, no one need try to get there."<sup>118</sup> The passing of such precious friends left Almira feeling alone and abandoned, "How many of my friends have I seen falling around me like autumn leaves?"<sup>119</sup>

Because of her lack of friends, or at least her perception that she had no real friends, Almira spent a great deal of time alone. This did little to relieve her despondency: "I did not stir out of the house all day."<sup>120</sup> While she often complained of having nothing to do and few friends, the truth was that she rather reveled in her self pity at times and did seem to enjoy solitary times. Quiet moments with her books and her thoughts provided her with the time needed to sort out her problems and hopes. She could dream and think of her future; "Some people cannot bear to be alone and prefer any company to none...in solitude I never yet felt listless or wearied--tho' I often have, when surrounded by company,--melancholy, I do often feel when alone--but when it is of the pensive, soothing kind, I prefer it to gaiety..."<sup>121</sup> She recognized that there was a

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116     Diary entry from July 24, 1835.

117     Diary entry from August 5, 1835.

118     Diary entry from August 27, 1835.

119     Diary entry from August 7, 1835.

120     Diary entry from July 19, 1833.

121     Diary entry from October 2, 1833.

difference between a lonely time and time alone that was soothing and replenishing of her person. Almira Bell seemed to feel most secure when with her family or alone.

Almira seemed to fall into periods of depression which coincided with her monthly cycle. Entries recording negative thoughts and feelings appear at rather regular intervals in the diary, which would lead one to believe that her period may have affected her emotionally as well as physically:

I feel very unwell this morning--better to be in my bed than to undergo the drudgery of school-keeping; I scarcely know how I shall go thru with it for my mind partakes of my body's imbecility, and in spite of all my efforts to conquer this weakness, the tears will keep flowing--Oh! that I had wings like a dove; for then would I flee away and be at rest...I would flee afar off into the wilderness...<sup>122</sup>

Almira made it difficult for people to befriend her. Often aloof, she was suspicious and critical of the motives of those who tried to befriend her. Not only did she seek time alone rather a lot, but she also shied away from shows of affection, even those of a non sexual kind, afraid of giving her heart to another only to be hurt again either through rejection or death. She was also concerned by what others might say and think of her. An unmarried woman in her late twenties always would attract some gossip where the attention of young men were concerned and Almira was very conscious of Victorian social proprieties and her reputation in a small community where everyone seemed to know everyone's business. Above all, she disliked the practice of kissing as a show of friendship. Perhaps she associated it with the Judas kiss. Whatever the reason, she believed a kiss was only exchanged between the closest and truest of friends or between genuine lovers. For example, the happy bridegroom who shared his joy by kissing all the guests drew this criticism from Almira; "...he bestowed kisses very liberally

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<sup>122</sup> Diary entry from August 2, 1833.



on the ladies who went to wish him 'joy'--but as I was not at all ambitious of the honor of a salute, I kept a respectable distance from him..."<sup>123</sup>

Even when a known friend approached her, Almira shied away. Kisses were not to be received from a "common acquaintance":

Hannah came with us to the corner--she kissed my cheek at parting--she has become strangely affectionate in her behavior of late--perhaps I am too fastidious but I feel I can only return her kindness with cold civility--our ideas and sentiments are totally dissimilar, even to admit of my regarding her in any other light than that of a common acquaintance...<sup>124</sup>

Bell, herself, realized that she might have been too hasty in her judgement of this girl who only wanted to be her friend. But Almira was suspicious of Hannah's motives and would not allow herself to become close with her even though she longed for a good and true friend. Apparently Bell felt that it was easier to be without friends because then she could be sure to remain unhurt. The pain of being hurt by friends was greater in Bell's mind than the pain of loneliness.

Ironically, Almira wanted friends as much as she rejected them. She wanted a "kindred spirit" but noted the contradictions of friendship. She wrote; "Oh! for a kindred spirit to whom I could reveal the workings of my soul? vain wish--there are none to participate in my emotions--and I am obliged to smother my feelings; and bury them in my bosom, lest I should incur the ridicule of the frigid and insensible being with whom my war with fate compels me to associate."<sup>125</sup> On another occasion she wrote, "when we open our hearts to a friend it disburdens them of their load--happy they who think they have a friend--even tho' they but pour their hearts best treasure on the dust, in believing so."<sup>126</sup> Such cynicism must have made Almira a rather unattractive person at times. She

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123 Diary entry from July 25, 1833.

124 Diary entry from August 2, 1833.

125 Diary entry from August 6, 1833.

126 Diary entry from October 7, 1833.

spoke of the folly of depending too much on friendship. People, she argued, could be deceived by others who pretended to be friends and the result would be hurt and distrust. Almira spoke from experience. She always felt the pain of rejection by Homer Doane. He, more than anyone, had taught her the true meaning of betrayal, and she was determined never to feel that hurt again; "at present I feel alone in the wide world--oh! where are they, to whom I gave my heart with all its warm and trusting affections? gone--gone--and what had I done to merit their desertion?...oh my spirit! thou art no longer duped by false profession from the lips of the false and hollow hearted."<sup>127</sup>

On the whole, Almira viewed potential friends with suspicion and distanced herself from them. She was very much like young Kate Shannon, who at the age of eighteen, wrote in her diary of 1892: "Don't put your trust in friendship for when you grow cranky and dull and stupid you may be deserted and then what does your friendship amount to?"<sup>128</sup> Almira herself wrote, "once...I fondly deemed that there existed in the world a thing called 'Friendship'...and oh! folly--even imagined I had obtained its blessings--vain delusion!"<sup>129</sup>

Almira certainly did not always avoid the company of the young ladies of Barrington, or the young men for that matter. She was well aware that as an single, marriageable woman, she attracted considerable male attention; "There was a goodly number of young men present, and if I might presume to judge from their eyes, I think I must have been an object of great admiration to them."<sup>130</sup> Her opinions of the young men, however, were not very favorable, "such a set of scare-crows I never beheld before."<sup>131</sup> On another occasion she wrote critically of the behavior of the Barrington

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<sup>127</sup> Diary entry from July 30, 1833.

<sup>128</sup> Della Stanley, A Victorian Lady's Album: Kate Shannon's Halifax and Boston Diary of 1892 (Halifax: Formac Publishing Company Limited, 1994) 26.

<sup>129</sup> Diary entry from August 2, 1833.

<sup>130</sup> Diary entry from July 25, 1833.

<sup>131</sup> Diary entry from July 25, 1833.

men; "...the other young men stood in a cluster laughing and whispering. I do not know when I have felt more displeased. The Head young men certainly possess twice the politeness of those down this way."<sup>132</sup> She suspected that they were mocking someone, perhaps her, and she found this distasteful. But one thing was clear, Almira set very specific guidelines as to what she liked or disliked about men. Commenting on one man she wrote, "He is a very strange young man."<sup>133</sup>

Almira Bell was nothing if not opinionated. One suspects this characteristic reached well beyond the privacy of her diary. Her list of dislikes was long indeed and reflected her Victorian, Protestant morality. She was critical of girls she believed were rather open in their flirtations with the opposite sex. Bold women were on her 'do not like' list; "Elise's behavior disgusts me--bold and wanton in the highest degree--as an instance, she sat on the bed and placed her feet on Thomas' knee but this was a trifle."<sup>134</sup> She also had little use for those who partook in trivial talk, as opposed to gossip, "I met Hannah C. yesterday and chatted with her 'till I got tired of her nonsense."<sup>135</sup> Another time she described a conversation with Thomas:

Our conversation turned wholly on serious subjects & I can now reflect on it with satisfaction. I spoke of the dying moments of a beloved friend & of the effect it produced on my mind at the time. We then talked of the cholera & of the necessity of being always in a state of preparation for death. Oh how much better satisfied I feel now with myself than if I had indulged in trifling conversation.<sup>136</sup>

Almira was very pleased at having had a meaningful conversation with Thomas about important subjects, rather than a meaningless one about the trivialities of everyday life.

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<sup>132</sup> Diary entry from March 3, 1835.

<sup>133</sup> Diary entry from March 5, 1835.

<sup>134</sup> Diary entry from October 21, 1833.

<sup>135</sup> Diary entry from October 11, 1833.

<sup>136</sup> Diary entry from September 1, 1834.

Almira's mixed feelings about solidifying friendships and unburdening herself to a "kindred spirit", whether male or female, must have been very confusing for her would-be friends. This must have been especially true for the men who tried to court her, in particular, Thomas Crowell and Ansel Crowell who, alternately, gave her considerable attention throughout the period of the diary. Almira approached her relationships with confusion and unease. The result was often misunderstanding on the part of one or both parties. She had feelings of fondness for both Thomas and Ansel, but she had no desire to choose one over the other or to mislead them. Thomas, in particular, maintained a fairly constant interest in Almira. Often she seemed to actually relish his company but when she began to sense something more than acquaintantship, she pulled away reminding all that they were just "common acquaintances"; "Thomas came home with me--it was bright and moonlight--we had a pleasant walk--I felt sorry when I parted with him at the gate, at the thoughts of not seeing him again for so long a time--if some folks saw this they would smile--yet I mean nothing by it--neither do I consider him in any other light than that of a common acquaintance."<sup>137</sup>

Obviously, some in the community were interested in encouraging a relationship between Almira and a local bachelor. Almira noted a number of times that people had ideas about who was interested in her and in whom she was interested. Bell regarded Thomas, most of the time, as a good friend, but she did not want others, including Thomas, to think it was more than that. Although a fairly reserved person, she wanted to keep her options open. Thomas and Ansel were persistent but unsuccessful suitors, yet Almira did enjoy their attentions. She accepted their gifts; gloves, a thimble and comb from Thomas; a book and coconut from Ansel.<sup>138</sup> She even let Thomas wear a ring of her's. The explanation Almira gave to her diary was that the ring had inadvertently

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<sup>137</sup> Diary entry from October 31, 1833.

<sup>138</sup> Diary entry from September 16, 1834.

become stuck on Thomas' finger. Interestingly enough, it remained there for some time until he and Almira had a falling out. They did not speak for a month after.

At times Almira seemed to actively encourage Thomas' attentions and did not pull away from his shows of affection. On one occasion she commented on his boldness but indicated that she had not admonished him at the time; "When he came away, T. seized hold of me and declaring noone else should go with me, tried to hurry me off--the saucy fellow held his cheek close to mine all the way--he is really getting wilder than ever."<sup>139</sup> Other times she appeared to be playing with him. One evening after Thomas walked her to her residence she wrote; "He tried to detain me at the door but I burst from him and hurried into the house. I must try and keep aloof from him for a month to come or I shall have to tell a dozen falsehoods."<sup>140</sup> Often she stopped short of fully explaining her comments or feelings for Thomas. She might have made some situations easier had she told Thomas exactly what she meant and how she felt but she seemed afraid to tell her inner feelings to anyone but her diary; "When T. and I were alone I told him how offended I felt on Monday night. He tried to apologize but I would not listen to him. I told him something which I am sorry for now for he misunderstood my meaning and thought something very different. I refused to explain my meaning, tho' he soothed and threatened alternately."<sup>141</sup> Rejected one day, sometime later Thomas would be back in her life again as a friend.

Her sentiments for Ansel were equally contradictory. One minute she was resting her head on his shoulder, looking at the moon with him and marveling at his poetic interest and the next she would describe him as despicable, "Ansel came home with me-- he has been quite attentive ever since he came home but I cannot like him."<sup>142</sup> Ansel

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139     Diary entry from April 7, 1835  
 140     Diary entry from March 3, 1835.  
 141     Diary entry from March 3, 1835.  
 142     Diary entry from December 9, 1833.

clearly was interested in pursuing the young Miss Bell; "Ansel caught hold of me...he has grown insufferably bold lately for as soon as he took hold of me, he had the sauciness to kiss me. I did feel vexed...I do not like such romping ways but what can a person do with such a creature?"<sup>143</sup> One senses that "she doth protest too much." Ansel's attention increased throughout 1835 and he seemed to want to open up to Almira, but she generally closed the door to his advances; "He waited upon me home and as usual laid open all his affairs home. I felt as if I did not like him well enough to desire his confidence. Oh! the caprice of women! Sometimes I like him quite tolerably well."<sup>144</sup> By her own admission it was not to be unexpected that men like Ansel were confused and eventually turned off by her capricious behavior, one minute flirting and the next rejecting.

Almira's attempts to clarify her feelings for Ansel and Thomas were as fruitless in her diary as they were in person. Instead, she chose to humor them both and then draw away from them both; "We did not stop long and Ansel, Israel and Thomas came out with us. The latter seized hold of me at the door declaring that Ansel should not have me--teasing wretch! He walked slow because he thought it would plague A. ... T. would not quit his hold of me..."<sup>145</sup> Almira now at his side, Thomas pleaded with her to walk with him awhile and not to go in with the others of their party to visit the Robertsons; "I did not care about going in but seeing him so urgent against it I thought proper not to humor him. I therefore went in...He looked displeased and A. looked displeased. And oh! how much I cared for neither of them."<sup>146</sup>

Whatever her true feelings for Ansel and Thomas, there was one link between all three which she would never forget. They both had come to her rescue when she almost

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<sup>143</sup> Diary entry from April 8, 1835.

<sup>144</sup> Diary entry from March 21, 1835.

<sup>145</sup> Diary entry from March 26, 1835.

<sup>146</sup> Diary entry from March 26, 1835.

drowned one February evening. During that terrible night Almira first heard Ansel calling to her; "While I remained in this state, suspended, as it were, between life and death I heard a voice, which I knew to be Ansel Crowell's say 'For God's sake do not give up, we are trying our best to reach you'."<sup>147</sup> A moment later Almira also heard Thomas call out:

I remember saying 'I shall die now--nothing can save me'--when I saw a person flying towards me--he had no hat on, and I did not know who it was, till I heard him exclaim 'No--you shall not die, if it is possible for me to save you'--I then knew it to be Thomas Crowell, and the next moment he was at my side having plunged into the water; immediately reaching me--he caught me in his arms (for this second shock made me quit my hold of the ice) and lifted me out of the water, as tho' I had been an infant..<sup>148</sup>

Both men saved Almira that evening, Ansel having found her and Thomas actually pulling her from the icy river. Without the devotion of these two men Almira would not have survived this terrible ordeal.

A very independent person, Almira worked at trying to control her environment as much as possible as a way of protecting herself from hurtful feelings. Nevertheless, the result was that she was lonely and deprived of a real confidante and friend. Almira recognized she built up barriers against close friendships; "I am inclined to distrust such premature professions of friendship--Heaven preserve me from ever becoming a misanthrop--yet I cannot think I am in danger of this; for those I do love, I am not to blame--besides, I have been deceived--and bitterly--who, then can wonder at my being more cautious--or, if it must be so, suspicious than heretofore."<sup>149</sup>

Depression was her only constant companion and much of that was of her own making. In fact, her mood swings could be quite sudden and as confusing for her as they must have been to her acquaintances; "I have been in a laughing mood this evening--

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<sup>147</sup> Diary entry from February 6, 1834.

<sup>148</sup> Diary entry from February 6, 1834.

<sup>149</sup> Diary entry from August 13, 1833.

strange wild laughter--with a heavy heart as lead--such feelings I pray to be delivered from--they always alarm me."<sup>150</sup> Another day she wrote, "I have had one of two spells of my wild mirth today and I succeeded in my efforts to settle it down to a reasonable standard."<sup>151</sup>

Almira certainly did not reject having a good time on principle. She actually could enjoy a party, and she had a good sense of humor. It surfaced only occasionally as she feared her light-heartedness might be unbecoming to a Christian woman of her social status; nevertheless it was there. Interspersed throughout her diary are accounts of such moments. One such time occurred on February 26, 1835 after a Temperance Meeting which she had attended. Apparently tempers flared at the meeting and afterwards among friends Almira imitated the exchanges; "Before retiring to my room, I went into the parlor and made Mr. and Mrs. Sargeant laugh heartily, by giving an account of the proceeding in the meeting."<sup>152</sup> Another time she found herself laughing at the size of her puffed sleeves and suddenly a bizarre image popped into her head, "...I thought such sleeves as these would look strange in a coffin...such feelings are salutary...".<sup>153</sup> Why? Because they made her laugh and smile. Often her descriptions of people and events revealed her more lighthearted, even whimsical nature. The fun loving child of the past sometimes shone through. She could see humor in many situations; "Suzanne Kinney is to be married tomorrow--Caroline and myself have each received an invitation--I pitied the poor fellow who delivered it, for he quivered and shook as bad as tho' it was his own wedding to which he was inviting us."<sup>154</sup> In another entry she commented on the humor in the name one of the Barrington girls would acquire upon marriage; "Tilpha Smith...conversed freely with me concerning her approaching nuptials but oh! what a name she will have.

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<sup>150</sup> Diary entry from September 24, 1833.

<sup>151</sup> Diary entry from November 1, 1833.

<sup>152</sup> Diary entry from February 26, 1835.

<sup>153</sup> Diary entry from September 20, 1833.

<sup>154</sup> Diary entry from July 22, 1833.



Mercy me, the name of Hogg! I ought to be ashamed. I believe Alexander H. is a worthy man and if this is the case it is of little importance how he is named."<sup>155</sup>

Sometimes, her idea of what was funny actually verged on the hurtful and catty. Although she was often hurt by comments made by others about her, Almira could return in kind. Fortunately she seemed to keep such comments for the privacy of the diary, but they reveal her very human side. One wonders if such unkindness slipped past her lips when gossiping with her companions at a quilting party. In one entry she described Jemima Crowell, supposedly, a friend as, "a disagreeably zero little person."<sup>156</sup> She commented upon Gaven Lyle's bride by saying, "She was dressed splendidly but her enormous nose--it was enough to spoil the best costume...".<sup>157</sup> Weddings gave her an opportunity to muse on the physical characteristics of the bridal couple. She certainly was observant, if unkind. Of the groom she wrote, "he is certainly the ugliest man I ever laid eyes on--I looked at him and thanked heaven I was not in Suzanne's place."<sup>158</sup> On the occasion of an adult baptism by immersion, Almira wrote of poor Herman Kenny who, "floundered and struggled in the water like an overgrown porpoise. I would not treat the matter ludicrously, but indeed I could not help laughing immoderately...".<sup>159</sup>

Some of Almira's moments of gaiety and laughter were associated with gossip. She would have been appalled to think of her kind of gossip as being destructive or evil. In fact, it has been said that gossip is one of the most important clues for social historians as to how people in societies inter-relate and bond. Patricia Spacks, in her book *Gossip* has stressed the importance of gossip in community life. She describes it as "the shelf of domestic history", the way by which news was spread, and cautionary lessons learned.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Diary entry from April 15, 1834.

<sup>156</sup> Diary entry from August 13, 1836.

<sup>157</sup> Diary entry from August 22, 1836.

<sup>158</sup> Diary entry from July 25, 1833.

<sup>159</sup> Diary entry from October 18, 1835.

<sup>160</sup> Betty J. Wylie, *Reading Between the Lines: The Diaries of Women* (Toronto:

Gossip is a normal part of human relation, a way to keep up to date with what is happening, between whom and where. Almira recorded the gossip about the intended nuptials between William Kenney and Betsy Hopkins which were to take place in the fall of 1835; "Dr. Geddes took tea here this evening. He says William Kenney who was to have been married this fall...has a wife in Dublin and received a letter from her last week. I feel sorry for poor Betsy, tho' I think her fortunate to have escaped an union with a person so unprincipled..."<sup>161</sup> She also wrote about Anna C. who was pregnant but unwed, "...shameless creature that she is..."<sup>162</sup> A similar fate befell Harriet Doane, the intended of J. Homer; "T. came home with us. He kept talking about Harriet D. to me all the way and his speeches were "pretty high". After J. left us, he spoke about what I told him last winter and said he thought it was some such affair as this. He said her brother J. obliged her to go to meeting last Sunday and her appearance aroused universal laughter among the young men..."<sup>163</sup> The poor girl was married eight days later, "Harriet D. and J.H. were married. The weather was very stormy and I heard there were only ten at the wedding."<sup>164</sup>

The light-hearted times were few and Almira often regretted them. A devout Christian who held to some of the strictest tenets of Protestantism such as frugality, moderation, keeping busy, modesty and hard work. Almira always felt pangs of guilt after having enjoyed a particularly good time. She distrusted and disliked giddiness in herself as well as in others. Gaiety should not become a form of refuge for those who like herself were lonely and unhappy, at least so she reasoned:

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Key Porter Books, 1995) 44.

<sup>161</sup> Diary entry from October 17, 1835.

<sup>162</sup> Diary entry from October 25, 1835.

<sup>163</sup> Diary entry from April 24, 1835.

<sup>164</sup> Diary entry from April 28, 1835.

Alas! the heart may pine away with secret corrosion yet flippant wit and hollow laughter grace its martyrdom--and oh! how many are there who seek the society of the gay and thoughtless, merely as a refuge from the thoughts that torture and reflections that agonize--the relief, indeed is momentary, but still it is relief and who can blame these 'stricken deer' for striving to blunt the barbed arrow that can never be extracted from their wounded sides.<sup>165</sup>

Almira certainly viewed herself as the "stricken deer". Perhaps that is why she felt sympathy for the underdog. Her sympathy for the underdog and less fortunate was revealed in her kindness and concern for the poor squirrel. She also worried about those in debt and those who were widowed and orphaned. Almira felt herself to be an underdog and could therefore identify with those trudging the "pilgrimage of life."<sup>166</sup>

Religious faith was central to much of Almira's life. It influenced what she did, what she thought, and how she reacted to others. Although she was baptized an Anglican, Almira attended the services and sermons of the Congregationalists in Barrington, probably because that was the only practicing religious affiliation in the community. Verging on the puritanical, Almira viewed life as, "a long, a rough, a toilsome road...".<sup>167</sup> She described it as a "pilgrimage not of one's own choosing but of God's", and in Almira's opinion, her's was a "gloomy" pilgrimage indeed.<sup>168</sup> She firmly believed that the guiding principle of the pilgrimage from the womb to the tomb was to do as God wished, to remain true to the teachings of Christ and to wage a constant battle against the sins of human nature and the flesh, jealousy, pride and excessiveness. Almira believed that one must not dwell on the obstacles of life and wallow in bitterness but accept what God sent and recognize the silver lining in the gloomy clouds. One particularly trying day Almira confided in her diary, "Then bringest not to my mental vision the few green spots that embellished the Oasis of the Desert...I look in vain for the

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<sup>165</sup> Diary entry from July 21, 1833.

