

“Then to Sewing” Clothing the Family in Nineteenth-Century Upper Canada

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Abstract:

This article considers the Rural Dairy Archive project, of the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, as a source for dress historians. The article was inspired by the lack of information that often accompanies the dresses of ordinary people which enter museum collections. After discussing some of the challenges facing dress historians working with this type of clothing the article introduces the Rural Dairy Archive, highlights some of the strengths of the diaries as evidence, and considers two examples; the diaries of Eliza Bellamy and Ann Amelia Day Sunley.

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Introduction

This paper arose as I considered a number of dresses that had entered the City of Toronto collection from the Alan Suddon collection of dress. When I arrived in Canada in 2012, I worked on assessing and deciding the future of this private collection of historic dress, which could no longer be cared for by its owner (Kim and Mida, 2018). A key part of the project was ensuring that at least part of the collection ended up in Canadian collections including the Royal Ontario Museum and the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection in Toronto, and the McCord Museum in Montreal. Among the objects chosen for the City of Toronto collection were a number of dresses that were selected for their mundane and everyday nature, precisely the sort of the dress that is less likely to have survived than the showy satins or special silks of wedding dresses, evening wear and christening gowns. They included an 1880s brown print two-piece cotton dress, with a pattern of pink and light green sprigs on dotted with orange (fig. 1). Alan Suddon had purchased the dress for \$50 in 1979 from a Toronto dealer who had in turn purchased it from an Ottawa Farm Valley Sale. There was no further information about the dress however, and no indication of who might have worn it.

In autumn 2016, when the printed textile specialist Philip Sykas was in Toronto as the Gervers Fellow at the Royal Ontario Museum he visited the City of Toronto Collection and assessed a number of nineteenth-century printed garments in the collection, many from the Alan Suddon Collection. Sykas was able to identify the print of this dress as a six colour roller print. With its uneven stitching and dyed mother-of-pearl buttons he declared it a very middle class dress. Others dresses from the Suddon collection were similarly ordinary. A common feature of all of them was they were without the biographical information to fill in their narratives. It was as if they had become untethered from their moorings and were lacking the contextual information to re-anchor them.



Fig. 1:
Brown cotton two piece dress, mid 1880s, bought in an Ottawa Valley farm sale, Alan Suddon Collection, City of Toronto Collection.

The loss of personal information connected to such objects, representative of the everyday experiences of women, is not the only obstacle faced when trying to rehabilitate their narratives. This task is challenging in a Canadian history that has tended to privilege the activities of great men building and shaping the country (the anniversary which Canada is celebrating this year, which marks 150 since the confederation of four Canadian provinces, a milestone into becoming the country we recognize today, has faced this criticism) and the visual power of the physical landscapes of the country, often characterized as the great wilderness. What it means is that finding records of ordinary women's lives is much more complicated. In 1995 the historian Elizabeth Jane Errington commented '*the sources traditionally relied on by social and economic historians – land records, tax rolls, census data, and the like – also do not appear to chronicle women's lives.... In short, Upper Canadian women seem to have no voice*' (Errington, 1995, xiv-xv). While more and more historians are considering the role of women and finding new sources or reinterpreting old ones to shed light on their roles, there still remain many gaps, especially in terms of working and middle class rural women, the type of woman who might have worn the dress in fig. 1. The visual record of Canada is especially sparse when it comes to contextual information to inform these orphan objects. Most of the depictions of nineteenth-century rural Canada focus on the outdoors and the natural world. It is very difficult to find drawings, paintings or even prints depicting interior scenes of rural life.

University of Guelph Rural Diary Archive



Fig. 2:
Rural Diary Archives homepage <https://ruraldiaries.lib.uoguelph.ca/>.