<sup>166</sup> Diary entry from July 29, 1833.

<sup>167</sup> Diary entry from October 15, 1835.

<sup>168</sup> Diary entry from July 29, 1833.

spots of azure that illumined the clouds in the sky of my destiny."<sup>169</sup> On another day of great self-pity and loneliness Almira wrote; "Oh, my bark has been doomed to sail on a stormy ocean since the halcyon days of childhood but can I presume to say my days have not been marked by numerous unmerited mercies! Oh no, my lot has along been far better than I deserved."<sup>170</sup>

Above all, Almira valued humility, "Oh! Thou God of mercy! give me a grateful sense of the obligations I am under to Thee for all thy favours and felt not the ungrateful repinings I too frequently indulge...".<sup>171</sup> Her's was a forgiving and understanding God who would reward devoutness and penitence. She worked hard, therefore, to overcome what she regarded as her greatest weakness, the selfishness of self-pity, "I feel dejected and desolate but I must not give way to these feelings--gratitude to my Maker and duty to myself imperatively call upon me to struggle against them."<sup>172</sup> Bell's apparent distress did not allow her to enjoy a restful sleep and she wished to sleep to forget her problems but this did not happen. She felt guilty because she experienced these feelings of desolation and dejection and would not permit herself to be drawn in by them. Her religious beliefs and faith in God helped her to overcome her very disturbing feelings, even though the task was a difficult one, "This past week I felt too lowspirited to write--I have struggled to conquer it and I have in part succeeded--I must not--must not indulge it."<sup>173</sup>

Through her devotion to God's way, Almira found the inner strength to be strong-willed and determined. It was this inner strength that helped her continue living in Barrington even when she was lonely, homesick and depressed. Almira, ever practical and philosophical, believed one must move on with life and leave the unhappy past

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<sup>169</sup> Diary entry from July 29, 1833.

<sup>170</sup> Diary entry from September 13, 1835.

<sup>171</sup> Diary entry from February 27, 1835.

<sup>172</sup> Diary entry from July 21, 1833.

<sup>173</sup> Diary entry from January 30, 1834.

behind, "...experience teaches me to bear witness...oh memory...lay aside thy magic wand, thou cruel Enchantress..."<sup>174</sup> She never doubted that her merciful God would hear her prayers and answer them even though she wondered why so many afflictions seemed to have been thrust upon her, "Heaven grant me patience and resignation."<sup>175</sup>

Like the other virtues she aspired to, piety, purity, honesty and constructive activity, Almira also placed a high value on being busy. Idleness, in her mind, was definitely the devil's playground. After enjoying a fun-filled evening she felt remorse and questioned whether it had been time well spent in the eyes of God; "I took myself to task on account of the manner in which I had spent the day vainly and unprofitably indeed...and now when levity and folly had given place to silence and reflection, loved were the remonstrances of conscience..."<sup>176</sup> Almira's need to constantly be doing something industrious may account for her devotion as a diary writer.

Death was not something to be feared as far as Almira was concerned. It was the reward of the Heavenly afterlife which made it worthwhile. Death was to be welcomed, if one was prepared, particularly for one whose life had been a "desert." After Mrs. Doharty's death in Shelburne in September 1833, Almira confided to her diary that she was rather envious of the old family friend: "Oh that I were safely landed!"<sup>177</sup> Similarly, when her friend Mrs. Sargent was dying after giving birth, Almira looked upon her almost unconscious friend and thought of the hardships of earthly life and how trite mortal things were in comparison to the eternal life after death:

I do not think she imagined her end was so near. As I looked at her I thought of the vanity of all earthly things. What was Earth or its concerns to her? Her spirit so soon to encounter the unknown and awful realities of eternity. Oh! what is the world, its joys, its griefs, its hatred, its loves, vanity, vanity! The grief of her

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174 Diary entry from July 29, 1833.

175 Diary entry from December 9, 1833.

176 Diary entry from July 19, 1833.

177 Diary entry from September 2, 1833.

husband, the tears of her children. What do they avail the poor lump of mortality who has probably ere this exchanged worlds? nothing--nothing....<sup>178</sup>

Almira's strong religious convictions and opinions meant that she often moralized on various subjects in her diary, in particular, on topics of wealth and happiness. True to the Christian belief that one should not place much value on earthly possessions but rather, concentrate on heavenly treasures, she wrote of the John Sargent home where she resided; "It is a fine house indeed. But can stately mansion confer happiness on their possessors? Oh no! Content has ever been fonder of dwellings than palaces. Yet these are the ties that bind us to Earth and the Heirs of Heaven."<sup>179</sup> When one of the wealthier members of the community died Almira commented, "I heard of the death of Aunt Hannah Smith--poor woman! of what avail is all her riches now?"<sup>180</sup>

While Almira placed most of her faith in the word of God, she was also prone to superstition. Almira did not think that being superstitious was a positive characteristic in a person, but she admitted to feeling that way at times, "I am superstitious and I own it--a bell rang long and loud in my ear on Saturday and I feel as if I were going to hear some ill news--my Mother and Clara--the two I love best are uppermost in my thoughts--but let me not anticipate."<sup>181</sup> Although Almira admits that she is superstitious, she later denies this when saying; "I received a letter from Mother last night--the contents made me low spirited--she says during a fortnight past, she has been troubled with disagreeable dreams concerning me, which have made her uneasy lest I should be ill--it is singular but I have really been far from well these two weeks past--she is not superstitious--neither am I--yet only mind dwells on the circumstance."<sup>182</sup> Even though she claims to be free of superstitious feelings, she is bothered enough by this to record it in her diary. It appears

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178     Diary entry from August 4, 1835.

179     Diary entry from August 18, 1835.

180     Diary entry from November 24, 1835.

181     Diary entry from September 11, 1833.

182     Diary entry from August 5, 1834.

that she is unable to explain these happenings and it does make her feel uneasy but not superstitious, at least that was what Almira would have her diary believe.

Through her diary Almira Bell has left to history a much fuller picture of herself, the inner and outer woman, than history would otherwise have afforded her. She reveals more of her personality and self through her writing than many diarists. She described intimate details of herself which are often not found in diaries, at least not so consistently. Daily routines and weather are only mentioned when they have impacted upon her inner self. Her's was indeed a "journale intime". Arthur Ponsonby in his work English Diaries: A Review of English Diaries from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century with an Introduction on Diary Writing argues that introspective diarists may not leave a "faithful picture of themselves", if only because they are consciously and intentionally examining themselves: "Indeed it is not through their intentional and deliberate self-dissection that we really get to know people. Such a method is too self-conscious and too artificial." <sup>183</sup> Ponsonby believes that diarists record inner emotions and thoughts without careful reflection and analysis. They unknowingly leave to posterity a truer picture of themselves: "A diarist reveals himself or gives himself away by casual and quite unpremeditated entries far more than by laborious self-analysis." <sup>184</sup> Through her casual introspection, Almira reveals to her unintended readers a woman whom her contemporaries probably never knew. As Ponsonby has noted: "The Introspective Diary, is specially interesting as it often discloses unsuspected features and the light thrown on the writer's personality coming from within gives a different and new relief to the tissue of his character." <sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Arthur M.P. Ponsonby, English Diaries: A Review of English Diaries from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century with an Introduction on Diary Writing (Michigan: Gryphon Books, 1971) 10.

<sup>184</sup> Ponsonby 10.

<sup>185</sup> Ponsonby 11.

When reading the first two years of Almira's diary, one finds a troubled and discontent, bitter woman. The diary section spanning February 25, 1835 to October 28, 1836 was much more positive and upbeat in its content and expression. There is a definite change in tone. Although she still harbored the same resentments and Protestant values, Almira was less inclined to self pity. Almira Bell matured over the three year period. She was more familiar with her surroundings and more confident in herself. Undoubtedly having her sister Sarah Ann living in Barrington contributed to her greater contentment. She remained the same person but what she chose to write about changed significantly. She spoke less about herself and her desperate feelings, as she had in the past. Her shifts in mood were less dramatic and occurred less often. Bell was also not as introspective in her writing. She still freely gave her opinion on events and people, but her criticisms were not as harsh as they once had been. Not surprisingly then, the character of the diary changed as did the character of the diarist herself.

In her examination of the diary literature of American women between 1764 and 1985, Margo Culley argues that the reason women were more inclined to write intimate journals was because of the, "emergence of the self as the subject of the diary."<sup>186</sup> Often lacking the forms of self evaluation common in the public sphere, women whose lives were largely confined to the private sphere, as they were in the nineteenth century, used their diaries as a way to evaluate themselves, what they did and how they evolved as people. The diary was, "one place where they were permitted, indeed encouraged, to indulge full self-centeredness."<sup>187</sup> That is exactly what Almira Bell often did. When she felt unhappy and sad, she would complain, criticize and vent her emotions without fear of public comment. She often felt personal remorse for her outbursts but she was confident that once written down they remained private to herself. For Almira, the writing in her

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<sup>186</sup> Margo Culley, *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present* (New York: Feminist Press, 1985) 3.

<sup>187</sup> Culley 4.



diary was a therapeutic experience. Indeed, it was very selfish, self-centred in purpose and intent. She was writing for only one person, herself. Interestingly enough, there is little sense that Almira perceived of her diary as a friend. Although, it was a substitute for a friend, a confidante, Almira did not name her diary and she did not express any feelings of personal relationship with the diary. It simply was a secret vault protecting the inner self.

Unfortunately, because no further diaries have been found, the researcher cannot describe what kind of person Almira Bell was or what she did after the last entry in her available diaries. While this is frustrating, it does not detract from the value of the diary in the literature of women's history. In fact, diaries, like novels and autobiographies, are not conceived, generally, as "artistic wholes."<sup>188</sup> Instead, they are shaped by "their existence in time passing... by external events in the diarist's life...."<sup>189</sup> A diary is always evolving because the person writing the record is changing at the same time. Such was the case with Almira Bell. The Almira Bell of 1833 was not quite the same Almira Bell of 1836. Books and novels are consciously constructed around a beginning, middle and end, but the diary rarely has any intentionally devised structure. Some days the writer records long epistles and commentaries; some days she writes nothing. A diary, therefore, can end without notice and while it may seem unfinished, the foregoing content does not lose its impact or significance.

As Margo Culley has observed, "Most diaries...are a series of surprises to writer and reader alike."<sup>190</sup> This, of course, accounts for the immediacy and freshness of the content. The reader of Almira's diaries is never sure how she was going to feel from one day's entry to the next. She was unpredictable. This was because her feelings and life

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188 Culley 20.

189 Culley 20.

190 Culley 21.

were evolving and changing. As she met new people and experienced new things, her outlook on life was often altered.

It is important to remember that, as a reader, one is examining the diary as a historical document, but it was not planned as such. It was a document of the immediate present, freezing events and feelings in time. Had Almira expected her actions and thoughts would one day be examined as historical evidence and biographical information, she might have taken the time to consciously explain herself and remove the intimacies and immediacies of her writing. The result might have been more clearly defined information for the historian but probably fewer surprises and greater difficulty in fleshing out the inner Almira Bell.

A diary almost always holds secrets and mysteries within its covers. That certainly is the case with Almira's. The reader never really discovers who were her lost loves or the circumstances of their parting. One learns nothing about how or what she taught to her "scholars." One does not come away knowing her favorite author, her favorite food or her favorite color. Thoughts are left hanging. Initials suffice for names. As Margo Culley writes, "Some of the diary, at least on first reading may mean nothing to the reader... As a result the reader must take a rather active role in the creation of the world within the diary..."<sup>191</sup> The historian has to approach the diary as a puzzle full of clues, one must comb through the entries searching for linking details which are there but were unrelated in the diarist's mind. This is what Culley calls, "decoding 'encoded' materials."<sup>192</sup>

Almira Bell has now come out onto the public stage whether she would have liked it or not. Her world has been examined with a fine tooth comb for clues and links. As, Betty Wylie suggested a diarist should, Bell has spoken to the historian and to posterity.

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191 Culley 21.

192 Culley 21.

Her diary has also provided the historian with "insights into the life and mind and core" of Almira Bell.<sup>193</sup> Time has given Almira a place in history she never expected. Margery Peck writing in her introduction to A Full House and Fine Singing, explains the importance of diaries like Almira's "the crucial women are the millions who never became famous, for in these millions rests the history of women in Canada."<sup>194</sup> Almira Bell was never famous. She was one of those "millions" of crucial women who shaped Canadian society. Her diary is one small, but valuable piece, in the history of Canadian women.

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193 Wylie vii.

194 Mary Biggar Peck, A Full House and Fine Singing: Diaries and Letters of Sadie Harper Allen (Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 1992) 3.

Chapter IV  
Almira Bell's Community Revealed: Barrington, N.S.

The value of diaries as research tools is closely linked to their primary purpose for the diarist. In the case of many women's diaries, the motivations are often rooted in the need to have a confidante, a special friend to whom one can confide one's most inner thoughts, feelings, fears and hopes. To others, the diary is a way of maintaining a record of what they have done and a way of reaffirming their earthly presence. Whatever the personal reasons for writing, the female diarist is actually, "telling what it's like to be human from a female perspective, what it's like to be a woman."<sup>1</sup> Certainly that is the case with Almira Bell's diaries. By decoding her entries, the historian is able to reconstruct a picture not only of the person, inner and outer, but also of the lives of women in general, in a particular place and at a particular time.

If carefully decoded, diaries reveal much more than something about the diarist and her sex. Diaries can be invaluable to genealogists searching for information about family kinships or particular individuals. They can also reveal something about the physical and social community in which the diarist lives. Veronica Strong-Boag makes this observation when she writes, "diaries offer many clues in the much larger picture of daily life."<sup>2</sup> People are, in many ways, products of their environment. Certainly they are shaped by the attitudes, values and customs of those around them; by the economic activities, the political events and the climactic conditions that comprise their surroundings. Consequently, whether consciously or unconsciously, diarists generally portray much about their immediate community and its residents.

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<sup>1</sup> Betty J. Wylie, Reading Between the Lines: The Diaries of Women (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1995) xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1986) 3.

In the case of Almira Bell's diary, it is the community of Barrington, Nova Scotia, which emerges from the pages. Almira is the messenger passing news of the past to the present. A careful reading and decoding of her diary brings to life a rural, coastal community of the 1830s. As Mary Peck has written, diaries should be read in the context of the period in which they were written.<sup>3</sup> Almira Bell actually provides much of that context in her diary. The diary, therefore, not only can serve to confirm data already gathered by historians from more traditional sources like government documents, census figures and private correspondence, but it can add previously unknown information. More importantly, it can bring to life the facts and figures about a community. Margaret Conrad argues that, "women's lives have been dominated historically by the domestic and community context."<sup>4</sup> That being so, it is not surprising that Almira Bell's diary contains considerable information about Barrington, how its residents inter-related, how they lived, what they did and what they believed.

A careful study of Almira's diaries reveals the subtle shadings and nuances of life in Barrington. This form of personal historical documentation allows aspects of the community's personality to emerge. The very immediacy of the diary form means that the observations are fresh and accurate, at least from the perspective of the writer who experienced them first hand. Often the names of community members are mentioned which adds a unique flavor to Bell's writing about the area, as the community's social and kinship network are woven together throughout the diary itself.

The Nova Scotia that Almira Bell knew in the third decade of the nineteenth century was a fairly stable, orderly British colony. Joseph Howe said, in 1830, of the

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Biggar Peck, A Full House and Fine Singing: Diaries and Letters of Sadie Harper Allen (Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 1992) xii.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Conrad, "Sundays Always Make Me Think of Home: Time and Place in Canadian Women's History," Rethinking Canada Eds. V. Strong-Boag and A.C. Fellman. (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1986) 68.

approximately 143 000 Nova Scotians that, "a more contented and happy population is not to be found within the wide circle of the British Dominions."<sup>5</sup> Virtually all aspects of life in this Atlantic colony were affected one way or the other by the proximity to the sea. Fishing, shipbuilding, shipping and naval activities dominated the economy and politics during this "Age of Sail" which reached its peak around 1850. Merchants controlled the political and commercial centre of the colony, Halifax, which was the colony's largest town boasting about 15 000 residents.<sup>6</sup> In 1841, Halifax was granted incorporation as a city. Although the early 1830s were years of economic recession, there were few thoughts that existing trade patterns and transportation technology were about to come under attack. Free trade and the Age of Steam were still off on the horizon for most Nova Scotians.

The "Age of Sail" spanned the period between 1830 and Confederation in 1867, and the peak or "Golden Age" occurred in the 1850s in Nova Scotia because of free world trade. Barrington was in close proximity to the sea, they had availability to raw materials and could be easily involved in this period of sailing history. The Protection of Navigation Acts after the American Revolution meant that there was a lucrative West Indies trading system with a preference for Imperial ships. The most popular trade items were barrel staves and foodstuffs from the colonies. This was a "shipping based-economy that pervaded almost all aspects of Maritime society."<sup>7</sup> Men were able to visit the far corners of the world and most captains were under the age of thirty.<sup>8</sup> When the "Golden Age of Sail" began around 1850, the Maritimers became a leader in tonnage

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<sup>5</sup> J.M.S. Careless, Colonists and Canadiens 1760-1867 (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1971) 175.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Howe, Western and Eastern Rambles: Travel Sketches of Nova Scotia Ed. M.G. Parks. (Toronto: Un. of Toronto Press, 1973) 10.

<sup>7</sup> Del Muise and Charlie Armour, Shipping and Shipbuilding in the Maritime Provinces in the Nineteenth Century (Canada's Visual History: Series 1, vol.9 NFB, 1974) 3.

<sup>8</sup> Muise, 3.

owned and operated and were the fourth largest in tonnage in the world following Great Britain, France and the United States.<sup>9</sup> Barrington was heavily involved in this shipping and some of Almira Bell's friends, including Thomas Crowell and Ansel Crowell were captains of their own vessels.

The pre-industrial society of Nova Scotia seemed to be a relatively content one, dominated by English-speaking Protestants and rooted in British traditions and customs. Not that Nova Scotia was without its movers and shakers. On the contrary. As J.M. Beck has observed, some Nova Scotians were "eager to overhaul the entire ship of state...".<sup>10</sup> The 1830s witnessed growing criticism of the merchant-bound Executive Council appointed by the Crown's representative, the Lieutenant Governor. Reformers like Jonathan Blanchard and Joseph Howe called for the abolition of the Council and of unnecessary, costly patronage positions. But, Nova Scotia's reformers were moderates, preferring the power of the pen and the voice, to the power of the rifle and the pitch fork, which some of their more radical colonial counterparts opted for in Upper and Lower Canada in 1837.

The Mother Country was also putting into place reforms which would eventually alter the relationship it had had with its British North America colonies since the mid-eighteenth century, including Nova Scotia. Colonies were becoming costly possessions and the Colonial Office was looking for ways to wean the colonies from their financial and trade dependency on Great Britain.<sup>11</sup> The seeds of change were being planted throughout the 1830s, although the average Nova Scotian was probably unaware of them. For example, the Governor Colin Campbell who had arrived in the colony in 1833, convinced the legislative assembly to assume responsibility for paying the civil list, in

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<sup>9</sup> Muise, 3.

<sup>10</sup> J.M. Beck, Politics of Nova Scotia 1710-1896 (Tantallon: Four East Publications, 1985) 101.

<sup>11</sup> Beck, 101-107.

return for which Britain abolished its collection of quit rents and casual and territorial revenues in the colony. However, the politics of reform were not yet a central issue in most of rural Nova Scotia. Communities like Barrington were far more concerned about trade relations, markets and prices for fish and lumber. They were interested in more local matters like wharf repairs and road construction.

The community of Barrington sat facing the Atlantic Ocean on the South Shore of Nova Scotia. Located in Barrington Township in Queen's County, it was the main settlement area between the western communities of Pubnico and Yarmouth and the eastern communities of Shelburne and Liverpool. Barrington's sheltered harbour and ready access inland by the Barrington and Clyde Rivers meant that it had long been a gathering place for seamen and fishermen. The Mi'kmaq had camped on the shores of the harbour which they named "Menstu-gek", during the summer months to fish clams, salmon and trout.<sup>12</sup> According to local tradition, Champlain had anchored off the area in 1604 after which the French established a small fur trade post known as Fort St. Louis, close to Cape Sable Island.<sup>13</sup> By the 1670s, census figures showed a number of Acadian families residing in the area of the future community of Barrington.<sup>14</sup> Later, in 1713, when the English gained control of Nova Scotia under the Treaty of Utrecht, about twenty families were noted living in the area later known as The Hill, and at the mouth of the Barrington River known as The Head.<sup>15</sup> Apparently there was even a small stone church and grist mill at Le Passage, later referred to as The Passage.<sup>16</sup> At the time of the deportation of the Acadians undertaken by Governor Lawrence in 1755 and 1756 forty-

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<sup>12</sup> Edwin Crowell, The History of Barrington Township (Ontario: Mika Publishing, 1973) 9.

<sup>13</sup> Crowell 14.

<sup>14</sup> Crowell 17.

<sup>15</sup> Crowell 18.

<sup>16</sup> C. Dennis, Down in Nova Scotia (Toronto: 1934): 274.



four Acadian families were removed from the district.<sup>17</sup> However, a small group returned in 1767 to take up grants slightly to the west of Pubnico.