This lack of information with which to construct a cultural context around the orphan dress objects in the City's collection meant that I was particularly excited when I learnt about a project created by the University of Guelph; the Rural Diary Archive (fig. 2). The project was started in 2014, in the department of rural history, which grew out of the University's origins as an agricultural college. As the departmental website emphasises '*Until quite recently, most people lived in rural settings. Yet most history has been written from the perspective of urbanites*' (<https://www.uoguelph.ca/arts/rural-history-guelph>). The Diaries project was initiated by Professor Catharine Anne Wilson, the Francis and Ruth Redelmeier Professor in Rural History, who had discovered her own great-great-grandmother's diary and was fascinated by the amount of information it contained about the lives of people living in rural societies. Launched online in September 2015 the Rural Diaries Archive brings together over 130 Ontario diarists writing from 1800-1960. The project has not only scanned the pages of the original diaries, held by some sixteen institutions and private individuals; it has also encouraged people to make these diaries even more accessible by actively seeking volunteer transcribers, in an effort to produce typed transcripts of the diaries that are easier to search and easier for the modern eye to read.

These diaries offer a valuable glimpse into the lives of nineteenth-century families living in rural Ontario. They record the daily weather, farm life, family joys and sorrows and community events. They also provide fascinating details about clothing and dressing a family, exactly the type of information that helps to flesh out the orphan dress I've been talking about. And I think it's an area where, to date, they've been little used.

Reading through a few of the typescript diaries has allowed me to get a sense of the types of helpful information that they can provide. As demonstrated by the two following examples there are definite strengths and weaknesses in the content contained in diaries. As records created by busy, hard-working people, the entries tend to be short and matter of fact. This is not a place to find long, lyrical description, so rarely is a detailed textual image created in the entries. Nor do the writers often mention their feelings, emotions, or the senses. The diaries are much better with brief factual information:

- We often get clear information stated, like the price of goods, or where something came from. (Though the inclusion of this type of information is highly individualised and many diarists make no reference to prices.)
- The proliferation of verbs highlights a sense of purpose and routine, filled with chores and tasks. It is striking how many of these revolve around the making and procurement of clothing. The diary of Mary Parson Smith from 1893 for example is filled with entries like '*sewed all morning*', '*sewed most of day*', '*ironed and sewed rest of day*' (Smith, January 10, January 5, September 18).

- There are glimpses about how clothing is connected to events or circumstances; Ann Amelia Day mentions on one occasion that her mother changed her dress before going to a funeral, and how she herself put on thinner clothes after noting a June day *'has been hotter than any preceding one.* (Day Sunley, June 16, 1878).
- But perhaps most strikingly the very nature of a diary means that these often short and brisk entries offer a window into the rhythms of making and caring for clothing, the way in which sewing permeated the lives of women and the way in which this activity intertwined with the other tasks of running a household.

The way in which the online diary archive has been laid out all helps to facilitate its use by researchers. Each diarist is introduced with a page that notes where they lived, their birth and death dates, dates of the diary, family members, and then provides a pen portrait of the person and synopsis of the diary. I've chosen two diarists to examine in terms of their mentions of dress.

Eliza Bellamy

Eliza was born sometime between 1796-8 and died in 1862. Her first husband died after they had had three children and her second husband had six children. Eliza was certainly a woman of some means; she came from a well to do family and married a prosperous mill-owner/farmer in North Augusta, to the south of Ottawa. Their house was the first one-and-a-half storey stone house in the area and Eliza had servants to help her. Eliza's diary covers a period of about one year, 1854-5 and contains references to sewing, running her household and her relationship with her grown up children.



Fig. 3:
Wool plaid dress, c.1850, from Mary and Neil McEachern, who emigrated to Stayner, Ontario, 1866. 1990.2.2 (Wellington County Museum and Archives).

One of the things that the diaries are good at doing are demonstrating words and phrases actually used by people. In Eliza's case her diary entries record that she made a number of plaid dresses, which may well have looked something like one from Wellington Museum in western Ontario (fig. 3).