Following the removal of the Acadians, Governor Lawrence issued Proclamations in 1758 and 1759, inviting English-speaking Protestant New Englanders to take up the vacated Acadian lands. He also wrote to the Lords of Trade in London emphasizing the rich fishery which was waiting to be exploited off the Nova Scotia coast.<sup>18</sup> Such opportunity would surely make the area of the South Shore attractive to potential settlers Lawrence reasoned. About the same time, as a means of facilitating local government and the establishment of electoral constituencies, Lawrence divided the colony into a number of townships. One of those was Barrington, named in 1759 in honour of Lord Barrington, William Wildman, a member of the King's Privy Council.<sup>19</sup>

The absence of good agricultural lands, however, made Barrington less attractive to the New England farmers who sought to take Governor Lawrence up on his offer, than the rich marchlands of the Bay of Fundy region. Only a few, at first, saw the potential of the fishery and the advantage of being so close to the fishing banks. By 1768, there were eight-four families in Barrington, including the first who arrive, the Smiths, Crowells, Doanes and Nickersons.<sup>20</sup> Most were from the Cape Cod area and many claimed they could trace their roots to the Puritan Pilgrim Fathers.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that a number of the second generation of these so called New England Planters were still living at the time Almira Bell was writing. By virtue of their origins, age and community involvement, they were among the elite in Barrington. For example, the third child born

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17 Crowell 23.

18 Crowell 56.

19 Hattie Perry, This Was Barrington (Kentville: Kentville Publishing Company Limited, 1973) : 77.

20 Dennis 273, 276-77.

Crowell 86.

21 Crowell 86.

in Barrington was Ebenezer, the son of Thomas Crowell one of the very first settlers.<sup>22</sup> Born in 1763, he was living in Barrington in the 1830s and was respectfully known as Squire Crowell. Almira referred to him many times and was often entertained in his home. "We stopped at Squire Crowell's where we got treated to shrub and cake."<sup>23</sup>; "The Squire says he will take me to Shelburne."<sup>24</sup> She also mentioned the Squire's younger brothers, Nathan born in 1779 and Thomas, born in 1768, fondly called "Uncle Tommy"; "...we all went to meeting together..after it was out...went home and we did not go into Uncle Tommy's."<sup>25</sup> Another time she wrote of the local worthies confronting each other in a heated temperance meeting debate, "I was very amused at the squabbling that took place between uncle Seth Wilson, Uncle Tommy and Nezer Crowell."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, mention was made of Mrs. Samuel Osborne Doane whose husband, for many years, was the only commisioner authorized to solomize marriages in the township;<sup>27</sup> "I have been reading a sermon for Grandma Doane."<sup>28</sup> She often spoke of Aunt Hannah Smith, daughter-in-law of Archelaus Smith, one of the first two grantees. Almira frequented her shop at the Head; "We had an errand to Aunt Hannah Smith's..."<sup>29</sup> Almira also seemed to know many in the Sargent family who had originally come from Salem, Massachusetts in the early 1760s.<sup>30</sup> She lived with two of the families and was especially fond of Mrs. John Sargent who lived on Sherose Island; "I left home with the intention of going on the Island to see Mrs. John Sargent."<sup>31</sup> Invitation lists to parties Almira attended often read like the founding famlies' "who's who"; "Emma went also with us and after dinner,

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22 Crowell 463.

23 Diary entry from July 20, 1833.

24 Diary entry from September 6, 1833.

25 Diary entry from September 7, 1833.

26 Diary entry from February 25, 1835.

27 Crowell 473.

28 Diary entry from September 4, 1833.

29 Diary entry from August 21, 1833.

30 Crowell 552.

31 Diary entry from Februy 6, 1835.

Harriet, Mary, Esther Crowell, John Homer, Osborne Doane, Thomas Doane, James Crowell and several more came...Warren Doane waited on me...Sarah Robertson with Ann Crowell with Thomas and Israel Crowell had gone home in the afternoon...Hannah Crowell was there...".<sup>32</sup>

The Barrington lands were divided in such a way that each grantee received both a homestead lot and a fish lot. This was in recognition of the importance the fishery was expected to play in the economy of the community. It also meant that every grantee had a place to build a wharf and moor a vessel. Not surprisingly, then, in addition to fishing, shipbuilding and shipping became integral parts of Barrington's economy for more than two centuries. Hattie Perry writes of this economy:

Barrington Township gained worldwide recognition through its connection with the shipbuilding industry, as well as through the character of its sons who manned the ships set out from its little ports. To be known as a Barrington man was the open sesame to the respect and confidence of businessmen throughout the world.<sup>33</sup>

Shipping and shipbuilding were certainly the mainstay of the local economy in the 1830s when Almira was a resident and she frequently recorded the comings and goings of captains and sailors, brigs and sloops, "They introduced me to Captains Lord and Carey (of the Brigs Ottoman and Serena) and I spent an agreeable evening in the company of these gentlemen."<sup>34</sup> She wrote of the young men in the community whose livelihood depended on shipping and fishing, "Israel and Nathan did not stop more than an hour as they intended setting sail for Halifax this evening and had to get the vessels in readiness. Thomas...informed us he was going away tomorrow morning and did not expect to return in less than two months."<sup>35</sup> Almira also commented on the shipbuilding activities that

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<sup>32</sup> Diary entry from January 21, 1834.

<sup>33</sup> Perry 54.

<sup>34</sup> Diary entry from September 11, 1833.

<sup>35</sup> Diary entry from September 31, 1833.

generally were undertaken during the winter months, "Thomas C. and Ansel are at work building a vessel on Seal Island this winter."<sup>36</sup>

Among the New Englanders who settled in Barrington in the 1760s was a group of Quakers from Nantucket who immigrated to be closer to the whaling grounds. While some lived in Barrington village, most preferred to be alone, living about a mile away on Cape Sable Island.<sup>37</sup> With a few exceptions the Quakers returned to New England at the start of the American Revolution. The Planters, however, remained although many may have wondered why they had chosen to stay in light of the trouble they encountered with American privateers who raided homes, stole boats and catches and generally intimidated the populace.<sup>38</sup>

One consequence of the privateer threat on the water was that some Barrington residents began to shift their attention from fishing and shipping to farming and road building; the former as a way to ensure self efficiency; the latter as a way to reduce isolation from other parts of Nova Scotia. By the 1830s, although the economy of Barrington was still largely dependent on the ocean, agriculture was of some importance. Between the rocky outcroppings were small areas of rich soil which could be planted with grains and provide food for livestock. In December 1831, John Homer organized a local Agricultural Society because he believed the agricultural potential of the area had been neglected far too long. The first objectives of the Agricultural Society were to find ways of improving the quality of oats grown and the breeding of cattle and sheep.<sup>39</sup> Although *Almira* made no specific references to farming one cannot escape the evidence that there were farms close to the village. There was a grain mill at the Head, "I went with Miss Mary as far as the Mill streams..."<sup>40</sup> *Almira* spoke of the John Sargent farm on Sherose

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<sup>36</sup> Diary entry from January 31, 1836.

<sup>37</sup> Dennis 277.

<sup>38</sup> Crowell 184.

<sup>39</sup> Crowell 362.

<sup>40</sup> Diary entry from November 6, 1833.

Island. "My mother, Sarah and Mary Ann Sargent and myself took tea at Mr. John Sargent's. We walked all over the farm...".<sup>41</sup> And, a couple of times Almira mentioned that cattle had gotten loose and were on the road paths, "We had a walk of terror for fear of the cattle that might infest the road."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, "We were very much afraid of meeting the bull but fortunately we saw nothing of him and reached the Head in safety. We fared better than we expected for we came across John Crowell who came along with us...I think I should have died with terror had we been alone."<sup>43</sup>

Slowly but surely the institutions and trappings of community life began to take shape. The first general store was opened in 1762 by Edmund Doane. In 1767, Joshua Nickerson and Elijah Swain finished building the Old Meeting House at the Head, the name given to the settlement at the mouth of the Barrington River, at the head of the tide water. The Rev. Isaac Knowles was hired as the first Congregational minister. The enterprising Joshua Nicherson also built a mill at the Head. Houses were constructed, some from frames and building materials that had been brought from Cape Cod.

By the mid 1770s, Barrington had the basic ingredients of a village. The three areas of development had evolved, The Head, The Passage and The Neck. The Neck was largely an area of housing and was located between The Head and The Passage. The Head was the township's administrative and business centre. Here were located the courthouse and jail, warehouses, the school house, a tannery, dry goods, mill, shipyard and bait suppliers, as well as post office. The latter was particularly important to Almira who longed for mail from Shelburne; "Yesterday was post day and I started for the Head towards evening to get my letter."<sup>44</sup> The Head was also the location for the county court sessions. The holding of the sessions was part of the rhythm of community life which

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<sup>41</sup> Diary entry from July 19, 1835.

<sup>42</sup> Diary entry from July 17, 1835.

<sup>43</sup> Diary entry from July 22, 1834.

<sup>44</sup> Diary entry from January 13, 1834.

Almira noted; "It is just a week from the time when the court will sit...but I fear I shall not be there."<sup>45</sup> The Passage was in the location of the earlier Acadian community known as Le Passage. It was sometimes referred to as "The Back of the Island" because nearby Sherose Island faced The Passage. There was a bridge running between the two locations. Because of its excellent anchorage The Passage was the centre for shipping and fishing vessels. Here freight was loaded and unloaded and stored in the many warehouses.

Sherose Island was also part of the Barrington community because of its close proximity to the mainland. During the Acadian period it had been known as Ile De Chevrose, but the name was anglicized to Sherose in the 1760s.<sup>46</sup> There was always much coming and going of residents to and from the island not only for business and social purposes but also to attend the meeting house on the Island; "Mr. Harris Harding preached at the Island Meeting House yesterday morning. He had a very large congregation. Several people from Clyde were there besides a great number from the Head."<sup>47</sup> Before the bridge was constructed the Crowells had run a ferry but even once the bridge was constructed some people, during the winter months, walked across the ice as a short cut. That was how Almira almost drowned in February of 1833, "I pursued my way across the ice unsuspecting of danger...I got a little way past the middle of the river...I could hear the ice cracking around me and it was now quite dark...the ice broke and I fell in..."<sup>48</sup>

It was on Sherose Island that the Crowells established a shipyard and where the

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<sup>45</sup> Diary entry from September 1, 1835.

<sup>46</sup> Perry 81.

<sup>47</sup> Diary entry from August 18, 1835.

<sup>48</sup> Diary entry from February 6, 1835.

Squire resided. It was also home to two other second generation Planter families, that of Obediah Wilson, "Uncle Obed" and that of John Sargent. Both built fish stores and wharf facilities on the Island. Almira was certainly familiar with the Sargents and their five children for she lived with them when she first arrived in Barrington. She counted Mrs. John Sargent as one of her dear friends. Almira also often referred to Uncle Obed who was married to Squire Crowell's sister Hannah; "We were at Uncle Obed's. We had a pleasant visit there...I came down with Mrs. Sargent as mother staid all night at Uncle Obed's."<sup>49</sup>

The American Revolution not only affected the local economy of Barrington but it also changed the social makeup of the community. In the early years of the Revolution hundreds of Black and White Loyalist refugees took up land grants around Shelburne about twenty miles east of Barrington. This was when Almira's grandparents took up residence in Shelburne. On the whole, the people of Barrington regarded the Loyalist newcomers as being rather snobby and ungodly. Likewise, the Loyalists viewed the Barrington New England Planters with a degree of suspicion and superiority.<sup>50</sup> These attitudes did not totally vanish with the passing of time. Even in the 1830s, there was still some evidence that old tensions still existed between the residents of Barrington and Shelburne although many of the Loyalists had actually left Shelburne in the mid 1780s to take up land grants in the newly created colony of New Brunswick. A Shelburne girl by birth and sympathy and of Loyalist heritage, Almira felt this tension while she lived in Barrington and commented on it a number of times; "We spent a pleasant afternoon at Elvira's but it would have been more so if she had given us simple bread and butter instead of worrying herself to make cake and biscuit, but this is the Barrington fashion. They manage these affairs better in Shelburne."<sup>51</sup> On another occasion Almira

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<sup>49</sup> Diary entry from July 21, 1835.

<sup>50</sup> Crowell 204.

<sup>51</sup> Diary entry from March 3, 1835.

attempted, unsuccessfully, to convince a Barrington girl that rumours that Mr. Homer was interested in her were unfounded. Almira concluded that her inability to convince the girl lay in the fact that Almira came from Shelburne; "I laboured to convince her of the contrary--mercy me, if the folks get the that notion in their heads--I might as well take leave of here at once--old and young will all get upon me like a pack of hounds and the blackest word they can say of me will be, in their opinions, too white--I am not a native of their blessed township and this would be reason sufficient."<sup>52</sup>

It was really in the post-revolution decades that Barrington experienced marked growth and expansion, particularly in population size and shipbuilding and shipping. Much of this was due to the arrival of William Robertson at The Passage in 1814 at the end of the War of 1812-14. During the war years the men of Barrington, having learned a lesson during the American Revolution, readily took to privateering themselves. Almira recalled in her diary a Mr. W. Kenny who, "was the person who during the last American War rather unnecessarily killed a poor American sailor whom he saw in a boat and imagined to be a privateers man."<sup>53</sup> Originally from Scotland, Robertson had been among the Loyalists who had come to Nova Scotia's South Shore during the Revolution. He lived for a time in Yarmouth and then moved to Barrington. It was during the "Age of Sail" and the demand for vessels and crews to sail to Britain, the United States and the Carribean was great. Barrington was well located strategically to take advantage of the demand. Robertson was impressed by the economic potential of the region. Here he was not only the local blacksmith but also the receiver of wrecks for Lloyd's of London, the notary public and the owner of several warehouses and a dry goods store. Almira was very good friends with Sarah, Robertson's daughter. In fact, Sarah eventually married Thomas Crowell who, for a time, courted Almira. She was often a visitor at the

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<sup>52</sup> Diary entry from August 21, 1833.

<sup>53</sup> Diary entry from September 10, 1835.



Robertson home as well as a patron of the store, "I sat with Mrs. Sargent about an hour and then went to William Robertson's where I took tea."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in January 1834, she wrote, "There will be a party at Mr. Robertson's tomorrow evening and I am invited."<sup>55</sup> It was largely due to Robertson that The Passage became the thriving centre it was in Almira's day.

Robertson was not only the Loyalist who eventually took up residence in Barrington. There were others including a number of Blacks who moved to what became known as Brass Hill, just back of The Passage. The Hill was named for the first Black resident,<sup>56</sup> "Dr. Geddes overtook us before we went far and offered his arm to Ann--he only came with us as far as Brass's Hill."<sup>57</sup> While Almira did not comment on the cultural mix within her community, she did mention occasionally the presence of a Black person in Barrington; "Sarah Ann had gone to bed but we made Matilda (S.A.'s black girl) put on the kettle and get us some supper."<sup>58</sup>

In decoding Almira's diary one learns the names of places probably well known to the people of Barrington in the nineteenth century but which have been forgotten, disappeared or passed into oral tradition. One was Ghost Hill; "On Sunday last I dined at Dr. Geddes' and he brought me down in the gig as far as Ghost Hill...".<sup>59</sup> A nearby community to the east on the way to Shelburne was Clyde; "Sarah Ann is at Clyde..so near and I debarred the privelege of seeing her--but Mother says I must not walk there."<sup>60</sup> A spot often mentioned was the Big Rock; "We met Mr. Larkin by the Big Rock."<sup>61</sup> The Kissing Bridge also appeared relatively often in the diary and while Almira

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54 Diary entry from August 2, 1833.

55 Diary entry from January 31, 1834.

56 Crowell 374.

57 Diary entry from July 30, 1834.

58 Diary entry from September 28, 1836.

59 Diary entry from June 23, 1835.

60 Diary entry from January 13, 1833.

61 Diary entry from September 4, 1833.

did not use it for that purpose others certainly did; "We met Sarah and Thomas just below Kissing Bridge...Thomas appeared very dull and I fancied embarrassed."<sup>62</sup>

Another often mentioned spot was Doctor's Cove, which because of its sheltered location west of The Passage, was regularly used as a mooring for the vessels; "Miss L. and her brother...were to return to the Yarmouth Packet which was lying in Doctor's Cove, by ten o'clock."<sup>63</sup> Michael Wreyton also had a general store here where Almira occasionally shopped, "I went to Wreyton's and bought a comb and stockings."<sup>64</sup>

Another sheltered harbor was that of Shag Harbor. Originally called "Pipequeniche" by the aboriginal peoples, the Acadians named it Shag, the French word for cormorant of which there were many in the area. The French name was retained by the Loyalists who settled the area in the mid 1780s.<sup>65</sup> Shag Harbour was connected to Barrington by a rough road in 1794.<sup>66</sup> Although there was a certain amount of social interchange between the two places, each maintained its individual character and identity, at least in the mind of Almira. She referred to her immediate group of friends on the mainland as "our set" separating them from "the Island girls" and "Shag-Harbourers." She labelled people in this manner as a way of making clear distinctions. Her opinions, thus, were implied rather than directly stated.<sup>67</sup>

A place of particular note was the Valley of the Dry Bones located on Seal Island, the largest of several islands sitting between the Cape Sable Island and Cape Fourchu. Known as the Seal Islands because the seals gathered there to bear their young, these island outcroppings were a sailor's nightmare. Running from the islands were two

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<sup>62</sup> Diary entry from September 9, 1835.

<sup>63</sup> Diary entry from November 6, 1835.

<sup>64</sup> Diary entry from May 8, 1835.

<sup>65</sup> Perry 78.

<sup>66</sup> Frank Doane, Old Times in Barrington (Truro: Truro Printing and Publishing, 1948) : 53.

<sup>67</sup> Diary entry from July 19, 1833.

dangerous ledges which accounted for the numerous shipwrecks in the area. Almira mentioned several wrecks during her stay in Barrington; "News has come that there is a large brig ashore at Seal Island--she is from Boston--Mr. Robertson will think it another 'God Send'."<sup>68</sup> Collecting wreckage along the shores and burying bodies were common activities for the people of Barrington. In 1823, Captain Richard Hichens moved his family from The Passage to Seal Island in order to assume the job of rescuing those shipwrecked. His wife, Mary, was the daughter of Uncle Tommy. It was she who convinced her husband to ask the Governor for a lighthouse.<sup>69</sup> On November 28, 1831, the seal oil lamp in a new lighthouse was lit for the first time and the Hichens became the government paid lighthouse keepers, as well as the rescuers, for Seal Island.<sup>70</sup>

Curiosity drew many to see the new lighthouse. One pleasant September day in 1834, Almira and a group of her friends including Ansel Crowell decided to go to Seal Island to visit the Hichens; "We..went to the Seal Island. We had a very pleasant passage indeed...we amused ourselves with inspecting the lighthouse."<sup>71</sup> The lighthouse duly examined, Ansel offered to take Almira for a walk to the Valley of Dry Bones. While not named on a map it had been known to local residents for several generations. It merited its descriptive name; "...as far as the eye could reach, bones that looked as if they had been bleached in sun and rain for centuries lay scattered in every direction...".<sup>72</sup> Almira continued with her description; "I felt almost angry at Ansel for telling me these bones belonged to certain animals called Seals, when I was just about fancying they might once have stalked in the shape of heroes."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Diary entry from September 6, 1833.

<sup>69</sup> Walter W. Hichens, Back to My Father and Home (Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1987) : 82-83.

<sup>70</sup> Crowell 388.

<sup>71</sup> Diary entry from September 18, 1834.

<sup>72</sup> Diary entry from September 18, 1834.

<sup>73</sup> Diary entry from September 18, 1834.

Barrington, like so many coastal communities in Nova Scotia, was quite isolated. The colony comprised vast areas of wilderness broken by small fishing and farming settlements and a few larger communities like Halifax and Yarmouth. The few roads that existed were often impassable for much of the year owing to weather conditions, flooding and mud. Poor conditions probably accounted for the short lived coach service James Ensor tried to institute between Yarmouth and Shelburne in 1834. The post road, as it was called, running between these two places, was really only passable to carriages and wagons in the summer, and then only if it was fine.<sup>74</sup> Those on horseback or walking could use the road for a longer period but it was not a dependable means of getting from one settlement to another. Local historian Hattie A. Perry has captured a picture of the Barrington roads in her book This Was Barrington:

During the 1800s when travel by horse and buggy was in vogue, the roads throughout the township were far less than satisfactory and often impassable for several months of the year. Boats, which were in common use, prevented complete isolation of the communities, except when storms and ice conditions curtailed this mode of travel. People of that day accepted the dry, dusty roads in summer, the snow-blocked or slushy roads in winter and the slippery, muddy, axle-deep mucky roads in fall and spring. The savannah between Barrington and Port LaTour and low swampy places were all-year round troublesome spots.<sup>75</sup>

Almira was all too aware of these limitations as she often bemoaned the weather preventing her from going home to Shelburne or the lack of someone willing to travel the road; "Mr. Sargent tells me he cannot possibly go to Shelburne. I felt greatly disappointed for T.C. has given up also--I have but one recourse left and that is to apply once more to my good old Squire. I think he cannot remain against my entreaties."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> J. Howe 15.

<sup>75</sup> Perry, Barrington 2.

<sup>76</sup> Diary entry from September 4, 1833.

Most people relied on their legs to get around locally. Almira, for example, often walked miles in a day getting from Sherose Island to The Passage and to The Head; "He walked me home, which I reached sufficiently wearied--having walked more than twelve miles during the day."<sup>77</sup> But walking also had its hazards including stray bulls, muddy conditions and early nightfall; "I met T.C. near Aunt Ruth's. He wanted to know where I was going. I told him 'To The Head' if his sister Hannah would accompany me--He said the roads were not fit, indeed, I was of the same opinion."<sup>78</sup> Clothes and boots often got wet and muddy; "I went to the Head on an errand this afternoon, the wind high, which rendered my walk very disagreeable...".<sup>79</sup> Another day she noted, "...the mud was above my boot-tops and the wind blew full in my face."<sup>80</sup> One also had to be flexible with plans given the nature of the roads and paths, "I am afraid we shall have rainy weather tomorrow--if so, I shall not be able to go to The Head, which will be a great disappointment."<sup>81</sup> Darkness was another concern and Almira occasionally stayed over night with friends because she was afraid to walk home in the dark. One evening, for instance, she agreed to let Thomas Crowell bring her the mail from The Head the next day;"I acceded to this proposal, for the night was as dark as Egypt, and I felt doubtful as regarded my ability to perform the journey."<sup>82</sup>

Depending on their financial resources people had access to other modes of transportation including horse, wagon, carriage, gig and sleigh. Although Almira did not own a horse, she obviously knew how to ride one; "John Robertson was kind enough to offer me his horse (without which indeed I could not have gone) so I had the pleasure of

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<sup>77</sup> Diary entry from January 10, 1834.

<sup>78</sup> Diary entry from December 28, 1833.

<sup>79</sup> Diary entry from September 2, 1833.

<sup>80</sup> Diary entry from December 23, 1833.

<sup>81</sup> Diary entry from August 31, 1833.

<sup>82</sup> Diary entry from January 3, 1834.

riding while the others were obliged to walk."<sup>83</sup> She also welcomed rides with those in the town who possessed more relaxing alternative means of transportation; "I went to The Head in Squire Crowell's wagon as we heard The Bishop was to preach there at eight o'clock."<sup>84</sup> Similarly, "Miss Geddes sent James down this morning with an invitation for me to spend the day with her. He brought the carriage which rendered it somewhat of a temptation...".<sup>85</sup> Or again, in the winter she noted with some glee, "Mrs. Sargent and I took tea at Elvira's yesterday afternoon. We went in the sleigh, Mrs. Sargent acting the part of the driver."<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, like walking, there were dangers to travel in a carriage or wagon, "I rode in the carriage with George and Sarah and our brother William accompanied us on horseback. When we reached Brass's Hill our foremost horse stumbled and Sarah Ann and I were thrown out of the gig. Fortunately, we escaped uninjured except that I bruised my shoulder a bit."<sup>87</sup>

The people of Barrington were very dependent on sea and river transportation to move goods and people. As Joseph Howe observed in 1827, "clouds of small craft, from petty shallops to schooners of 20 tons annually emerge from the sequestered inlets, all around the shores of the province...".<sup>88</sup> Most vessels were powered by wind although a steam propelled schooner plied the waters from Annapolis to Saint John.<sup>89</sup> Sailing packets like the Yarmouth Packet were used for local trade as well as trade to the West Indies, the United States, Bermuda, even South America. Barrington was a hive of activity once the shipping season began in the spring; "Barrington was simply a continuous waterfront."<sup>90</sup> In 1834, for example, one brig and sixty-seven schooners

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83 Diary entry from September 15, 1835.

84 Diary entry from October 10, 1834.

85 Diary entry from July 9, 1833.

86 Diary entry from March 8, 1835.

87 Diary entry from January 31, 1836.

88 Howe 14.

89 Howe 14.

90 Crowell 119.

registered at the Custom's House at The Passage.<sup>91</sup> Vessels took away dried and pickled fish and lumber and returned with sugar, molasses and rum. They also carried mail and passengers. Barrington men were respected sailors and their captains, not surprisingly, held positions of social prominence in the community. Almira was pleased, for example, to meet young Captain Obed Homer and recorded their meeting; "I met George Wilson who shook hands with me and told his father's Brig had arrived. The Captain (young Homer) was just behind with him and I also shook hands."<sup>92</sup>

The rhythm of the shipping business shaped the rhythm of the community life. Men would often be away for eight to ten weeks at a time leaving the women to take care of the families and family business; "We thought we should be alone as all the young men were aboard of their vessels."<sup>93</sup> Community meetings and social events had to be planned around the shipping season to ensure the presence of the young men. Though the winter months the men would be home for long periods but in the spring, summer and fall they were generally at sea, returning home for just a few days at a time. Both of Almira's suitors, Ansel and Thomas were sailors who eventually captained their own vessels; "Ansel says he is going to Boston in a fortnight."<sup>94</sup> and "Sarah is going to Saint John next week in the Enterprize (the vessel Thomas sails in)."<sup>95</sup>

Like many vessels, the Enterprize carried mail as well as freight and passengers. In one way or another the ships were the principal contact with the outside world. Not only did they bring in goods and news, but they also made it possible for people to leave to visit friends and family and to escape their isolation for a time; "Mary and Ellise left Barrington this morning. They went in the Hazard."<sup>96</sup> The Hazard returned two weeks

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91 Crowell 341.

92 Diary entry from March 13, 1835.

93 Diary entry from July 24, 1834.

94 Diary entry from April 4, 1835.

95 Diary entry from May 16, 1835.

96 Diary entry from November 1, 1834.

later and Almira's friends were full of news of people and things they had seen in Saint John, New Brunswick. Many ships, of course, sailed beyond Nova Scotia. This meant that the people of Barrington, in spite of their physical isolation, were aware of a much bigger world. Sailors brought stories and goods from far away places. Almira looked forward to the return of Ansel and Thomas when they had been sailing in the southern waters of the West Indies and she was thrilled by even the simplest exotic gift. A coconut, for instance, brought excitement and something special to the humdrumness of daily life. Just home from being away for over two months, Ansel visited Almira on March 14, 1835; "he treated me to some coconut and when I came home he waited on me."<sup>97</sup>

As isolated and restricted in travel as the people of Barrington might have seemed, there was still a fair amount of short distance travel undertaken by the Barringtonians. Almira usually managed to get home to Shelburne several times a year, generally going by wagon with someone else who was also going; "The Squire says he will take me to Shelburne."<sup>98</sup> Destinations like Saint John, Halifax, Yarmouth and Boston could be reached by regular packet service; "The George Henry arrived yesterday and George has gone to Halifax in her this afternoon."<sup>99</sup> Meanwhile, nearby spots like Clyde, Port La Tour, Pubnico and Shelburne were accessible part of the year by road. Of course, travel plans did not always work out and there were lots of disappointments; "Lovitt was to have taken Jane and me to Pubnico today but I suppose something has happened to prevent him."<sup>100</sup> Travelling in the 1830s could be tedious, dirty, time-consuming and dangerous, whether by land or sea, but it was absolutely essential and it was the only way Barrington and its residents maintained contact with the outside world.

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<sup>97</sup> Diary entry from March 14, 1835.

<sup>98</sup> Diary entry from September 6, 1833.

<sup>99</sup> Diary entry from October 28, 1836.

<sup>100</sup> Diary entry from October 8, 1936.



Not only was the isolation broken by trips away but visitors also arrived by land and water routes. Almira always looked forward with great anticipation when members of her family came to visit from Shelburne. Each year her mother, a sister and her brother came for one or two short visits. Once her mother came for almost two weeks, staying overnight with different members of the community as well as her two daughters, Almira and Sarah Ann, "My mother arrived at Barrington last night...I felt glad enough to see her in Barrington...My mother, Sarah Ann, Mrs. Robertson and Sarah spent the afternoon here. My mother staid all night and slept with me..."<sup>101</sup>

Occasionally one of the leading members of the community would be visited by a person of some note or someone from considerable distance away. Such visits generally resulted in a flurry of teas and dinners to which Almira, as a well educated, single woman, was invited; "I received an invitation from Mrs. Sargent this morning to take tea at her house as she expected Miss O'Brien and Miss McNeil there, this afternoon...They are two ladies from Halifax, and at present, on a visit at Mr. Webb's."<sup>102</sup> Visitors brought news and stories from beyond Barrington's shores and created a certain amount of curiosity and excitement; "Col. Marshall is here to dinner...I peeped through the window at him, a stern, martial looking man. He fought at Waterloo and lost an arm at that time...I wore my black silk dress. The Colonel is a pleasant sociable man...The dinner time passed off quite pleasantly, tho' I should imagine the gentlemen felt the effects of their wine."<sup>103</sup>

Another group of unexpected visitors were those poor souls shipwrecked off Cape Island. Since ships were grounded quite regularly in these areas, the people of Barrington were accustomed to playing host to upset and bedraggled survivors. For the people of Barrington shipwrecks broke the tedium of daily life and one never knew what interesting people might be seeking refuge in one's home, "I did not go to the Head

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101 July 16-17, 1835.

102 Diary entry from October 1, 1833.

103 Diary entry from July 18, 1835.

yesterday but went over to Aunt Didy's--Jemima, Hannah, Thomas and Mr. Sayne, mate of the Brig lately wrecked on Seal Island was there."<sup>104</sup> It was part of the unwritten code of the seafaring world that one was hospitable to those in distress at sea in the manner one would hope others would treat one's loved ones when they were in need of assistance. Those at sea were always at the mercy of nature regardless of where they were in the world; "Ann and Sarah could not go as they had people from the wrecked vessels at each of their houses."<sup>105</sup>

The life of a seafarer was always at risk and accidents and wrecks were an accepted part of daily life for those at home as well as at sea. Some lost their ships; "Ansel came home with me. He talked about the loss of his vessel and seemed low spirited. It is no wonder. He has cause."<sup>106</sup> They were much more fortunate than those who lost their lives leaving behind widows and children. In September 1835, "Mr. W, who sailed in Wreyton's sloop was unfortunately drowned last night. He had just returned from Yarmouth and was going ashore in a small boat. The accident happened just before his own door..."<sup>107</sup>

Mail was an important way of maintaining contact with people outside of the immediate community. Not only did it keep families and friends in touch, but it also brought newspapers and information from outside. In a day and age before telegraph, telephone or radio, the mail was a very valuable link to modern day fashions, contemporary political events and economic conditions. Good communication in a rural community was essential for continued family interaction, friendship cultivation and political awareness. Letter writing, therefore, filled a goodly portion of one's time. Almira was probably no exception as she mentioned writing a letter almost on a daily

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<sup>104</sup> Diary entry from September 6, 1833.

<sup>105</sup> Diary entry from October 7, 1834.

<sup>106</sup> October 15, 1834.

<sup>107</sup> Diary entry from September 10, 1835.

basis. Receiving letters was so important and such a highlight of the day that Almira always mentioned when some mail had arrived, especially if it came from a family member like her mother or Clara. Its arrival was greeted with excitement and anticipation; "...the post has arrived I suppose--and tomorrow if no chance occurs of sending, I shall start off to the Head to see if I have any letters...I must have letters there...and I am going to get them."<sup>108</sup>

Most of the mail was moved by wagon or packet ship. It was distributed from the post office at the Head. Mail was so important in everyone's life that most willingly helped each other to deliver it or carry from one place to another if one was going that way; "Mrs. Sargent was kind enough to send Mary to the Head for my letters today."<sup>109</sup> The failure of the mail to get through because of weather conditions or some other delay was a source of great sorrow; "I have shed tears of disappointment too, for Mary has returned from the Head and brought no letters--the post has not arrived...".<sup>110</sup> The mail service obviously was uncertain at times but with people willing to pass the mail on to its intended recipient, it was somewhat more dependable; "Thomas got home from Halifax just before the afternoon meeting--He brought a letter from George Wilson to his sister Mercy."<sup>111</sup>

Within the community, because there was no such means of communication as a telephone and because it was often inconvenient to have to send a message by a friend or to go one's self, people rigged up their own forms of messaging. Almira and her friends who lived within sighting distance of each other developed their own system. Just as Anne of Green Gables designed a signalling system to communicate across the farm meadow with her best friend, Diana, so Almira did the same; "Urbane got home

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<sup>108</sup> Diary entry from August 5, 1833.

<sup>109</sup> Diary entry from July 22, 1833.

<sup>110</sup> Diary entry from November 25, 1833.

<sup>111</sup> Diary entry from August 11, 1834.

yesterday. She hung out her signal as soon as she came and I went over immediately."<sup>112</sup> Similarly, "Jemima hung out her signal yesterday. I went round and took tea with her."<sup>113</sup> On another occasion she wrote, "I have not stirred out, tho' Urbane's signal has been flying all the afternoon."<sup>114</sup> Almira does not describe in detail what form the signal took but it appears to have been some kind of flag or cloth that would fly in the breeze and could be easily seen. One form appeared to mean "come to tea". The other appeared to send the message, "I am going to the Head. Join me?" With this system the only response necessary was acceptance by appearing shortly after the signal was put out. If a person did not want to visit or go for a walk, no reason had to be given at the time. It was all very simple and it seemed to work; "I was afraid I should have to go alone as Urbane had not yet answered my signal and I knew that she was not going."<sup>115</sup> Almira's group of girl friends was closely knit, if only because of the isolation, and this method of communication made keeping in touch much easier. It is probable that others in the community communicated simple messages over short distances in much the same fashion.

The monotony of daily life, particularly in an isolated, rural community, required that residents find ways to entertain themselves. Not only was the community dependent on its residents helping each other in times of need, but they needed to mix together socially in a relaxed environment. Since the community was relatively small and close knit, everyone was acquainted with one another. They knew who was being visited and who was not. It was expected that one's door was open to guests any time of the day. This was a way of ensuring the cohesiveness of the community, particularly one like Barrington that had developed around a number of smaller locations.

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<sup>112</sup> Diary entry from July 25, 1833.

<sup>113</sup> Diary entry from November 22, 1833.

<sup>114</sup> Diary entry from August 19, 1833.

<sup>115</sup> Diary entry from September 21, 1833.

In Barrington socializing took many forms including teas, overnight stays, dinners, sewing bees, singing parties and celebratory gatherings. Sometimes friends got together for relatively simple exchanges. Almira and her friends read out loud to each other and look at each other's scrapbooks to brighten an otherwise dull day. Some days they would read from the Bible and sometimes from a new work of fiction. One late April afternoon Sarah Robertson, Hannah Crowell and Almira met for an impromptu tea and "a comfortable little repast", and then Almira, "read several pieces aloud to them out of Hannah's scrapbook."<sup>116</sup> Other times friends might gather to play cards or other kinds of board and word games, "We played cards till eleven o'clock."<sup>117</sup> However, card playing was not always endorsed by the older generation with whom moral values were still deeply ingrained. One Saturday afternoon several of Almira's friends were playing cards when Squire Crowell returned unexpectedly; "...as usual they all commenced playing, in which I was compelled to join but it was soon terminated by the unexpected entrance of the old Squire, who I suppose suspected what was going on--we all came away at an early hour."<sup>118</sup>

The most common form of social exchange involved taking tea. Tea was a way of ensuring a visitor would stay for awhile as well as a way of refreshing both mind and body; "Robert Hogg came with his sister's compliments, desiring us to stop in and take tea with her--we pleaded a thousand excuses, but it was in vain, for he carried his point--when I went in, tea was ready, and it tasted refreshing after our tiresome walk."<sup>119</sup> Tea was intended for men and women alike. Afterall, tea provided an opportunity for all to talk over community events and to gossip. Tea could be offered at almost any time of day, assuming either a formal or informal presentation. It could take but half an hour or

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<sup>116</sup> Diary entry from April 30, 1835.

<sup>117</sup> Diary entry from February 20, 1834.

<sup>118</sup> Diary entry from February 15, 1834.

<sup>119</sup> Diary entry from August 22, 1833.

several hours. It could consist of light refreshment or a substantial meal. But, whatever form it took, hospitality was of great importance in Barrington society and it had to be done properly according to Barrington custom with lots of food; "We spent a pleasant afternoon at Elvira's but it would have been more so if she had given us simple bread and butter for tea instead of worrying herself to make cake and biscuit, but this is the Barrington fashion."<sup>120</sup> In fact, sometimes she had to graciously accept tea twice in one afternoon if she stopped to visit in different locations; "We all stopped at Squire Crowell's where we got treated to shrub and cake and then proceeded to Aunt Didy's where we partook of another repast."<sup>121</sup>

Wanting to make one's guests feel welcome and satisfied was the key to Barrington hospitality; "Elizabeth Crowell, however, went to work and made me an excellent cup of tea--she also set before me a plate of plum-cake and mince pie--I took my repast quite comfortably."<sup>122</sup> One evening when Almira was late returning home, a light lunch was left for her in her bedroom. She greatly appreciated the small jecture; "It was near 12 o'clock when I got home. I found some nice bread and buter with a pitcher of ginger tea left on the little table in my room of which I took heartily..."<sup>123</sup> It is clear that someone in the household knew that Almira would be tired upon her return home, so a nice lunch was left in her room. Such was the hospitality of the community which saw people always entreating others to stop and visit; "On our way we called at Uncle Obed Wilson's. They were all very glad to see us. Treated us to wine, cake etc. and begged us to stop."<sup>124</sup>

Most hostesses must have been successful in achieving their goals if Hannah Crowell was anything to judge by:

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- 120     Diary entry from March 8, 1835.  
 121     Diary entry from July 10, 1833.  
 122     Diary entry from December 25, 1833.  
 123     Diary entry from Octpber 7, 1834.  
 124     Diary entry from March 8, 1835.

Hannah soon had a comfortable meal consisting of tea, bread and butter, cake, cheese etc. ready for us. She rummaged about and found a bowl of boiled apples which she also set before us. Hannah took it into her head that the apples had not 'sauce' enough on them and looking for the pot they were boiled in, she at length found it half full of liquid which she pronounced to be 'sauce'. She approached the table crying 'Who wants sauce?' Upon which Sarah and I immediately held out our saucers to receive some.<sup>125</sup>

Hannah's hospitality knew no bounds but on this occasion it went beyond the call of duty. To everyone's dismay the extra sauce was dirty water, providing a good laugh to all concerned, apart from the poor hostess who thought that she was serving something special.

It is apparent from reading Almira's diary that food was a topic of some importance in Barrington. Almira recorded what was served at most teas and dinners she attended. Food was clearly more than sustenance, it was a way of showing one's level of hospitality and kindness to others, whether one was serving tea, delivering food to the sick or providing a full meal. However, Almira commented that sometimes one tired of the same foods being served; "We have had a real visiting time this winter and I am tired of plum cake and minced pies."<sup>126</sup> Although Almira enjoyed visiting she would have liked more variety in the foods that were served. This was both a reflection of the amount of visiting that was conducted and the somewhat limited resources that were available for cooking and baking. Generally, though, Almira was pleased to be served and everyone appreciated the culinary efforts of the hostess; "We found our beef and apple dumplings ready and dined with an excellent appetite."<sup>127</sup> Almira often found it relaxing and convenient to accept an invitation for a light meal before heading home; "We called for a few minutes at Dr. Geddes where we got a glass of wine and piece of cake

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125 Diary entry from

126 Diary entry from January 31, 1836.

127 Diary entry from May 22, 1836.

and then set off again."<sup>128</sup> She also thought of the family with whom she was living and brought home food treats for them, as she knew the items they favored; "We fared sumptuously and I brought home for Mr. Sargent three nice doughnuts as it is a cake of which he is particularly fond. I also brought Mrs. Sargent a nice slice of pound cake."<sup>129</sup> While the foods might be starchy, sweet and lacking in variety, there seemed to be plenty. Nothing in Almira's diary suggests that a lack of food was a problem or concern in the community. Quite the contrary, food was an important part of the local way of life, a way of silently communicating friendship, respect and caring.

If the company was good and the weather poor, tea could easily turn into supper and/or an overnight stay with breakfast in the morning. This was particularly true in the winter when daylight gave way to darkness in the late afternoon and when walking hours became more difficult; "I went to Miss Robertson's yesterday afternoon--they made me stop all night and to breakfast this morning."<sup>130</sup> Similarly, on another occasion Almira wrote; "We met Urbane and Hannah--I went home with the former, and staid till after breakfast this morning...".<sup>131</sup> Bad weather might also result in an extended tea and overnight stay; "...I staid all night with Jemima for the weather did not admit of my returning home."<sup>132</sup>

Overnight stays usually meant a sharing of beds. This was not, it seems much of a social issue since the sharing was between the same sexes. Sometimes such intimacy allowed for an exchange of secrets and a kind of pillow talk between friends; "I stopped the night at Miss Hogg's...I slept with Fanny and she communicated her troubles to me...".<sup>133</sup> Other times, sharing beds was not an enjoyable experience and although it was

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128 Diary entry from July 26, 1836.  
 129 Diary entry from August 17, 1836.  
 130 Diary entry from October 11, 1833.  
 131 Diary entry from August 15, 1833.  
 132 Diary entry from January 13, 1834.  
 133 Diary entry from October 7, 1833.



a common way of making room for an overnight guest, it was viewed with some trepidation; "When I got home I found Aunt Harding who had arrived a few minutes before me--I was dreadfully frightened, for I thought I should have to share my bed with her, and the prospect of lying awake all night was not very pleasing, but Caroline relieved my apprehensiveness by telling me Mrs. H. would sleep with her." <sup>134</sup>

In addition to teas, the Barringtonians often had people in for dinner, both at noon and in the evening. Almira made particular note of Ebenezer Crowell's hospitality at dinner time. His home was always full of guests it seemed; "I took dinner with Urbane, after which we went to Uncle Ebenezer's to see if Hannah would go to the Head with us--when we went in they were just at dinner, and there were no less than ten visitors, exclusive of three children, sitting round the table--I think they have more company than any other family in Barrington." <sup>135</sup> Almira identified this home as being probably the most popular in the area. The door was always open to welcome a few more. For example, one afternoon at Squire Crowell's, Almira noted; "They insisted upon my staying to dinner, which I refused, as there were a dozen folks assembled there already." <sup>136</sup>

When dinner was a noon time meal, it might well flow into tea time as it did one July day in 1835; "After meeting I went home with Maria Coffin. Mr. Hogg and Telpha were there to dinner as well as myself. Mrs. Geddes, Ellen Geddes, Margaret Stalker, Gwen Lyle and Charles Stalker all came in after dinner and stayed awhile. Robert Hogg came in...Dr. Wilson came in soon afterward with Mr. Crowell...Both he and Robert Hogg staid to tea. It was nearly sundown when I left the Head..." <sup>137</sup> While many teas were spur of the moment gatherings, full evening dinners were more formal and were

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<sup>134</sup> Diary entry from July 28, 1833.

<sup>135</sup> Diary entry from August 10, 1833.

<sup>136</sup> Diary entry from December 23, 1833.

<sup>137</sup> Diary entry from July 8, 1834 .

generally planned a little in advance so as to give the hostess time to make preparations. Such was the case with the kind of dinner Mrs. Sargent prepared the time Col. Marshall came to visit. But, whether it was breakfast, tea or dinner, a good hostess in Barrington was always ready with food and drink because someone was always likely to stop in sometime during the day.