2 November 1854 'Finished my plaid dress yesterday'
19 March 1855 'marking my plaid dress'

Of course what we cannot tell from Eliza's diary is whether she is referring simply to the pattern on the fabric, or whether the fabric that she is using for her dress is a twilled woollen cloth, as the term originally meant. Certainly it was a term that was found on both sides of the Atlantic, as these examples quoted in the Oxford English Dictionary suggest:

1845 *Xenia (Ohio) Torch-light* 31 July 4/5 A large lot of..Fancy Plaids,..Plain and Fancy Tweeds [etc.].

1845 *Blackwood's Edinb. Mag.* June 733/2 An immense step in the improvement of this garment has been made by the introduction of all that beautiful variety of plaids, and checked patterns, which are so commonly used.

(OED online, <http://www.oed.com/>)

Other terms to be found in her diary include 'gingham' – a checked cotton, 'full cloth' – a good quality woollen, and 'Orleans'. The Oxford English Dictionary description for the latter is 'a cloth of a type originally made at Orleans; spec. a fabric of cotton warp and worsted weft, similar to Coburg. 'Drab', another fabric is described by the OED as dull light-brown or yellowish-brown, without the negative connotations that we might expect of the term today. (OED online, <http://www.oed.com/>)

Eliza also talks about making dresses for her daughter and for making matching capes and cloaks to go with the dresses (for example Bellamy March 30, 1855). Although on the majority of occasions Eliza seems to make the dresses, she also employs another woman, Mrs Shambeau to make the dresses too (for example Bellamy August 17, 1855). All this points to, as Douglas McCalla has suggested in his book *Consumers in the Bush* about purchases from rural stores in Upper Canada, that rural women could think about both the practicalities and fashionability of their clothing. While their clothing might have been far from the Parisian fashions to be found illustrated in urban fashion magazines their clothing choices were not devoid of fashionable considerations as histories of rural life have often tended to suggest (McCalla, 37-66).

Eliza's diary is also enlightening in terms of the clothing made for the men in her family. As these entries show she both made and mended clothes for her husband and her husband's youngest son who was in his twenties but still at home when the diary was written (for example December 2, 1854). As with the clothes for her daughter Mrs Shambeau is brought in to help, but it is clear that the majority of work is done by Eliza (Bellamy, April 19, 1855). She makes a range of shirts for her husband and son, suggesting both workwear – could the coarse shirts be for wearing in the mill? – weather changes and smarter clothing (Bellamy, April 19, 1855).

Ann Amelia Day Sunley

The second diarist I looked at is Ann Amelia Day Sunley. She was born in 1853 so she was twenty-five when the diary starts in 1878. Ann Amelia was the oldest daughter, still living with her parents on their farm in Wellington County, in western Ontario. Her life and entries are full of household chores and gardening, but she regularly makes trips into the nearby towns of Guelph and Rockwood. On March 25, 1879, she marries Noah Sunley – a day she

describes as *'a most beautiful day without a cloud'* (Day Sunley, March 25, 1879). Touching entries following her marriage suggest her pride in caring for the clothes of her new husband *'this afternoon I mended Noah's overcoat and did some other little chores'*, *'This afternoon I put a new back in Noah's old vest'*. (Day Sunley March 27, May 12, 1879).

The sense of rhythm in the daily lives of these rural women is no better expressed than in the weekly ritual of the household wash. Almost without fail Ann Amelia, and other women, record the weekly cycle of washing on Monday. No where is this more sharply brought home than her entry for Monday October 21, 1878 *'We washed this morning. This is my birthday and I am 25 today'*. The weekly wash forms a backbone and framework to the rest of their entries, yet within the superficial repetition nuances to this crucial household task can be observed. Often, as in the entry for July 11, 1878 we can see the care that goes into separating coloured clothing from whites, and we learn of the weeks when weather conditions have not been good enough for the wash to be properly dried until the day after. We learn that Ann Amelia starches and irons her sister's dark print dress. Ann Amelia takes this housewife's pride with her to her new married home and the entries continue to regularly record the Monday wash, and the care she takes to wash her clothes, starching her white clothes (Day Sunley April 7, May 19, June 5, June 9, 1879).



Fig. 4:
Tan and green silk dress, with cuirass bodice and looped skirt, 1880. 1964.1.1.03 (Wellington County Museum and Archives).

The sense of fashion hinted at in Eliza Bellamy's diary is also visible in Ann Amelia's diary. She makes frequent references to the term polonaise, which is used to describe dresses for herself and her sister and friend (Day Sunley August 19, September 20, December 28, 1878, February 15, March 12, 1879). Indeed they take turns to share the polonaise pattern among themselves, with her friend's brother coming by on horseback to pick up the pattern

for her friend Annie (Day Sunley August 19, 1878). The polonaise style of dress, with its looped overskirt detail (fig. 4) was clearly one popular in a variety of different forms over the 1870s and Ann Amelia's use of the term comes without any description to help us understand what the polonaise dresses of her and her friends may have looked like. Nevertheless the use of the this fashionable term helps to confirm the girls' interest in fashion and creating dresses that were stylish and part of a shared sense of fashionable clothing.

It is clear that the making of clothing and the choosing of details was very much a shared experience. Ann Amelia continually refers to working with her friend and sisters on the dresses together. For example for one dress Ann Amelia gets the pleating ready for Annie on Friday 24 May and a week later she brings the dress skirt and trimming back home with her to finish it for her friend. She and her mother work together on her little sister's dress, and Ann Amelia frequently uses the word 'we' to describe the work on the different dresses and sewing projects (for example Day Sunley May 3, 1878).



Fig. 5:
Brown silk wedding dress, worn by Mary Cathrine [sic] Dennis for her marriage to William East in 1878 or 1879. 1985.21.1.a-b (City of Toronto Collection).

Wedding dresses are of course one of the most common dresses to be found in museum collections, and the most likely to be donated with good biographical information (fig. 5). Yet rarely do we have any details about how they were made. While Ann Amelia gives us no indication of the fabric she used, the colour she chose or the trim and decoration she applied, what is special about the diary entries leading up to her wedding on Tuesday 25 March, 1879 is the way in which they offer the chance to learn more about the preparations for this special day and the making of her dress. Maybe Ann Amelia had the chance to pore over fashion engravings from women's journals, and her dress echoed their shape and style. We'll never find out but we do know that Amelia Ann and family went to buy her wedding

dress fabric, and a dress for each of her sisters on 6 February. The next day they drove into Guelph, a nearby town, to get the dress cut and fitted. This is the only dress of the many we learn about in Ann Amelia's diary that gets this treatment so it highlights just how special it is. On 8 February they spend the whole day working on the dress and on 12 February Ann Amelia bakes her wedding cake. The next day they finish the wedding dress and begin that of her sister Jenny, before two days later icing her cake and finishing a dress for Jenny. Jenny's dress for the wedding is finished three days after this (Day Sunley February 6-15, 1879). This record of the process of making a wedding dress, in just under a week, and slotted around the regular household chores, like the washing and the ironing, offers a fascinating perspective on the process of preparing for a wedding and one that cannot be found in the surviving garments themselves, or much of the contextual sources like photographs or newspaper accounts. It illustrates just how valuable these rural diaries are as a source for dress history in the lives of women in Upper Canada.

Conclusion

I've much reading still to do, and want to take more time to consider how these written sources can best help to rehabilitate the narratives of the dresses of the unknown wearers in City of Toronto's collection. As my examples have shown the information presented in the rural diaries is selective, with plenty of omissions. Yet for all this there is much that they have to offer in enhancing the narrative power of clothes; the terms used by women to describe their clothes, the central role the production and care of clothing played in their lives, and the way in which this was part of the fabric of their lives, finding its place alongside household tasks like cooking and cleaning. So I'd like to end with a quotation from Dr Catharine Wilson, the founder of the Rural Diary Archive "Nothing brings you closer to rural women's daily life in the past than reading an old diary." Using both the written record and surviving garments we can perhaps fashion a clearer window into clothing choices of women in nineteenth-century Canada.

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