Within the community there were obviously different social groupings probably based on economic status, family connection and religious affiliation. Almira often referred to her friends as "our set." They seemed to be a tight cliche that did most things together including going to religious meetings; "After meeting all our set went to Harvey's..."<sup>138</sup> Similarly, they planned excursions together such as one to Cape Cod Island, "...Our set has concluded to go to Cape Island tomorrow."<sup>139</sup> Being part of a "set" meant one had a distinct sense of belonging as well as somebody with whom to do things. It was also evidence of definite social divisions with the community.

Judging from Almira's round of activities social life in Barrington was alive and well in the 1830s. There were always gatherings of some sort, particularly in the winter and summer months. In the winter months when the shipping and farming activities were much reduced, there were more entertainments that involved both men and women. Singing parties were a favorite with Almira; "In the afternoon, Sarah Robertson, Jemima Crowell, Hannah Crowell with her brother came and we had quite a singing meeting-- Lydia-Ann, Homer and Maria Osborne were there also."<sup>140</sup> Generally, they sang hymns, had something to eat and enjoyed their afternoon or evening of mixed company. Music was obviously of some importance to the people of Barrington. The chief musician

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<sup>138</sup> Diary entry from July 19, 1833.

<sup>139</sup> Diary entry from August 3, 1833.

<sup>140</sup> Diary entry from February 17, 1834.

seemed to be Mr. Wreyton who not only played the flute but also taught singing; "Sarah says Wreyton intends teaching a singing school this winter."<sup>141</sup>

During the summer period, while the men were generally away at sea or busy on the farms, there were still many occasions for outings including picnics and beach parties. With wonderful sandy beaches nearby and Cape Island just as easy sail from Barrington, there were lots of pleasant spots to gather. In July 1834, Almira joined a large crowd of friends at the beach; "Sarah, Janet Kendrick, Mrs. F., Hannah Crowell, Ann Crowell, Sophia, Marcia and myself went on the beach this afternoon--John, William Kendrick, Corning Crowell and William Knowles rowed us over...while we were on the beach the girls amused themselves with firing off guns, charged only with powder..."<sup>142</sup>

Berrypicking was a similar outing that friends could share in during the summer period; "Sarah Robertson, Ann Crowell, E. Osborne, Janet Robertson, John Robertson, myself with Bessy and Margaret were on a blue berrying expedition...Miss Farish went with us also..."<sup>143</sup> This was a relaxed opportunity for young people to be together, free of adults, to talk, laugh and have fun.

Another form of social exchange was the sewing party or quilting bee. While the women did the sewing it was not at all uncommon for the men to stop in to visit and take tea, particularly if the young women of the community were gathered together. For instance, on October 25, 1833, Urbane Crowell, "had her quilting." It was a large gathering including Almira, Emma and Harriet Doane, the Misses Kendrick, Ann and Hannah Crowell, Sarah Robertson, and Chloe; "the gentlemen were J. and Nathan Crowell, Lovitt Wilson, John Robertson and Thomas Crowell." Almira reported, "We sat and sewed nearly all the evening but the gentlemen appeared to sit very uneasily--after a

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<sup>141</sup> Diary entry from October 19, 1835.

<sup>142</sup> Diary entry from July 30, 1834.

<sup>143</sup> Diary entry from August 14, 1834.

game of 'how do you like it', we broke up."<sup>144</sup> But most quilting parties were dominated by the women. Sometimes such parties were very large. In November 1834, Hannah Crowell had twenty ladies in to quilt. Only two men appeared which, as Almira wrote, was, "a sad disproportion in numbers."<sup>145</sup> Quilting parties were a very efficient way of producing a number of warm quilts for the winter months but, more importantly, they were relaxing affairs at which much female gossiping took place; "We have had an old woman's quilting today and a comfortable, scandalizing time they had."<sup>146</sup>

Special parties were greeted with great enthusiasm. They were the highlights of the year and gave those involved something special to which to look forward. Mr. Wreyton planned such an event in the winter of 1834; "he gave us all an invitation for next Thursday evening--we girls settled our dresses for the occasion--we are all to wear dark silk frocks and white ribbons, the men also fixed their's--dark clothes and white shoes--laughable--but we must do something to amuse ourselves--I believe it is to be a grand entertainment."<sup>147</sup> Almira's tone reveals the importance attached to having fun given that much of daily life was lacking in excitement. Such parties included eating, dancing and game playing. Almira wrote of one evening party at Mr. Robertson's; "Mr. Wreyton played the flute for us and we danced, hunted the squirrel...".<sup>148</sup> Clearly the Puritan disapproval of such frivolities as dancing did not affect the social set of which Almira was a part.

Teas, parties, outings and dinners served a purpose other than social mingling for Barrington residents. They also provided a socially acceptable environment for courting and beaung. In the first half of the nineteenth century in Canada most women married in

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144     Diary entry from October 25, 1834.  
 145     Diary entry from November 6, 1834.  
 146     Diary entry from November 6, 1835.  
 147     Diary entry from February 18, 1834.  
 148     Diary entry from February 6, 1834.

their early twenties.<sup>149</sup> Not surprisingly then, young men and women developed friendships and relationships early on. Since most of the courting had to be conducted in a relatively public way, or at least in the presence of an adult chaperone, group outings and parties were an important way of facilitating courtships. Scholars have examined courtship patterns and social activities surrounding the courting ritual in the nineteenth century. Peter Ward in his article, "Courtship and Social Space in Nineteenth Century English Canada", discussed the places where young people could meet one another without arousing social contempt and criticism; "In drawing community members together, religious observances allowed intimate social as well as spiritual contacts. Popular amusements and recreation--balls, house parties, skating, sleighing, picnics, concerts, plays and summer excursion--all provided courtship opportunities as well."<sup>150</sup>

This certainly was the case in Barrington. Church meetings, teas, outings and dinners were common gathering occasions for the young men and women of Almira's social set. For example, Ansel Crowell, who for a time was interested in pursuing a relationship with Almira, took the occasion of the group trip to Seal Island to take Almira for a private walk along the shore. The setting was perfect for an exchange of romantic thoughts and comments on the beauty of the landscape; "It was a sweet moon light evening and we had a charming walk along the sea shore...I leaned on the arm of my companion..."<sup>151</sup> Similarly, Thomas Crowell, Almira's other most persistent suitor, found occasions after meetings or during a party to accompany the young school teacher on a romantic walk; "Thomas reached the gate almost as soon as I did. He went home with me, keeping my hand in his all the way."<sup>152</sup> On another occasion she wrote; "Thomas who beaved me was in a very lingering mood..."<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Conrad, *No Place Like Home* 14.

<sup>150</sup> Peter Ward. *Canadian Historical Review* 68, (1987) : 37.

<sup>151</sup> Diary entry from September 18, 1835.

<sup>152</sup> Diary entry from August 19, 1835.

<sup>153</sup> Diary entry from August 14, 1834.

As a single, highly eligible young woman in Barrington, Almira attracted a fair amount of male attention and rarely lacked for someone to beau her home after an event. Beuing was only a first step in the courtship ritual and often was nothing more than an act of chivalry and thoughtfulness. Nevertheless, it provided an opportunity for a young couple to chat, flirt and simply discover whether they enjoyed each other's company enough to become more serious about their friendship; "After meeting I came home directly, Thomas of course waiting on me--we chatted all the way..."<sup>154</sup> Beuing was a young man's way of showing interest and concern for the welfare of the young woman at his side. On one occasion Almira found herself in the strange position of being beued by a man on skates while she was walking; "We went on the ice and James Cox beau'd me, tho' I was very adverse to his doing so, for as he had skates on, I knew I impeded his progress sadly--but he would take no denial..."<sup>155</sup> Beuing was also a gesture of kindness between friends and close acquaintances of the opposite sex, but it could lay the foundation for something much more. Perhaps that was what Robert Hogg had hoped in August 1833; "after tea, Sarah and I took our departure--James waited on her and Robert Hogg escorted me: it was a sweet moonlight evening and I enjoyed my walk tolerably well--I urged Robert to leave me at the lane leading to the bridge, but he insisted on coming all the way--nearly four miles--a long distance too, to see a lady home!"<sup>156</sup> Certainly on beautiful summer evenings the atmosphere might quickly change from that of friendly chatting to a more amorous exchange. Almira always on her guard with Ansel and Thomas; "Ansel has grown insufferably bold lately for as soon as he took hold of me, he had the sauciness to kiss me...I do not like such romping ways but what can a person do with such a creature?"<sup>157</sup>

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154 Diary entry from September 7, 1833.

155 Diary entry from January 21, 1834.

156 Diary entry from August 1, 1833.

157 Diary entry from April 8, 1835.

Teasing and flirting are age old ways of showing romantic interest in someone. These were certainly in the arsenal of the young men and women of Barrington; "Thomas Crowell waited upon me to Aunt Didy's...he got my Mother's letter from me and teased me an hour before he would give it back--the folks here think he is paying attention to me..."<sup>158</sup> They were right, he was. However, a proper young lady would have known when and how to keep such attentions under control. Otherwise, she might be labelled a wanton, shameless or bold woman. Consider the following examples described in Almira's diary; "Miss Hatfield was in high spirits and dances nearly all the time...I think she is one of the boldest girls I ever saw..and can I say with truth her behaviour shocked me."<sup>159</sup> and, "Ellise's behaviour disgusts me--bold and wanton in the highest degree--as an instance, she sat on the bed and placed her feet on Thomas' knee but this was a trifle..."<sup>160</sup> Almira was, therefore, careful to conform to the social proprieties of courting and the relationships between men and women. To that end, she was extremely careful not to lead a beau on to expect something more than what she intended. Maintaining a high level of social decorum was a matter of considerable importance to Almira; "Ansel got my bonnet off and as I did not feel disposed to romp, I allowed him to keep it as long as I thought proper..."<sup>161</sup> Similarly, one evening when Thomas Crowell appeared to be particularly inclined to flirting and teasing Almira wrote; "I felt that it behoved me to restrain myself for the least appearance of levity..."<sup>162</sup> Nevertheless, under the watchful eye of the elders, young couples could slip off for a private moment during a dinner party. At the wedding of Hannah Osborne, Thomas Crowell and Almira found a moment to flirt in private; "Thomas Crowell and I got into a snug little corner in

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<sup>158</sup> Diary entry from August 19, 1833.

<sup>159</sup> Diary entry from September 4, 1833.

<sup>160</sup> Diary entry from October 21, 1834.

<sup>161</sup> Diary entry from January 15, 1834.

<sup>162</sup> Diary entry from September 1, 1834.

the evening where we contrived to have a little chat together...Thomas got my ring from me and put it on his little finger..."<sup>163</sup>

Sometimes the strict moral and social codes of the community were breeched even by those from the best families. Often such lapses were harmless encounters that aroused little if any comment. Such was the case with an evening in September 1833 when Thomas Crowell and Mr. Larkin turned up at Urbane Crowell's home after she and Almira had started to prepare for bed. Almira, believing that the knock on the door was that of Hannah Crowell who might have forgotten something when she was in earlier, answered the door; "...with my frock unpinned, and shoes and stockings off, I ran open the door, when who should enter, but Thomas Crowell and Mr. Larkin. It was in vain to tell them we were going to bed--go they would not--so had to fix ourselves as well as we could and sit with them as long as they were pleased to stay; which I think was until about two o'clock in the morning..."<sup>164</sup> This unchaperoned visit was probably acceptable because Urbane was Thomas' sister. Other times, however, the breaking of strict moral standards resulted in social ridicule and ostracization. In the case of Mr. Wreyton it was the fact that he was courting a much older woman that upset the community; "Wreyton was invited but did not come because the widow Kimball was left out of the party--little fool! She is old enough to be his Mother..."<sup>165</sup>

The worst social offense was pre-marital sex, particularly if one became pregnant. Unmarried sexually active women were held in very low esteem and were often the source of public ridicule; "...they kept alluding to a not very decent affair that happened between a pedlar and a girl at Cockerwit yesterday."<sup>166</sup> Such activity was equated with prostitution but it was not limited to women from the lower levels of society. Even

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<sup>163</sup> Diary entry from January 3, 1834.

<sup>164</sup> Diary entry from September 4, 1833.

<sup>165</sup> Diary entry from February 2, 1834.

<sup>166</sup> Diary entry from March 14, 1835.



within the strict community of Barrington, children were conceived and born out of wedlock. Such was the case of poor Harriet Doane. On April 27, 1835, Harriet Doane married John Homer. Only ten people attended. The wedding was necessary because Harriet was with child, a fact which her brother used to embarrass her publically at church; "Her brother obliged her to go to meeting last Sunday and her appearance aroused universal laughter among the men."<sup>167</sup> Almira was astonished that one of her own set would commit such an offence; "Yet as very precise and demure as she has always appeared who would have thought it of her?"<sup>168</sup> Interestingly enough nothing was said by Almira about the part played by John Homer in the pregnancy. The responsibility for the situation clearly rested with Harriet. In the eyes of the community it was Harriet's fault, "How could Harriet bring such disgrace on her family?"<sup>169</sup>

Although Almira's acquaintances seemed to make the most of their own company for entertainment and relaxation, life was not really just a round of teas and parties. In fact, life was difficult for many and even those with financial security had to work hard. Almira was proof of that. She hated teaching school and having to be away from Shelburne but it was financially necessary. One did not want to become a debtor. Debt was a crime resulting in a jail sentence. Such was the case of one unfortunate Mr. H.; "They say Mr. H. is imprisoned in the Shelburne jail for debt--I am sorry for him--surely his friends will not allow his incarceration to be a long continuance..."<sup>170</sup> Debt was treated as a serious offence and one was dependent on the charity of others to help one out in such a situation. However, it would seem indebtedness was not a common problem in Barrington as Almira only mentions one case. Families and friends probably came to the rescue before debts overcame a family.

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<sup>167</sup> Diary entry from April 25, 1835.

<sup>168</sup> Diary entry from April 20, 1835.

<sup>169</sup> Diary entry from May 7, 1835.

<sup>170</sup> Diary entry from August 24, 1833.

Generally, crime was not a problem for concern in Barrington, or in most rural communities at that time. During the three year period covered in Almira's diary, other than the crime of indebtedness, the only other offence Almira mentions was that of attempted murder. On July 13, 1835, "...Samuel Homer almost killed one of Captain Willet's children."<sup>171</sup> This unfortunate event was excusable since the twenty year old Homer was suffering from mental problems and had threatened to commit suicide; "I called at Mr. Homer's to inquire after poor Samuel whose intellects still appear to be much deranged. It is singular what could have caused his insanity."<sup>172</sup> Almira lived for a time with the Justice of the Peace, Mr. Sargent and occasionally she would allude to a case he had mentioned; "On the whole, Barrington appeared to be fairly law abiding community. I pretended ignorance, tho' my living with Mr. Sargent (before whom the affair was brought) must have convinced them I was acquainted with all the particulars."<sup>173</sup>

The men of this pre-industrial community were, according to the custom of the day, the primary income earners, working outside the home. Most were employed in the shipping, shipbuilding, fishing, agricultural or lumbering sectors. Some were involved in service sector jobs such as blacksmithing, shop keeping and tanning. Work was often seasonal and highly sensitive to weather conditions and market prices. It was hard and labour intensive.

True to the division of sexual responsibilities, or separate spheres as it has been called, women were largely responsible for running the home, for the domestic affairs.<sup>174</sup> While the men were often away for long periods of time at sea, the women not only had to look after the household but also had to discipline of the children and to manage the

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171 Diary entry from July 13, 1835.

172 Diary entry from July 2, 1835.

173 Diary entry from March 14, 1835.

174 Guilford, 10-11.

finances. It was the expectation that the women would raise the children, prepare the food, make the clothes and see to the general well being of the family. The household was the social centre for every family and it was up to the women to make it a comfortable place to gather. That was why, if a man became a widower with young children, as was the case with Mr. John Sargent, it was expected he would remarry within a reasonable period of time. A man needed a helpmate to run his house. One afternoon Almira went to visit Mr. Sargent and his five young children and was moved by the difference the absence of the mother made to the family; "They looked as if they needed a mother", she wrote in her diary.<sup>175</sup> A few days later, she visited again. She found several of the children were ill and Mr. Sargent was at his wits end, unprepared for his dual parental role; "I pity poor Mr. Sargent. Who could blame him if he were to marry shortly."<sup>176</sup>

Almira was an exception to the rule. She was one of the few women in Barrington, who, although still single, did not live with her parents. Instead, she had had to go out on her own to make a living. Teaching was one of the few employment opportunities available to unmarried women or those women who because of economic necessity had to find employment to supplement the family income. Other forms of employment included seamstress, shopkeeper, inn manager, laundress and domestic. In Barrington there were a number of women thus employed. Almira makes a brief mention of having a couple of dresses being made up for her by a seamstress. She also mentions going to a shop at the Passage which appears to have been operated by a Mrs. Dennis; "I went as far as Jane Dennis' toward sundown for an article I wanted to purchase."<sup>177</sup>

Several of the upper class families in Barrington employed servants. They not only helped around the house with cleaning and meal preparation but also ran errands.

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<sup>175</sup> Diary entry from August 16, 1835.

<sup>176</sup> Diary entry from August 21, 1835.

<sup>177</sup> Diary entry from September 2, 1835.

For example, one day when Almira did not feel up to going to the Head for the mail she "dispatched Mary who got it for me this afternoon."<sup>178</sup> Similarly, Matilda, Sarah Ann Wilson's servant was responsible for cooking and other household duties, particularly during Sarah Ann's pregnancy.<sup>179</sup> There were also male servants to help with chores, household repairs and driving the carriage. In the Sargent house, in addition to Lydia the "serving girl", there was Zack the "serving man." Ansel Crowell often sent Tom, "the boy" on errands as did Dr. Geddes with his "servant man", Jerry. Not everyone could afford a domestic or servant. Their presence was a sign of definite social and economic divisions within Barrington.

Motherly duties came first within the home. It is hard to judge from Almira's diary what was the average family size. However, she mentions a number of families with three children including that of her sister Clara. As well, while she was living with the Sargents, Mrs. W. Sargent gave birth to her eighth child, her first boy. Mrs. John Sargent had five children at the time of her death. Certainly, in most instances, mothers had a number of children under their care at any one time.

Among the many household duties, including child rearing and early teaching, the women had to do the time consuming and tiring one of washing; "Hannah Crowell was there helping Sarah to wring out clothes..."<sup>180</sup> Another on going job was sewing and mending. Store bought clothes were a luxury so most clothing was hand made at home and had to be repaired constantly; "Aunt Lydia was there making a suit or clothes for Ansel."<sup>181</sup> Then, of course, there was the seemingly eternal job of house cleaning with particular attention given to the thorough cleaning done annually in the spring. Early in May of 1836, Almira dropped by just when her friends were well into spring cleaning.

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<sup>178</sup> Diary entry from September 15, 1833.

<sup>179</sup> Diary entry from September 28, 1836.

<sup>180</sup> Diary entry from August 15, 1836.

<sup>181</sup> Diary entry from March 26, 1835.

She joined in by doing some mending while the others, "...were busy cleaning house, whitewashing, painting etc..."<sup>182</sup> The decor of the house was also generally left up to the women; "Sarah and I took tea with Ellen and assisted her in putting up window curtains in the parlour--we compelled her to take down the looking glass, besides cleaning the room of several other "superficials"--and the apartment looked much more genteel at our exit than it did at our entrance..."<sup>183</sup>

While the women ran the operation of the home, men were still the masters of the home, the principal decision makers. Barrington society was as patriarchal as the rest of North American society in the 1830s. Almira commented on the influence and power a father wielded within the home when she wrote about the unfortunate circumstances of Miss Fanny Farrish. It seemed Fanny's father had sent her to live with and work for a Mrs. Daty C. whose reputation, according to Almira, left something to be desired. Fanny did not like this plan and was very upset. Almira felt Mr. Farrish was being unduly harsh but even she accepted the inevitable, that according to social practice and the Ten Commandments, children had to obey their father. The father's word was law; "...Fanny declared that she could not consent to it, upon which her Father threatened to cast her off entirely...I hope Fanny will remain firm, but what can the poor girl do?...I feel very much interested concerning her and hope her unfeeling Father will yet relent and not force her to take a step so repugnant to her feelings."<sup>184</sup> Her hopes were in vain. Others must have felt as did Fanny and Almira for in the end a Miss Homer offered Fanny lodging for the winter. Having disobeyed her father, however, Fanny was indeed "cast off". "Her Father refuses to pay anything for her board", Almira recorded on October 14, 1833.<sup>185</sup>

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182 Diary entry from May 22, 1836.

183 Diary entry from August 1, 1833.

184 Diary entry from October 10, 1833.

185 Diary entry from October 14, 1833.

According to Edwin Crowell, the people of Barrington worked diligently to promote education in their community. He notes that after the passage of the Education Act in 1811 allowing for the establishment of free schools paid for by local assessment and government subsidy, the people of Barrington erected a schoolhouse at the Head.<sup>186</sup> In 1826, the government divided the colony into a series of districts and assigned commissioners to examine and licence teachers as well as to inspect the public schools. However, only males could be licensed and hired to teach in these public schools. James Mann Doanne was the first licenced teacher in Barrington, arriving in 1830. Interestingly enough, Almira makes no mention of him. The year that Almira began her diary, 1833, the Nova Scotia government awarded a grant of 50 pounds to Barrington to build a grammar school on condition that the community supply and equal amount of capital.<sup>187</sup> Once again, Almira makes no mention of a new school being constructed.

In spite of the absence of information about the local schools in Almira's diary, she does indicate that education was of some importance. A number of parents apparently chose to have their children taught privately by female teachers like Almira. She mentions in her diary a couple of other women like herself who had taken up teaching as a profession. One was a Mrs. McDonald, who may well have been a widow and needed the money; "Mrs. McDonald is at the Head. She intends teaching Mrs. Winthrop Sargent's children this winter."<sup>188</sup> The other was Sarah Ann, Almira's sister, who like Almira may have wanted to ease the financial burdens on her mother; "Sarah Ann is thinking of teaching school at Mr. Richardson's."<sup>189</sup>

Barrington had a long history of private schools dating back to the 1790s.<sup>190</sup> Schools taught by women in private homes were sometimes called Dame Schools and like

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<sup>186</sup> Crowell 308.

<sup>187</sup> Crowell 288.

<sup>188</sup> Diary entry from September 24, 1835.

<sup>189</sup> Diary entry from December 19, 1834.

<sup>190</sup> Crowell 308.

the government licenced teachers these women were boarded out with families in the community. As Almira noted many times, this arrangement was not always a happy one but the teachers had little choice in the matter. Crowell provided this description of the dame schools; "For a long time teachers 'boarded round' and received small tuition fees from their pupils. In the dame school the subjects were the three R's, spelling and needlework, particularly the making of samples."<sup>191</sup> Not until 1838 did Nova Scotia legalize the licensing of women as elementary school teachers. That change in qualification probably reduced the number of private teachers, although Almira's diary ends before female licensing began.

Almira says nothing about the subjects she taught, but one suspects she concentrated on the basics, reading, writing, spelling and deciphering. These were the subjects taught in the free schools at the time. What is clear from the diary is that class schedules and terms were erratic at best. So too was attendance. This was partly the consequence of there being no compulsory school attendance law. Also, since boys generally aspired to be farmers, fishermen, sailors or shipbuilders, they stayed in school just long enough to earn the basics or until they were physically developed enough to go to work. The girls tended to remain in school longer since their main objective was to marry and learn to become good mothers and homemakers.

Almira's class size seemed to fluctuate according to the season and the weather. The children came more regularly in the summer and fall than they did in the winter and spring. For example, in 1835, Almira took her vacation time in May and June. Similarly, in 1836, she wrote on April 3; "I have not kept school this winter...I commenced teaching school today."<sup>192</sup> As well, although she provides no explanation, her classes grew in size in 1835 with the arrival of some children from Sherose Island on June 29 and with the

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<sup>191</sup> Crowell 311.

<sup>192</sup> Diary entry from April 6, 1936.

and whatever fresh fruits and vegetables were available in season. In fact, Barrington was regarded as such a healthy spot that some people were sent out there to recuperate; "I was introduced to Miss Saunders...She is in ill health and has come here for the benefit of sea bathing."<sup>194</sup> The town was also fortunate in having the services of two trained doctors. The senior doctor was Dr. Geddes who resided at The Head. Originally from Scotland, he had practised for a time in Halifax before setting up office in Barrington in 1825. Not only did he look after the residents of Barrington but he also used horseback to reach outlying areas as far away as Tusket and Shelburne.<sup>195</sup> As in all small towns the doctor knew everyone and mixed with them socially as well as professionally. Dr. Geddes was no exception; "The Dr. waited upon me as far as the school house and I had quite an agreeable walk with him...".<sup>196</sup> As well, his children, Ellen and Andrew, were part of Almira's social set. Not surprisingly, when young Andrew drowned in the Clyde River the people of the community including Almira were devastated; "Our late companion was buried today. On that his premature death may have its due effect on all our hearts...".<sup>197</sup> Dr. Geddes was a fixture in Barrington society until he retired in 1859 and as Edwin Crowell writes, he, "became heartily attached to the people of Barrington among whom he lived."<sup>198</sup>

The second doctor was Dr. George Wilson who originally came from New Brunswick. He arrived in the community in 1834, an eligible young bachelor who boarded at Mr. Coffin's. Almira noted his arrival; "Dr. Wilson came in soon afterward with Mr. Coffin. He is a good looking, pleasant man."<sup>199</sup> However, it was not long before Matilda Wilson had caught his eye and they were married in August 14, 1836.

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194 Diary entry from August 30, 1833.

195 Crowell 320.

196 Diary entry from August 15, 1833.

197 Diary entry from September 17, 1833.

198 Crowell 84.

199 Diary entry from September 14, 1834.



About forty guests attended the wedding of the season including Almira; "Mr. White of Shelburne married them and I never saw the marriage service gone thro' with equal solemnity...".<sup>200</sup> He too remained in Barrington all his life and attended at the births and deaths of many of its residents, as well as seeing to their daily health care. He and his wife raised seven children, one of whom became a doctor and practiced with his father.<sup>201</sup>

Like most people in Barrington, Almira rarely went to the doctor unless she was especially ill. Even in childbirth women were more likely to call on the local midwife or a well respected older woman in the community than on the doctor. The doctor was called only for serious illnesses and birth complications. He was expected to perform surgery and curing procedures like bleeding and blistering. Most of the time people relied on traditional cures passed on through the generation to deal with ague, tooth aches, common cholera and colds. People often made up plasters and poultices to deal with ailments as varied as boils and back aches. One day, for example, Almira attended Sarah Sargent who was suffering from a very sore throat; "I rubbed Sarah's throat with liniment and put a flannel cloth round it...".<sup>202</sup> Home cures were not always pleasant judging from one Almira cooked up for Jane Dennis when she was ill; "Jane was quite sick and I undertook to doctor her. I do not know how she came on with the dose I prepared for her but I think she required her throat tinned before taking it, being chiefly composed of black pepper."<sup>203</sup> After her near drowning, Almira was tended to by Mrs. Sargent who tried to give her something to sleep well; "Mrs. Sargent insisted upon my taking some warm peppermint and going to bed immediately--which I did. She then wished to place bottles of warm water around me but I objected to this, as I merely needed rest."<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Diary entry from August 14, 1836.

<sup>201</sup> Crowell 321.

<sup>202</sup> Diary entry from August 16, 1835.

<sup>203</sup> Diary entry from September 14, 1835.

<sup>204</sup> Diary entry from February 6, 1833.

When someone was ill enough to need help there was always a friend or family member to help out. Such was the advantage of the small, closely knit community where the extended family was the norm. For example, one evening Almira noted; "Sarah has gone to sit up with Mrs. Wilson who is ill."<sup>205</sup> For someone away from home, like Almira, without the advantages of an extended family, it was a relief to know someone cared enough to help you; "I have won Aunt Hannah's heart, by some means or other, for she told me if I ever was sick in Barrington she would come and nurse me."<sup>206</sup>

The two things most feared in the town were tuberculosis and cholera. Both were a concern in the 1830s because they were common and virtually incurable. Almira mentioned tuberculosis, or consumption as it was known, several times. She was most upset when Dr. Geddes announced that it looked as though her sister, Clara, probably was consumptive; "He informed me my sister Clara was ill, and said he thought her consumptive...it went like a dagger to my heart and I could scarcely forbear screaming."<sup>207</sup> Fortunately, Clara eventually recovered. She was one of the lucky ones. Many did not.

In 1834, a cholera epidemic struck the Maritime region. It ravaged Halifax before moving on to Saint John. The number of ill and dying was so great that the Lieutenant Governor, Sir Colin Campbell, even took to helping in the streets of Halifax.<sup>208</sup> News of the epidemic quickly spread to the South Shore. On August 12, Almira recorded; "We have heard today that the cholera is in Halifax."<sup>209</sup> The intelligence has affected me greatly."<sup>210</sup> It affected everyone as there was little one could do to battle the epidemic's

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<sup>205</sup> Diary entry from April 15, 1835.

<sup>206</sup> Diary entry from November 6, 1833.

<sup>207</sup> Diary entry from September 2, 1833.

<sup>208</sup> B. Russel and J. Conwell, Nova Scotia Blue Book and Encyclopedia (Halifax: 1932) : 95.

<sup>209</sup> See G. Bilson, A Darkened House: Cholera in 19th Century Canada. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980.

<sup>210</sup> Diary entry from August 12, 1834.

lethal progress. Death could come quickly as was the case with, "poor Elizabeth Crouch who died of the cholera after six hours illness."<sup>211</sup> Dr. Geddes in trying to maintain calm suggested that he did not believe the extreme nature of the reports being received.<sup>212</sup> In reality, he did know, having received a directive from the Lieutenant Governor as to the procedures he was to implement in the event, "cholera morbus" reached Barrington. He was to set up a quarantine and detain all vessels unless they had received a medical clearance from the quarantine station.<sup>213</sup>

Dr. Geddes could not keep the awful truth from the people of Barrington for long even if it did take several days for information to get from the capital to the rural communities. As was often the case, news arrived via a vessel which had sailed from Halifax to Barrington; "At length the appalling intelligence that the cholera with all its attendant horror is raging in Halifax is confirmed. A vessel arrived this morning which had brought accounts that fully establish the fact."<sup>214</sup> Almira's reaction was that of most people; "Oh Heaven, prepare us to meet it for it is near to impossible that we can escape it."<sup>215</sup> There was, however, one traditional way of preparing for such a horror, a public fast. This allowed the community as a body to pray for deliverance, to cleanse their spiritual selves, as well as cleaning their physical bodies of impurities. In the 1830s many in British North America were followers of Samuel Thomson, of Upper Canada, who had published a New Guide to Health in 1832. In it he encouraged the practice of fasting arguing that, "all disease is caused by clogging the system and all disease is removed by restoring the digestive powers..."<sup>216</sup> Hence, the interest in fasting. On Wednesday, September 17, 1834, Barrington held such a public fast. Perhaps it was good luck.

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<sup>211</sup> Diary entry from September 19, 1834.

<sup>212</sup> Diary entry from August 13, 1834.

<sup>213</sup> PANS, MG100 Vol 145, file B.

<sup>214</sup> Diary entry from August 28, 1834.

<sup>215</sup> Diary entry from September 2, 1834.

<sup>216</sup> C. Godfrey, Medicine for Ontario (Belleville: Mika Publishing, 1979) : 21.

Perhaps it was divine deliverance. Perhaps it was the public fast. But, whatever it was, on October 14, Almira reported that the crisis had passed and Barrington had been spared the cholera.<sup>217</sup>

In spite of the relative good health of Barrington, death was an ever present threat. For some it came as a result of old age such as the deaths of the elderly John Crowell and "poor old Aunt Didy" Crowell.<sup>218</sup> For others death came suddenly and unexpectedly as the result of an accident such as the drownings of Andrew Geddes and William Kenny. But, perhaps the most common and disheartening deaths were those of infants, young children and mothers in childbirth. Many children died before they reached the age of five.<sup>219</sup> This was a general concern at the time, partly owing to the limited resources available in the event of infections, early childhood diseases like whooping cough, diphtheria and measles, and various birthing complications. After all, there were no antibiotics and no anesthetics. Illnesses that are treatable and curable today were often fatal in the 1830s, particularly for young children.

Almira did not always provide explanations for the deaths of the children but there were a number of entries about dying children during the period covered in her diaries. One was the death of her little nephew; "I received a letter from Sarah Ann this morning announcing the death of Clara's little boy and the extreme grief of its mother."<sup>220</sup> It may have been that the child had consumption since his mother was suffering from that disease at the time.<sup>221</sup> Another child's death that upset Almira personally was that of the baby son of Mr. and Mrs. Hichens, the lighthouse keepers on Seal Island. The poor parents, in an effort to save their child, brought him off the Island to see Dr. Geddes on October 13, 1835, but there was really no hope. The little one died on the morning of October 15;

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<sup>217</sup> Diary entry from October 14, 1834.

<sup>218</sup> Diary entry from August 27, 1835.

<sup>219</sup> B. Kalman, *Early Settler Children* (Toronto: Crabtree Publishing, 1982) : 42.

<sup>220</sup> Diary entry from November 11, 1833.

<sup>221</sup> Diary entry from December 26, 1833.

"On my way I called to see the sick child--poor little thing! It was apparently in the agonies of death."<sup>222</sup> There were other children, less well known to Almira, whose deaths were also recorded in her diary. Not surprisingly when Mrs. Sargent's newborn son became ill there was much worry in the household; "The baby has been poorly today. I hope it will live. Mrs. Sargent's heart seems bound up in it and this is not strange all things considered."<sup>223</sup> The baby recovered slowly but it was well enough to be taken outdoors for its first time on October 8. As Almira observed; "Dying is hard work even to a child." No one ever grew accustomed to this sadness even though baby deaths were uncommon; "I pitied Mr. Hichens bending over the little sufferer wrung his hands and seemed to feel in his own body every pang his child was enduring."<sup>224</sup>

The agonies of a mother dying as a result of complications during or after childbirth were no less heart rending. Such difficulties were common in the early nineteenth century.<sup>225</sup> The place of the mother in the household was so important that the loss of a mother placed a family, not only in turmoil, but its very wholeness in jeopardy. Sometimes, if a father could not cope the children would have to be separated and sent to live with other family members or friends. When the mother of two girls in Shelburne died Almira wrote, "Poor unhappy creatures."<sup>226</sup> Almira, therefore, was much concerned for her sister Sarah Ann after she gave birth to a son on the evening of October 18, 1836; "I staid all night and slept in her chamber as Jane had been up nearly the whole night before."<sup>227</sup> Perhaps the saddest death of all was that of Mrs. John Sargent who left behind a newborn as well as four other children; "Mrs. Sargent is dying. I do not think she will live till tomorrow morning...The grief of her husband, the tears of

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222 Diary entry from October 16, 1835.

223 Diary entry from August 8, 1835.

224 Diary entry from October 14, 1835.

225 Kalman 35.

226 Diary entry from January 22, 1834.

227 Diary entry from October 26, 1836.

his children...Mrs. Robertson has had the little babe this fortnight past. Poor wee thing. It is in good hands...".<sup>228</sup> After observing the eldest daughter in tears over her mother's deceased body, Almira captured the true meaning of the death of a mother; "What can supply the loss of a mother?"<sup>229</sup> But, life went on and people learned to cope with the regularity of death. Family and friends would come to assist the bereaved families and ease the period of adjustment.<sup>230</sup>

Funerals were generally community affairs if only because everyone knew everyone else. In one way or another, the passing of a child or an adult affected or touched most people in such a small community. Attending the funeral was not only a way of showing respect for the deceased and support for the bereaved, but it was an occasion for the community to come together in a common interest. When Mr. W. Kenny drowned Almira said of his well attended funeral, "I scarcely ever saw such a concourse of people assembled."<sup>231</sup> In the case of Mr. John Crowell's funeral she wrote, "I suppose nearly 500 people were assembled on the occasion. Of course, all our set was there."<sup>232</sup>

Almira attended many funerals while she lived in Barrington and she wrote of a number of them in some detail thereby providing historians with information on the funeral practices and customs of the community. The local practice was to bury the body the day after death occurred; "Mr. Isaac Knowles died yesterday morning after not one day's illness and was buried according to the Barrington custom today."<sup>233</sup> Since there were not funeral homes, the body was kept in a private home until the interment service. Such was the case on Sherose Island when Mrs. John Sargent died; "the funeral was

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228 Diary entry from August 4, 1835.

229 Diary entry from August 6, 1835.

230 Conrad, *No Place Like Home* 14.

231 Diary entry from September 11, 1835.

232 Diary entry from April 20, 1835.

233 Diary entry from May 15, 1836.

numerously attended. I and Margaret and Bessy went on the Island in a boat. The procession left the house at half past nine and we reached the Head a little before eleven...All the others walked separate. The men together and the women together."<sup>234</sup> Almira contined with a description of the arrival of the casket at the Methodist chapel:

When we reached the Chapel door, old Grandma Doane supported by her daughter-in-law came tottering down the stairs to look for the last time upon the face of her daughter. She prayed audibly for support as she approached the coffin and she was supported wonderfully. I never was present at a more affecting scene. She thanked Mr. Sargent for his kindness to her child and blessed her grandchildren as they stood weeping around her. Poor John cried as if his heart was breaking! There was scarcely a dry eye among the assembled multitude."<sup>235</sup>

The death of a dear friend or near family member was appropriately mourned according to the custom of the day. For very close family members a woman wore black for a period of time followed by mauve or deep purple. Slowly, over the ensuing year, one would return to brighter colours. For a dear friend, one could choose to honour their passing and memory for whatever length of time one felt was necessary. Almira chose to set aside one social season to mourn Mrs. John Sargent. This was the only time she mentioned wearing mourning dress, although she wrote of helping others prepare their mourning attire. In one such instance she assisted Sarah and Janet Robertson and Maria Osborne in making a mourning gown for Mrs. William Sargent to wear.<sup>236</sup> Almira felt the passing of Mrs. Sargent particularly deeply because of her kindness to Almira when she first boarded on the Island; "I have busy making mourning for myself this week. I felt as if I could not rest without paying tribute of respect to the memory of Mrs. Sargent. True, I have fine clothes and no scarcity of them but I willingly lay them aside for a season."<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Diary entry from August 7, 1835.

<sup>235</sup> Diary entry from August 7, 1835.

<sup>236</sup> Diary entry from September 1, 1835.

<sup>237</sup> Diary entry from August 14, 1835.

Like funerals, weddings were church based ceremonies which often drew together a large number in the community. Unlike funerals, however, weddings were generally happy occasions and whether one attended depended upon receiving an invitation . The invitation was determined by one's family relationship or friendship with the couple. Judging from the number of weddings Almira attended it would seem that Barrington was home to many young men and women in their twenties and thirties and that she knew most of them quite well. In many respects Barrington was a young town as evidenced by the number of young adults and young children. It was a flourishing community with plenty of employment opportunities, so that young people from Barrington were able to stay and raise their own families in the community of their birth. Hence, the strong sense of community and close family ties.

Many in Almira's crowd were married in the 1830s. With the exception of the rather hurried wedding of the pregnant Harriet Doane to John Homer, weddings in Barrington numbered between twenty-five and fifty guests. Almira described the wedding of Hannah Osborne; "Hannah Osborne was married yesterday afternoon. I was invited and so was Mary Ann--there were about 50 persons at the wedding--too great a number for comfort."<sup>238</sup> The wedding of Helena Kimbal was also well attended. Her wedding took up two days of celebrating, one for the ceremony and one for the partying; "Helena Kimbal is married today--Ann Crowell has gone to the wedding--tomorrow is the second day and half of Barrington are going."<sup>239</sup> Clearly this was an occasion for much of the community to share in the excitement. On the occasion of Telpha Smith's wedding to Alexander Hogg, Almira commented on the dress worn by the beautiful bride; "The bride looked very handsome. She was dressed in dark silk and wore a cap. The bridegroom looked well also..."<sup>240</sup>

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238 Diary entry from January 3, 1834.

239 Diary entry from January 23, 1834.

240 Diary entry from March 2, 1835.



Wedding preparations, then as now, involved a careful planning of who was invited, what was served and who sat with whom. Almira was asked to help with the last minute arrangements for Suzanne Kinney's wedding on July 24, 1833. The local invitations were hand delivered the day before the ceremony. Upon Almira's arrival the next day to help with the preparations, Uncle Tommy Crowell asked her to decide, "in what part of the room the ceremony should be performed." As well, she recorded, "Aunt Ruth (the bride's mother) insisted upon my overseeing the bridesmaid and directing her in the setting of the table--with both of which requests I gravely complied..."<sup>241</sup> But fancy, large weddings were not to Almira's taste. She much preferred the more intimate and relaxed wedding of her friend Urbane Crowell who was married on November 10, 1833. Almira's contribution to the preparation for twenty-six guests was "getting our fly traps ready."<sup>242</sup> Even in November flies buzzing around guests and food were not welcome. Urbane's wedding began at 3:00pm and the partying afterwards continued until well into the evening.

Also, as was the custom, Urbane's wedding banns were published three times at the meeting house before the wedding took place, allowing plenty of time for someone to come forward to prevent the ceremony from proceeding if there was reason to do so; "Urbane was published yesterday--I am glad matters are brought so near a conclusion but feel sorry to lose Urbane..."<sup>243</sup> No one came forward to disallow this wedding but it did indeed happen once while Almira was in Barrington. The case involved William Kenny who was to marry Betsy Hopkins in October 1835. The wedding was cancelled when it was discovered Kenny already had a wife in Dublin, Ireland. Almira's words of wisdom

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<sup>241</sup> Diary entry from July 25, 1833.

<sup>242</sup> Diary entry from november 8, 1833.

<sup>243</sup> Diary entry from October 21, 1834.

on the subject were simple and to the point; "I feel sorry for poor Betsy, tho' I think her fortunate to have escaped an union with a person so unprincipled."<sup>244</sup>

In many ways the church was the centre of spiritual and secular life in Barrington. In Barrington in the 1830s there were three places of worship. All three were open to everyone and were a gathering places for social nourishment as well as spiritual regeneration. Such had been the tradition in Barrington since the arrival of the New England Planters in the 1760s. Congregationalists in the majority, these hard working Protestants had placed much emphasis on marking the Sabbath with Bible readings, prayers and hymn and psalm singing.<sup>245</sup> At first, they had met each Sunday in each others' homes but by 1765 a meeting house had been built at The Head, making it the oldest non-conformist Protestant meeting house in Canada.<sup>246</sup>

The old Meeting House, as it became known, was built by Joshua Nickerson. He began with framing brought from New England. There were gables on the east and west ends. Inside there was a tall wall pulpit designed to emphasize the importance of the sermon in the service. Because of the cost the doors and window panes were not added for many years.<sup>247</sup> Almira attended many a service in this building; "Mrs. Dennis, Mercy, Lydia, Lovitt and myself all went to the Head for the afternoon as Mr. Harding preached in the old Meeting House."<sup>248</sup>

In 1835, the members of the Old Meeting House took out subscriptions to become shareholders. They were awarded voting privileges according to the amount of their subscription. With some of the money doored pews were added and pews were sold annually auction style until 1850.<sup>249</sup> In this way one could acquire the pew of their

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<sup>244</sup> Diary entry from October 17, 1835.

<sup>245</sup> Crowell 167.

<sup>246</sup> Dennis 278.

<sup>247</sup> Dennis 278.

<sup>248</sup> Diary entry from August 18, 1835.

<sup>249</sup> Crowell 271.

choice. Almira alluded to the practice of assigning pews, "The gallery was so full I was obliged to sit below in Mr. Osborne's pew."<sup>250</sup> Another time Almira noted, "Mr. Sargent came up in the gallery to take the names of the subscribers..."<sup>251</sup>

Services at the Meeting House, true to the democratic spirit of the Congregationalists, were open to anyone in the community including the Quakers.<sup>252</sup> Since there were no other formal churches in Barrington, those who wanted to worship on Sunday, regardless of whether they were Presbyterian, Episcopal or Congregationalist, attended the only church in the area. Services were conducted by community members until the arrival of the first New England clergy in 1770. However, when the American Revolution began, the resident minister, the Rev. Samuel Wood, returned to his New England home and throughout the period of the war Barrington had no ordained clergy. Once again the running of the services fell to the senior elders of the church, people like Solomon Smith and Thomas Crowell. They conducted two services each Sunday, a day given over to worship and catechism study. There was to be no formal visiting, no physical labour and as little cooking as possible.<sup>253</sup>

It was during the revolutionary period that a spiritual revival was experienced in Barrington. Having been abandoned by their clergy, the Barringtonians felt the absence of a sense of direction in their lives. This was exacerbated by the poor economic conditions, the physical isolation and the ever present danger of privateer attack. Any sympathy they might have felt initially for the revolutionary cause quickly dissipated. As George Rawlyk has noted in his book, A People Highly Favoured by God, "to the Barringtonians 'Descendents from America', it was hard to accept that they had to be threatened...this type of introduction into revolutionary rhetoric made it difficult for them

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Dennis 279.  
 250 Diary entry from March 9, 1935.  
 251 Diary entry from October 1, 1835.  
 252 Crowell 111.  
 253 Crowell 167.

to accept the fact that the American colonists were battling for the Lord."<sup>254</sup> Into this spriritual and political leadership vacuum came the charasmatic, itinerant evangelical preacher Henry Aline.

While the organized churches were appalled by Aline's extravagant mannerisms, Henry Aline won his way into the hearts of the people. His message seemed to be what many rural Nova Scotians were seeking and Barringtonians were no exception. Aline preached on Sherose Island in 1782 and at The Head in 1785. Aline preached of a loving God and stressed the importance of conversion, of seeing the true way in order to acheive redemption and entry to Heaven. In the midst of political and economic chaos, Aline promised spiritual peace and heavenly rewards.<sup>255</sup> For many, Aline's message harkened back to the evangelical doctrines of the New Light preachers the Planters had known in New England before they had moved to Nova Scotia.<sup>256</sup> Its familiarity provided a much needed sense of security and justification for the neutral position they had adopted.

New Lightism once again filled the hearts and souls of many Barrington residents. As in other parts of Nova Scotia, the 1780s witnessed a religious reawakening in Barrington. Thomas Crowell and Obediah Wilson, in particular, took up the New Light cause in the community. Aline encouraged the converts to gather together in a common place of worship of their own.<sup>257</sup> In response, a new meeting house was built on Sherose Island. Thereafter, the Old Meeting House at The Head tended to be the meeting place for those who held to the practices of the organized churches such as Anglican, Presbyterian and Congregational. The New Lights attended the Island Meeting House noted for its high galleries, "the Meeting House was croweded and I really trembled lest

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<sup>254</sup> G. Rawlyk, A People Highly Favoured of God (Toronto: Macmillan Publishing, 1972) :65.

<sup>255</sup> J.M. Bumstead, Henry Aline reprint (Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1984) : 50.

<sup>256</sup> Rawlyk 85.

<sup>257</sup> Rawlyk 92.

the galleries should give way...".<sup>258</sup> Almira often went to service here, particularly when she lived on the Island, "Mr. Norton preached in the Island Meeting House, and I attended both morning and afternoon."<sup>259</sup>

A third place of worship was built at The Head in 1861.<sup>260</sup> This was the Methodist Church, known locally as the Chapel. It had a striking tall steeple that could be seen as one came in the harbour. About the same time Aline was travelling around Nova Scotia in the 1780s, another preacher was also riding from settlement to settlement on horseback. His message was less evangelical in flavour, but for some, no less impressive. The Rev. William Black, or "the Bishop", as he was nicknamed, was a Methodist clergyman. He appealed to those who felt no spiritual satisfaction in the traditional churches but were not inclined to abandon the organized church totally. Black stressed the sinfulness of humanity and the need for regeneration through faith. In 1789, he was appointed Methodist Bishop for the Maritimes and Newfoundland, hence the nickname.

Almira attended the Chapel with much the same degree of regularity as she did the two Meeting Houses. It appears from her diary, that many in town did the same, generally attending worship twice a day on Sundays. The choice of place seemed to depend on who was preaching and at what time; "I went to the Head with the rest of the Island girls--the Chapel was crowded and the heat excessive...after dinner we went back to Chapel...".<sup>261</sup> The preaching must have been excellent or the soul in need of repair, for in spite of the August heat, Almira added on another occasion; "I could willingly have

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<sup>258</sup> Diary entry from November 18, 1833.

<sup>259</sup> August 5, 1833.

<sup>260</sup> Crowell 250.

<sup>261</sup> Diary entry from July 20, 1833.

sat an hour longer."<sup>262</sup> The leading Methodist families included those of John Sargent, Samuel O. Doanne and Joseph Homer.<sup>263</sup>

Although they had separate places of worship in Barrington, the Methodists, Allinites and Congregationalists often attended each other's meetings in order to hear well known preachers regardless of their religious affiliation. After all, going to hear a flamboyant preacher or hear people speak of their conversions was as much entertainment experience as it was a religious one. One might not always identify with the emotional rhetoric but it was unlikely one would leave totally unaffected; "Charles Knowles preached at the Island Meeting House and I went to hear him. They had a very lively meeting and tho' I could not approve of the extravagant behaviour of a few individuals who were present, there was some whose happiness I envied."<sup>264</sup>

Even in the 1830s, there would have been those like Uncle Tommy and Squire Crowell who remembered the evangelical preaching of William Black and Henry Alline. But, by then, there had been some significant changes within the New Light community, and to some extent within the Methodist one as well. Part of the change revolved around one of their own, Theodore Seth Harding. Harding was born in Barrington to Planter parents in 1773. At the age of eight he witnessed the visit from Henry Alline and resolved early on to dedicate his life to reading the news of the gospel. However, rather than becoming an Allinite, he chose, first, to become a Methodist preacher. Although he was an extremely popular preacher, Harding's belief in predestination was unacceptable to the Methodist church and in 1795 he became a Baptist minister, moving closer to the New Light tradition. Brother Harding was also a firm believer in adult baptism by immersion and he encouraged the New Light followers in Barrington, and elsewhere in the colony, to adopt the Baptist baptismal practices and to be converted.

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<sup>262</sup> Diary entry from August 19, 1833.

<sup>263</sup> Crowell 249.

<sup>264</sup> Diary entry from September 27, 1835.

The practice of baptism by immersion had been common in New England in the eighteenth century even with Congregationalists, but when the Planters arrived in Nova Scotia most abandoned the practice owing to the coldness of the local waters. However, the fervour of preachers like Harding and one of his first converts who was later ordained, Thomas Crowell, convinced many to re-establish the custom. By the 1830s, adult baptism by immersion was common with the now Baptist congregation at the two meeting houses. Nevertheless, it would seem the topic was still a source of some discord in the community, "Went to hear Mr. Ashley at Island Meeting House. I did not feel pleased with the sermon. Neither did Mrs. Sargent...The subjects of it were baptism (the mode) and other controverted points."<sup>265</sup> The Methodists, meanwhile, continued the practice of infant baptism with a pouring of water over the forehead. Almira mentioned one such baptism; "The two baby boys were christened today by Mr. Webb, also little Elira."<sup>266</sup>

Adult baptisms far out numbered infant baptisms in Barrington during Almira's period. This was partly due to the numbers of former Congregationalists and Allinites who converted to the Baptist faith at this time. Many of those baptised were older residents like Miss Crowell; "Old Miss Molly Crowell was baptized after meeting..."<sup>267</sup> Like funerals, the baptisms often attracted large crowds. Undoubtedly some of those attending did so as much out of curiosity as out of religious fervour. Usually the baptisms took place during the summer and early autumn in order to ensure that the water was not unbearably cold. Herman Kenny and Matilda Wilson were baptized by Rev. Mr. Ashley on the afternoon of October 18, 1835; "...an immense concourse of people were assembled to witness the ceremony. Matilda looked pale but pretty and interesting and impressive. She seemed calm and collected. Not so her companion. He

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<sup>265</sup> Diary entry from October 18, 1835.

<sup>266</sup> Diary entry from September 25, 1835.

<sup>267</sup> Diary entry from August 16, 1835.

was immersed after her and floundered and struggled in the water like an overgrown porpoise."<sup>268</sup> On July 19, 1935, Almira noted the large attendance at the baptism conducted by the Rev. Charles Knowles; "Charles Knowles preached and after morning service baptized Betty Osborne. The ceremony took place near Mr. Seth Wilson's. There was an immense concourse present."<sup>269</sup>

By the early 1800s, the Barrington Allinites had pretty well converted to the Baptist faith and the Island Meeting House was their place of worship. However, within the Baptist community there was a serious rift between those who advocated open communion, which had been the tradition in Barrington since the first Congregationalist meetings, and those who advocated closed communion. The latter was the position adopted by the Baptist Association of Nova Scotia. In general, the closed communion Baptists tended to be those attending the Allinited Island Meeting House, while the open communionists attended the Old Meeting House at the Head. The Rev. Seth Harding and his cousin, the Rev. Harris Harding, both believed in the open communion practice a concept which appealed to the old Barringtonians; "Mr. Harris Harding preached...He had a very large congregation. Several people from Clyde were there beside a great number from the Head."<sup>270</sup> However, younger Baptists were moved by the preaching of the Rev. Jacob Norton who called for closed communion.<sup>271</sup> Nortonites, as his followers became known, tended to congregate at the Island Meeting House. Norton certainly was by all reports an effective preacher:

Mr. Norton preached in the Island Meeting House and I attended both morning and afternoon--the world say what it pleases of him, he certainly possesses talents of no ordinary stamp--and had his opportunities of acquiring knowledge (I speak of literary attainments) been equal to his capacity he

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268 Diary entry from October 18, 1835.

269 Diary entry from July 19, 1835.

270 Diary entry from August 18, 1834.

271 Crowell 252.



would have risen to celebrity, in whatever profession he might have chosen. If some of my acquaintances were to see the eulogism I have just written they would pronounce me a complete "Nortonite"--but this is not the case. I admire his talents as a public speaker...<sup>272</sup>

The split between the Baptists seemed to focus around the two leading preachers on the subject of communion. Even though Barrington Baptists might continue to meet together from time to time, the tension between the two groups was obvious even to an Anglican like Almira. In the summer of 1833, for instance, she noted, "Mr. Norton's disciples prayed heartily for him in meeting but Uncle Tommy and Nezer did not seem to fellowship them much."<sup>273</sup> Another time Almira alluded to rumours that were circulating regarding Norton's character. She suggested that the comments might well be nothing but a form of character assassination designed by his opponents; "His character as a private individual I know nothing of except heresay--if he has been guilty of the crimes laid to his charge, I ought to detest him--but how do I know that these reports are the forgeries of slander."<sup>274</sup> In the end, the split was partly resolved by the work of the Rev. Asa McGray.<sup>275</sup> McGray visited Barrington several times but Almira only notes his presence and makes no comments about the content of his preaching; "Mr. Reynolds preached to a crowded auditory, a great number from The Head having come down. Mr. McGray and Uncle Tommy were there likewise."<sup>276</sup> Nevertheless, finally in 1837 the rift was mended.<sup>277</sup> That year all Baptists became Free Baptists and adopted the Island Meeting house and their spiritual gathering place. Closed communion became the practice.

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<sup>272</sup> Diary entry from August 5, 1833.

<sup>273</sup> Diary entry from August 26, 1833.

<sup>274</sup> Diary entry from August 5, 1833.

<sup>275</sup> George Levy, The Baptists of the Maritime Provinces 1753-1946 (Saint John: Barnes-Hopkins, 1946) 238.

<sup>276</sup> Diary entry from September 22, 1834.

<sup>277</sup> Crowell 255.

Meanwhile, the Methodists welcomed one and all to their revival and prayer meetings as the Chapel in Barrington. Like the Baptists, whether Nortonites or Hardingites, they were served by itinerant clergy through much of the 1830s. Mr. Padman and Mr. Webb were regular preachers. Generally there were two services each Sunday. On Sunday August 19, 1833, for example, Almira attended the Chapel; "Mr. Padman preached in the morning and Mr, Webb in the afternoon. I stopped to the prayer meeting for the first time--I felt solemn and wished I could feel as happy as some whom I heard pray."<sup>278</sup> Almira seemed to particularly enjoy the sermons of Mr. Webb; "I went to the Head to hear Mr. Webb preach--I like him very much--he had a numerous auditory..."<sup>279</sup> Sometimes, the clergy would remain for several weeks at a time and bring their family. Such was the case of Mr. Webb who arrived in the Fall of 1833 with his wife and mother. Almira and a friend stopped by to visit one afternoon; "Mr. and Mrs. Webb are very agreeable people and so to the old lady, Mr. Webb's mother. Mr. Webb read and prayed before we came away and I felt pleased he did so. He, I believe, gave us separate good advice..."<sup>280</sup>

When clergy were not available there were a number of elders in the community who could take the services and deliver sermons. After a funeral run by Uncle Tommy, Almira exclaimed that she was appalled by how poorly he had done the job; "I think I never have heard a text so miserably handled as was the one which Uncle Tommy selected."<sup>281</sup> Another time she criticized the sermon given by Uncle Nezer Crowell, "Uncle Nezer talked most ridiculously in the afternoon. He gave us the whole affair of Joseph and his mistress..."<sup>282</sup> Nevertheless, the Sabbath was duly and properly observed and the people reminded of God's word; "Uncle Nezer had prayed before we left...he read

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<sup>278</sup> Diary entry from August 19, 1833.

<sup>279</sup> Diary entry from July 9, 1833.

<sup>280</sup> Diary entry from September 15, 1833.

<sup>281</sup> Diary entry from March 30, 1835.

<sup>282</sup> Diary entry from March 2, 1835.

a chapter that had bullets in it."<sup>283</sup> Also during the winter months when the howling winds and cold temperatures made it impossible to use the meeting houses, people gathered in each other's homes to observe Sunday customs. Other times special private gatherings would be held. Sometimes, depending on the preacher, the gathering would even strain the resources of the house. Such was the case when the Baptist preacher, Charles Knowles, arrived from Yarmouth; "Uncle Obed gave out a meeting for Charles Knowles. It was to be held at Mr. Kensey's and to commence at early candlelight--all we Island girls went--every room in the house was filled."<sup>284</sup>

One of the central concerns of the Methodist community was missionary and conversion work among the "heathen" in remote areas of the world. This was highly valued because of its evangelical purpose in spreading the gospel and teachings of Christ. Within many rural communities like Barrington, the Missionary Society not only had a religious purpose but also served an important social role in the lives of the people, particularly the women. It provided an opportunity for social mingling and a chance for women to speak out publicly, beyond the confines of the home. The Missionary Society was very active in Barrington and its membership was open to both men and women, young and old. Almira often attended the meetings of the society which included the prayers, bible readings and hymn singing as well as discussion on missionary activities in places like Bermuda. Unfortunately, she did not describe what the content of the meeting discussion was; "There has been a Missionary Meeting at the Head this evening and I have just returned from it."<sup>285</sup>

Another organization that afforded the women of Barrington an opportunity to mix outside of the home and perhaps, to speak out on a social issue of some concern to

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283 Diary entry from March 2, 1835.

284 Diary entry from August 26, 1833.

285 Diary entry from October 27, 1833.

them was the Temperance Society.<sup>286</sup> The Puritan tradition, denouncing excessive consumption of alcohol was, at least, officially, alive and well in Barrington during Almira's time. An area noted for strict codes of conduct, humility, hard work, pious counsels and sobriety, it was not surprising that support for the temperance movement came from all parts of the community regardless of social status or religious affiliation. The concern here was temperance, not prohibition. The latter would have been very hard to enforce given that the ships of people like John Sargent and Obediah Crowell, regularly arrived with liquor from the West Indies.<sup>287</sup> Although it was illegal for them to sell the liquor, because they did not have government licences to do so, the fact was that it was not difficult to acquire alcohol when one wanted it.<sup>288</sup> Almira often mentioned the consumption of wine by the women as well as the men; "After drinking a glass of wine at Wreyton's we proceeded home;"<sup>289</sup> and again, "We called for a few minutes at Dr. Geddes where we got a glass of wine and piece of cake and then set off again."<sup>290</sup> Nevertheless, there must have been some concern about the abuse of liquor, particularly hard liquor such as rum. Undoubtedly, there was pressure from the various religious leaders to end, or at least control the consumption. In 1831, the Barrington Temperance Society was formed with the support of the Rev. Jacob Norton, and local worthies including Ebenezer Crowell, Winthrop Sargent and Thomas Crowell.<sup>291</sup> Similarly the role of the church in the temperance movement was felt again in 1833 when the Rev. W.W. Ashley, conducted a temperance meeting in Barrington at which 20 young men took the pledge.<sup>292</sup> Almira did not mention this achievement but she did note the

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<sup>286</sup> See Janet Noel, Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades before Confederation.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995.

<sup>287</sup> Crowell 315.

<sup>288</sup> Crowell 315.

<sup>289</sup> Diary entry from March 6, 1835.

<sup>290</sup> Diary entry from July 27, 1835.

<sup>291</sup> Crowell 315.

<sup>292</sup> Crowell 316.

day she added her name to the pledge sheet. It was October 7, 1835; "There was a Temperance meeting held at the Head last evening which I attended...I liked the meeting very much and had my name put down...The Rev. Mr. Cloney had arrived from Yarmouth and was there. He spoke most eloquently..."<sup>293</sup> Not that the Temperance meetings were without their heated debates and differences of opinion; "There was a temperance meeting at the Island...I attended and was very much amused by the squabbling that took place..."<sup>294</sup> But Almira had her reasons for supporting the temperance cause. As in everything else in her life, she abhorred excess and she had witnessed enough excessive consumption of alcohol to convince her that the temperance movement was an important vehicle, along with the church to ensure social stability and morality. With some disgust, she wrote about Ansel's behaviour after a party; "Ansel certainly had been drinking..."<sup>295</sup> Weddings were a favourite occasion for excessive drinking and such was the case it seems at Urbane Crowell's wedding; "...quite agreeable evening and it would have been still more so it had not been for Mr. Crowell who got a drunk as a coot and made himself mighty ridiculous..."<sup>296</sup>

Because Almira Bell was not writing with an eye to posterity, she often did not record the kinds of detail that future researchers would have wished. She does not always clarify to whom she is referring when she uses only initials to signify a person's name. She does not provide minutes of meetings of local organizations. She does not always conclude a story leaving one wondering what happened in the end. She rarely provides physical descriptions of people's appearances, clothes or educational levels. She says nothing about the problem or particulars within the business community, the shipping industry or the farming community. She says nothing about the political events

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293 Diary entry from October 7, 1835.

294 Diary entry from February 26, 1835.

295 Diary entry from April 20, 1835.

296 Diary entry from November 10, 1833.

of the day. She says very little about her own form of employment, that of school teaching. Instead, Almira writes about those things which concerned her most directly, her family, her friends and her faith. With a careful reading of the diaries, accompanied by a understanding of the historical times, one can, however, acquire a surprisingly full picture of life in Barrington, Nova Scotia, between the years 1833 and 1836. By the end one has a good idea whom they might meet were they able to move back into the 1830s. One would have some idea of how the community was laid out, what the family relationships were, what the economic activities were, who the social elite were, what people ate, what they did for entertainment, what they believed and how they expressed their beliefs and what were some of their social concerns. And, because, Almira was writing from a female perspective, one can gain some insight into what it was like for a young single woman living in Barrington at the time. Throughout there are references to aspects of life affecting young girls, single women, married women and widowed women. Such are the decoding possibilities of the diary.

## Conclusion

Diaries have long been a form of record keeping, a form of confessional and/or a form of literary expression throughout time. But, what is their value beyond the immediate needs of the diarist? According to Ellen Terry, the value of the diary changes with the passage of time:

What is a diary as a rule? A document useful to the person who keeps it, dull to the contemporary who reads it, invaluable to the student centuries afterwards, who treasures it!<sup>1</sup>

For the keeper of the diary this form of written expression may serve a number of very personal and intimate needs. It may be a record of events, a record of things important to the life of the writer, or a kind of memo filing system kept regularly or irregularly. It may be an outlet for personal emotions and thoughts, a kind of private confessional. Whatever its purpose, the diary is without a doubt, a "document useful to the person who keeps it."

For the contemporary who may by accident or intent read a diary, the material contained within may indeed be "dull" as Ellen Terry suggests. After all, reader and diarist, as contemporaries, have most likely shared the same environment and same events. Beyond gossip and curiosity, the contemporary reader has little interest in another person's diary, particularly since most diaries lack the sparkle of a work of fiction.

It is only after some time has passed that the diary emerges as a document of interest and value for someone other than the diarist. Unlike the contemporary, the reader from another time and place is intrigued by the unknown. The diary becomes a window opening into the private life of someone from the past. The events and thoughts

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<sup>1</sup> Betty Wylie, Reading Between the Lines: The Diaries of Women (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1995) 1.

recorded within the diary are not dulled by familiarity. Instead, the diary brings to life the past as seen through the eyes of the diarist and as experienced by the diarist. The diary draws the reader into the environment and times of the writer. Little wonder diaries become, as Terry noted, invaluable, treasured documents for students of social and cultural history. From the pages of diaries emerge intimate details, personal commentaries and evidence of daily rhythms of life which, only rarely, can be gleaned from the pages of political speeches, legislative papers and other public documents. This is why the value of any diary must not be underestimated, no matter how brief the entries or how short the time span covered.

Because of what they may reveal about a person or their time and place, diaries have been used as supplementary research tools for some time. Granted, they were not valued in the same way as more traditional official primary sources such as government documents and personal correspondence, but they were consulted in order to acquire a more intimate feeling for the life of a famous person or to confirm information gathered in other ways. However, diaries written by unknown individuals or by those who had had no particular role in history were long ignored by historians until the rise to academic respectability of social and cultural history in the second half of the twentieth century. A recognition that all persons, regardless of social and economic status, of sex or race, are part of historical development meant that diaries acquired an intrinsic research value of their own, far greater than that of just being supplementary documentation. They gained a new respect as research tools, opening doors to the past.

Diaries, like personal correspondence, are those special types of documentation which can transport a researcher back in time with some degree of intimacy and immediacy. They may be limited in their usefulness to some because they offer an account of a time and place as seen through the eyes of only one participant or bystander, but when combined with other sources, a much fuller and more accurate retelling of history can be achieved. As Veronica Strong-Boag argues, "diaries intersect with



existing data drawn for traditional documentation."<sup>2</sup> It is this blending of diary information with more traditionally retrieved documentation which has given diaries academic acceptance as research tools. As Betty Wylie observed in 1995, the diary form is finally being taken seriously both by historians "searching for more details and the texture of everyday life" and by literary critics "who see them as stories."<sup>3</sup>

The emergence of women's history as an area of study in the midst of the feminist movement and the growth in social and cultural history in the 1960s and 1970s meant that historians began to search out and examine women's diaries in particular. At first, the greatest curiosity was reserved for diaries written by women of some note, women who had stood out in the evolution of women's rights, those who had broken down barriers in such areas as education, politics, medicine and business. Left to the last were the diaries of little known or unknown women living in isolated, rural Canada. As Laurie Alexander noted in 1989 in her Master's thesis, "An Interdisciplinary Approach to Maritime Women's Diaries: Laura Wood, Victoria Ross and L.M. Montgomery", "the journals that rural women have left to posterity deserve a much closer and detailed analysis."<sup>4</sup> Diaries written by rural women are every bit as rich in documentation and historical revelation as those written by women living in more urban centres on the country. After all, the domestic history of rural Canada is integral to an understanding of the development of urban Canada, whether one is examining economic, political, social or cultural matters. The development of urban, industrial Canada is rooted in the rural history of the country. And, key to that rural development was the part played by women. For example, the establishment and maintenance of the family farm depended as

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<sup>2</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Canadian Women's History (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1986) 3.

<sup>3</sup> Wylie 228-229.

<sup>4</sup> Laurie Alexander, "An Interdisciplinary Approach to Maritime Women's Diaries: Laura Wood, Victoria Ross and L.M. Montgomery (unpublished M.A. thesis for Atlantic Canada Studies Program, Saint Mary's University, 1989) 88.

much on the females in the family as on the males. Together they formed the economic unit which made the family farm possible.

An examination of the diaries of Almira Bell, written between 1833 and 1836, in the isolated, coastal community of Barrington, Nova Scotia, addresses Alexander's challenge. A careful examination and decoding of Bell's entries provide the historian, perhaps even the sociologist, with valuable information and insights into life in Barrington, in general, and into the life of Almira, in particular. As well, because of the way in which Almira tells her story and because of her own literary interests and activities, Almira's diary would also be a valuable research tool for the literary critic examining female literature in early nineteenth century Canada. It is an unique document. There was, after all, only one Almira Bell and only one diary written by her at that time. It has, to this point, never been fully decoded, let alone published. Her voice speaks from the past to the present through the medium of her diary. She speaks of her community and its residents; their activities, kinships, beliefs and customs. She speaks of herself; her sorrows, loves, fears and joys. She speaks of her life as a woman in a male dominated society.

Veronica Strong-Boag, in Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History, reiterates Laurie Alexander's plea for a more extensive use of women's diaries as research tools.<sup>5</sup> Strong-Boag recognizes the deficiencies in historical research if one were to depend solely on a diary or groups of diaries for evidence. But, like other non traditional research tools such as interviews and memoires, diaries must not be ignored just because they lack the academic seal of approval. They are far more than useless gossip, for even the gossip reveals something about social attitudes, social relationships and female attitudes and values. To ignore them is to ignore a valuable source of information. Women's diaries as historical research tools enhance and broaden the picture of women's

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<sup>5</sup> Strong-Boag 3.

history, one which has, until recently, had many blank or shady patches owing to an absence of reliable and substantive primary documentation. Women's diaries like Almira Bell's can fill in some of those gaps and bring detail and clarity to what has been little more than a general outline.

Diaries are valuable research tools for historians, sociologists and literary critics at a number of levels. The focus of this study has been to examine the diaries of Almira Bell for the purposes of historical reconstruction. Three kinds of historical reconstruction have been possible; the social and cultural history of Barrington in the 1830s; the history of women in a given time and place; and, the story of Almira Bell's personal life between 1833 and 1836. Historical reconstruction is the piecing together of an event, of an environment, of a person's life, of a community, based on bits of evidence drawn from documents created in the past. The diary is one such source, providing clues and actual data to be inserted into the historian's puzzle. By placing the diary clues into their political, social, economic and cultural contexts, based on evidence drawn from other more traditional primary and secondary sources, the historian can reconstruct the past, and thereby, gain an understanding of what took place and why. Additional sources may also provide verification of unsubstantiated clues in the diary which then make it possible for the researcher to pull the reconstructed historical puzzle together. Because diaries often record the mundane, ordinary aspects of daily life, they are invaluable in helping the historian appreciate and comprehend why certain things were done as they were and why certain things happened as they did. In spite of stories half told, persons unidentified and gaps in entries made, diaries are still one of the few forms of documentation available to the historian seeking the private, more intimate inside details of past events or persons. Similarly, a diary may help to explain certain customs or activities such as a game which is no longer a part of daily cultural life.

Little of a substantial nature has been written about the community of Barrington, particularly in the 1830s except the book by Edwin Crowell entitled, The Township of

Barrington, the book Following the Sea by Benjamin Doane and several shorter works by local amateur writers like Hattie Perry who wrote This Was Barrington and A Hole in the Fog. Most histories of Nova Scotia which deal with the period of the 1830s, such as J.M. Beck's Politics of Nova Scotia, focus on the seeds of political reform and responsible government which were being sown at the time in Halifax and Pictou County. There is little interest expressed in life in Barrington. In fact, Barrington is rarely mentioned in Nova Scotia history books except in conjunction with the arrival of the New England Planters, the privateering escapades of the American Revolution and the War of 1812-14, and the high regard in which sailors and shipbuilders of Barrington were held during the "Age of Sail." Otherwise, very little has been written. For that reason alone, Almira's diary is a valuable addition to Maritime historical literature and documentation, as it provides a tool for the reconstruction of Barrington's history.

From Almira's diary the researcher learns about her community and its people although little is revealed with respect to the political life of the community. However, a much can be learned about the social, economic and cultural life of the area. The economic activities in Barrington included fishing, shipping, shipbuilding, tanning, blacksmithing and school teaching, to name a few. The men of the community who were involved in shipping and trading were often away at sea for long periods of time, leaving the women of Barrington alone to care for families and their homes on their own. Women, such as Almira, who had to financially support themselves were employed as domestics, servants, teachers and seamstresses. Some of these women worked because their families needed the extra income, or because they were on their own with no other financial support, or because their husbands had died, or abandoned them, leaving them with little money. It is clear from Almira's diary that Barringtonians, whether male or female, were hard workers who felt a strong responsibility for the welfare of their families.

Almira's diary may also be useful to the historical geographer. She often mentions geographic locations in the area. Some of the places no longer exist except in memory but they are recorded in Almira's diary; Ghost Hill, the Kissing Bridge and the Big Rock. Other geographic features such as the divisions of the community into The Head, The Passage and The Neck are well defined in the diary. The social and economic relationships between them also become very clear in the diary. Almira records regional jealousies between the subdivisions in comments such as this one describing the girls from The Head as "suspicious uncharitable creatures."<sup>6</sup> She referred to her own group of friends as "our set". Such references as these would generally not be found in other histories but are recorded in Almira's diary, revealing the intensity of social and regional differences within Barrington as a whole. The social structure and social distinctions of Barrington were based on both economic status and where one lived in the area. Mention, for example, was made of the "Island girls", and the Shag Harbour men. Each distinct group was named and identified thereby leaving historians with a record of the various divisions within the community and surrounding areas.

Given the rather isolated location of Barrington and the limited forms of communication available, it is interesting to note to what extent Barringtonians were aware of things outside of their locale as well as Nova Scotia. Many of the men in the community sailed to the West Indies, Bermuda and the United States. They would bring back tales from exotic far away places and return with unique souvenirs such as coconuts, pretty shells and combs.

Mail was another important link for the people of Barrington with the outside world. It was generally transported by ship, wagon or by personal messenger. Without this form of communication, Almira like other Barrington residents would not have been able to keep in touch with family, to learn of events like the cholera epidemic in Halifax

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<sup>6</sup> Diary entry from September 2, 1833.

or to follow changes in tastes and style. Almira often mentioned the latest styles that were popular in Halifax or in places from which visitors had come. Large puffed sleeves, for example, were in vogue during the 1830s and Almira was one of the first women in Barrington to sport them in her area, much to the amusement of some like Dr. Geddes. Clearly although communication and transportation was rather slow in comparison to the present day, Barrington was not without its knowledge of other places and things that took place within the colony.

Genealogists and sociologists could learn much about kinships from Almira's diary. In it she mentions the names of many families including those dating back to Barrington's Planter origins, the Smiths, Crowells, Sargents and Wilsons. All these people interacted with each other socially and/or professionally. Even a perusal of the first names of community residents provides evidence of the deep Puritan values and beliefs of the early Barrington families; Israel, Obediah, Ruth, Mary, Hannah, and Asa. As well, the researcher can trace family relationships through two even three generations. For example, Almira describes courting relationships, marriages, births and deaths, all of which are clues for those trying to reconstruct family trees and kinship structures.

Those interested in the role of religion in community life would find Almira's diary to be a rich source of clerical names, religious attitudes and philosophical differences. The various religious institutions of the area included the Chapel, the Meeting House and the Old Meeting House. All three were frequented by most of the community members from time to time. The differences between the Methodists and Baptists sometimes became the cause of heated debate. Such was the case with baptism. While the Baptists practiced adult immersion, the Methodists held infant christenings. Strict moral codes were rooted in the Protestant heritage of the community. Almira mentioned how an unwed pregnant woman was publicly ridiculed in the Meeting House by those who did not respect her situation and felt the need to embarrass her in front of her community

members. Such happenings showed the values of the day and the place of women in such situations.

For those interested in healthcare and education in the 1830s, Almira's diary offers another kind of information. Home care was the norm. Visits to the doctor were reserved for serious problems that could not be treated with poultices or peppermint. The two doctors in the community are mentioned but no precise details of their methods are offered. Nevertheless, it is clear from Almira that the doctors were important, valued people in the community.

It is clear from the diary that life was something to be greatly valued in the 1830s. Death was an ever present fear regardless of one's age, sex or economic status. Accidents at sea associated with shipping and seafaring were always possible. Tuberculosis was a constant worry as many did not recover from that illness. The same was true of cholera as was shown in Almira's diary when an epidemic of that dreaded disease hit Halifax during the summer of 1834. Many in Barrington feared it would spread to the South Shore as well. Childbirth was another cause for concern as untreatable complications could arise with the mother shortly after giving birth or problems could occur with the baby. Almira mentioned a number of young mothers who did not live to see their babies grow up. Life was uncertain during Almira's day and even crossing a frozen river could be problematic if the ice gave way and the traveler was to fall through as Almira discovered. No wonder Barringtonians seemed to be preoccupied with their preparedness to meet their maker; "Yet, at no distant day, I, too, shall have become a disembodied spirit, and shall have been made acquainted with those secrets that Death alone can reveal. Awful, awful thoughts, Oh, my soul! May'st thou be prepared for an event so tremendous--and so certain!"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Diary entry from September 17, 1833.

Almira provides few details about educational practices in Barrington. But, her references to other private teachers like herself and to the local school house make it clear that education was valued by Barringtonians. One does learn, however, that schooling was not compulsory, attendance was irregular at best, and if Almira's students were as bored as she was, classes must have been dull; "I have not kept school this winter and my health and spirits are much the better for it."<sup>8</sup>

Almira's diary provides the social historian with brief but interesting glimpses into the social customs and attitudes common in Barrington in the 1830s. She speaks of such practices as public fasts, burying the deceased the following day, women being beaded or escorted to the bars, men and women attending quilting parties and community attendance at the places of worship. These may not have been unique to Barrington but they were part of life in that community. Almira, in fact, occasionally mentioned that such things were not done in her home town of Shelburne, for instance. The social customs and social life of the people of Barrington also encompassed their various forms of entertainment including parties, beach outings, dances, quilting parties, card games, house gatherings, taking tea, singing parties and formal dinners. All were an important part of how Barringtonians interacted as a community. Such practices and customs shaped community life in Barrington during Almira's life there.

For those seeking to reconstruct the history of rural women in a given place and time, Almira's diary is a most valuable tool. As the authors of Never Done: Three Centuries of Women's Work in Canada have said, "rural women are the millions who never became famous, for in these millions rests the history of women in Canada."<sup>9</sup> Women diarists tend, according to Betty Wylie to, "record their tasks and their tales, their

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<sup>8</sup> Diary entry from February 1836.

<sup>9</sup> The Corrective Collective, Never Done: Three Centuries of Women's Work in Canada (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974) 3.



personal stories and their search of self discovery."<sup>10</sup> These daily domestic rituals of cooking, cleaning, washing and sewing are what author Margaret Conrad calls "women's culture."<sup>11</sup> In diaries by rural women such as Almira Bell, the fabric of their daily lives are woven throughout their diary pages and the reader is able to learn many things about the woman's daily chores, activities and responsibilities. The woman's household duties and household influence within the sphere of her control in her roles as wife, mother or daughter are usually described in the diary, if ever so subtly. Diaries like Almira's are breaking the silence which, until recent years, "surrounded the so-called private sphere."<sup>12</sup> It was within this private sphere that the woman was in total control, and it was she who shaped the home which was the social centre for the men, children and women. The home was where births and funerals were held. The home was where children were raised and husbands supported. The home was where parties were held and school lessons were taught. The home was, as Almira's diary reveals, a place central to the lives of all those in the rural community and at the very centre was the woman.

Time in the rural woman's life was generally related to the domestic events in her life rather than to the public ones. Because of this, female issues and concerns were written from a female perspective and with a female understanding of such things as birthing and marriage. Female relationships between friends, sisters and mothers can, therefore, be examined in the daily diary entries of rural women. Almira describes what she and her friends do together and what they think of others in the community. She speaks of the activities of women like Mrs. W. Sargent and how she related to that family of seven girls. In her own case, Almira talks of her need for a "kindred spirit."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Wylie 227.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Conrad, Toni Laidlaw, and Anita Clair Fellman, No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women 1771-1938 (Halifax: Formac Publishing, 1988) 298.

<sup>12</sup> Conrad 1.

<sup>13</sup> Diary entry from August 6, 1833.

The relationships that women have with one another, such as those between women of the same age, or those of differing ages shows how women's relationships can differ in some ways. Almira's relationship with her same age friends was open and fun. They were free to laugh and explore the concerns of their lives. The relationships Almira had with older women were more reserved in spirit. She learned from women like Aunt Didy and Mrs. John Sargent and loved them dearly. Relationships were severed, of course, sometimes owing to death, sometimes to disagreement and sometimes to marriage. When her friend Urbane got married, Almira felt "sorry to lose Urbane."<sup>14</sup> The bond of both being single girls with few household responsibilities had been broken. The dynamics of the relationships changed as the lives of the women in them changed. Understanding the relationships that women had in their lives in a community like Barrington helps the researcher to understand the place of women within similar communities elsewhere in rural Canada at the same time. After all, rural women's lives were not so totally dissimilar.

Just as a woman's diary can tell about the relationships between and among women, it can also tell "what it is to be a female in a man's world."<sup>15</sup> The reader is given the perspective of how men and women relate to one another. Sometimes this view is quite different than that of a man's. The paternalistic and authoritarian role of the male figure was shown in Almira's diary in the case of Fanny Farrish who was sent away by her father, and Almira's comment concerning the situation was simply, "but what can she do" as it was her father's bidding. There was an importance of establishing relationships with men if a woman ever wanted to marry. According to Almira's accounts, men were presuming and forward as she described Thomas Crowell's actions one evening; "When we came away T. seized hold of me and declaring no one else should go with me, tried to

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<sup>14</sup> Diary entry from October 21, 1833.

<sup>15</sup> Wylie xvi.

hurry me off. The saucy fellow kept his cheek close to mine all the way. He is really getting wilder than ever."<sup>16</sup> Almira was very conscious of the social proprieties expected of her. Some couples took their relationships too far and if a woman were to become pregnant before marriage it seemed that the fault lay with her alone and she was cast off or ridiculed by everyone. The blame was on her for being a loose woman, nothing was said of the man involved.

Almira's diary also exposes the attitudes of men towards women in terms of their place as helpmate, wife, mother and housemanager. Men expected women to be proper, pure and unknowing of things sexual or worldly. For example, Almira was incensed that men would think women would not understand their sexual stories. Once when Thomas and Ansel were telling a rather off colour story and assuming the women would not understand she wrote, "I felt quite vexed at them both--they thought Jemima and I were two idiots--yet, simple as we were, we could understand their allusions...but I had heard by brother speak on the same subject when he little thought I heard--so much for the way in which I acquired my wisdom."<sup>17</sup> Almira also described the actions of the men in her community which she thought distinguished them as being male. She described men as drinkers who argued in public during the Temperance meetings. However, men were also portrayed as being rough and unfeeling. For example, when Mr. Sargent tried to kill a squirrel that was trapped in his house he noted, "Man by nature is a cruel animal."<sup>18</sup> She also recognized men had a softer side such as that exhibited by Ansel when he recited poetry to her. She also wrote of men as protectors who escorted the women home when a bull was loose in the road. She also spoke of the thoughtfulness of the men in her community who brought her mail, drove her to Shelburne or rescued her from drowning. Almira also recorded the foolishness of men particularly when they were trying to gain a

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<sup>16</sup> Diary entry from April 7, 1835

<sup>17</sup> Diary entry from January 3, 1834.

<sup>18</sup> Diary entry from July 14, 1836.

woman's attention. She called them "scarecrows", particularly when they were eyeing the women. These varied roles of the men in Almira's community, clearly reinforced the theory of the subordinate, "separate social and intellectual space occupied by women."<sup>19</sup>

The lifestyle of a respectable young woman is also revealed in Almira's diary. Some codes of conduct were well established and women were expected to follow them; "while we were on the beach, the girls amused themselves with firing off guns, charged only with powder, but for my part, I was not amazon enough to engage in such a sport."<sup>20</sup> Almira felt that she should not take part in such unladylike activities and she refused to participate, calling the others amazons. Women's roles and expectations were clear and Almira attempted to abide by them at all times. She did not want to be described as forward, unladylike or brazen.

In reconstructing the personal life of Almira Bell between 1833 and 1836, very little is known about Miss Bell, although she came from a highly respected Loyalist family which was one of the first to settle in the Shelburne area. Her poems were printed in the Halifax papers which gives evidence of her literary skills and suggests a certain public image. Perhaps she turned to writing because as the authors of Never Done suggest, "Writing is perhaps the easiest of the arts for women to pursue, since it requires no special equipment and it can be sandwiched into the daily routine of housework."<sup>21</sup> However, it is only rarely through the diary that one can learn much of a personal nature about Almira Bell. She may not have changed the world. It is unlikely she was known outside of Shelburne and Barrington, with the exception of her poetry, but she taught school and probably shaped the minds and attitudes of some young people in the community. Her personal accounts have now become matter of public record.

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<sup>19</sup> Conrad 299.

<sup>20</sup> Diary entry from July 30, 1834.

<sup>21</sup> The Corrective Collective 117.

Almira wrote about what she did, what she believed, what she feared and what she aspired to, as well as about her emotional and spiritual development. She recorded her relationships with men and how she viewed those relationships. On the whole, she saw herself as an intellectual superior. The diary reveals a mature woman in her late twenties torn between her dreams of being married and raising a family, as was the "norm", and her expectations that she would never marry and would have to fend for herself by being a teacher no matter how much she disliked the vocation.

She was a woman who cared deeply for her family but placed little confidence in the fidelity of friendships. She participated fully in community activities but did so with restraint and concern for her public image and her puritan values. Her life, like so many of her time and place was repetitious, toilsome and routine, although her domestic responsibilities were not as great as those of women who were married and had a household to run. Almira's diary was a place where she felt very comfortable to express herself freely about any aspect of her daily life. Overall, Almira may have thought that she was only scribbling trivial happenings, but to the researcher and historian, she was doing much more than that.

Diary research has come a long way since 1966 when G.G. Campbell's publication of the one year diary of Susan Dunlap, published in the Dalhousie Review was heralded as being on, "the cutting edge of new historical analysis, which focused on the ordinary folk, the farmers and labourers."<sup>22</sup> Today diaries are commonly used by researchers and more and more are being published in order to make them more readily available to the general public as well as the research community. Several recent Maritime examples include Mary Peck's editing of the diaries of Sadie Harper, A Full House and Fine Singing (1992), Margaret Conrad's co-editing of a number of diaries in No Place Like Home (1988) and Della Stanley's editing of Kate Shannon's diary, A Victorian Lady's Album

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<sup>22</sup> Alexander 33.

(1994). No longer are women's diaries regarded as nothing more than records of the "timeless trivia of a woman's days."<sup>23</sup> Having entered the realm of historical respectability, the legitimacy of the process of decoding diaries is no longer questioned. The process now accepted, the work itself has to be done. Diaries like those by Almira Bell have to be collected, transcribed and decoded. What was for Almira a way of filling "a few of my lonely hours" in a constructive manner, has become for modern day researchers a yet unexploited resource for historical reconstruction and interpretation.

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<sup>23</sup> G.G. Campbell, "Susan Dunlap: Her Diary," The Dalhousie Review 46 1966: 222.

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