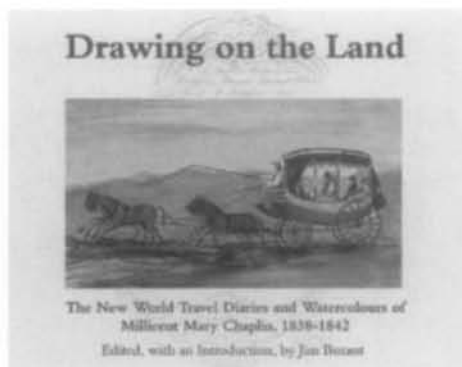




DRAWING ON THE LAND

**The New World Travel Diaries and Watercolours
of Millicent Mary Chaplin, 1838-1842**

Jim BURANT

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The interrelationship of image and text is a particularly dominant characteristic of early Canadian visual culture whose roots lie deep within European precedents. It is paradoxically a daunting sphere of study: at once as distant, vast and deep as the ocean between them, and yet as personal, intimate and luminous as the individuals whose work bridges these cultural worlds. The expressive word/image communications from the New World were motivated by, created by, and directed primarily to Europeans either as official reportage or informally as personal self-reflection in written journals or correspondence. In his 1625 *Essays* Francis Bacon encouraged travelers abroad to "let diaries, therefore, be brought into use." The coincidental advent of New World exploration and the invention of the printing press heralded an era of global communication in the form of the printed, illustrated book that inaugurated published travel literature. Most of the images were created by amateurs for whom drawing and painting was not a primary ambition. Amateur sketching and watercolour painting were practiced by members of the upper, educated classes and later came to be regarded as social accomplishments for men and women of the European bourgeoisie.

Works of art from “amateur” artists are very intimate, personal and almost always private, posing a different type of challenge to historians of Canadian art. Such works neither relate to questions of public patronage, nor take pride of place in a public exhibition arena; they remain confined to the personal sphere of the painter. Amateur artists are legion in Canadian art as attested to by the hundreds listed in J. Russell Harper’s *Early Painters and Engravers in Canada* (1970), and thousands of their works are stored in numerous public collections across the country. The amateur status of these works of art can be disconcerting. Underestimated, they are often too swiftly relegated to the fringes of our art historical discourse. To draw a thorough and accurate appreciation of the work of amateur artists, the many crucial but disparate personal, cultural, social, philosophical, political, military and scientific histories of the period must be interwoven to reveal the palpable texture of the work’s true character. In his study, Jim Burant focuses adroitly on the existing well-known watercolours and newly discovered diaries and watercolour album of amateur artist, Millicent Mary Chaplin, née Reeve (1790-1858), who lived and traveled through eastern British North America and the United States from 1838 to 1842. Burant’s contact with Reeve/Chaplin descendants further opened a direct pathway to previously ignored family and social histories, and provided him with most of the threads required to tell her story.

The most recent integrated study of the multicultural character of professional and amateur art in Quebec was undertaken in the extensive 1991 study by the Musée du Québec (now Musée nationale des beaux-arts du Québec) entitled *La Peinture au Québec, 1820-1850*. This ground-breaking work, although focusing only on visual culture in Quebec, presents and discusses many previously ignored and misunderstood amateur artists in a new, cohesive context. The summary of Millicent Chaplin’s life and work, carried on pages 218-19, constituted the small sum of our limited knowledge about her at the time. Burant’s fresh, new study presents Chaplin’s recently discovered diaries and new watercolour paintings in a much-welcomed reassessment of her artistic contributions within the broader spectrum of her life circumstances. His introduction exposes the many intellectual prejudices that continue to impede the accurate evaluation of Canada’s amateur artists: the lesser artistic quality of their watercolours, the indifference of disparate family descendants, the reprehensible destruction of watercolour albums by irresponsible dealers and covetous collectors, the misguided uses of such works by social and political historians and the difficulties of access to the work for research interpretation and appreciation. All of these factors clutter the topography of Canadian art history through which a new path must gradually be cleared.

Kingsford, Craig, Earl and Waterton have all compiled bibliographies of early published Canadian travel literature but these publications were intended for a universal audience, and so they remain a separate area of study. Much amateur art and writing in early Canada, especially by women such as Elizabeth Simcoe, Jane Ellice and Elizabeth Hale (whose correspondence was recently published by the Champlain Society) were rarely intended to be printed. Even today, their writing is too often considered apart from their painting. The interpretation of such works present unique problems; unraveling them demands broad expertise and the research methodology remains largely unformed. Burant's study is elegantly graced by the newly-discovered miniature portrait of Chaplin. It does more than simply introduce the artist to us; it allows us to make her acquaintance on a familiar level rarely achieved. By publishing her travel diaries along with the related watercolours from known and newly-found albums, Burant provides us with a more intelligible, holistic view of her North American experience in clearer contrast to her European "englishness." In addition, his extensive research into her family history uncovered Chaplin's possible social connections to Jane Austen: Millicent Mary's sister-in-law, Louisa Chaplin and Jane Austen's brother Edward both married into the Bridges family. Burant uses these family relationships to frame and illuminate Chaplin's childhood, youth, education, social life and amorous prospects. In turn they significantly mark the origins and motivations of her artistic education and practice, and of her future travel prospects.

Millicent Mary Reeve's marriage, on 21 October 1828 at the mature age of thirty-eight, to Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Chaplin of the Coldstream Guards and MP for Stamford, elevated her social status. It provided her with the opportunity to meet influential people and to travel to British North America. Colonel Chaplin, accompanied by his wife Millicent, was posted to Quebec in the spring of 1838 as part of the reinforcements sent to halt the rebellion of 1837. During their five-year stay they also traveled through Upper Canada, going as far west as Niagara Falls, already a major world tourist attraction. Later they ventured to the Maritimes via New England, which was also becoming a more familiar "tourist" route.

Burant lets Chaplin's diaries and watercolour sketches speak for themselves as much as possible, providing fifteen pages of rich endnotes, "to identify individuals, events or locations Mrs. Chaplin is describing, or to expand upon issues, provide context, or correct errors in fact." He also uses the diaries of some of her North American contemporaries to enrich his historical narrative. This strategy, in addition to Chaplin's own enthusiastic and avid engagement in her travels, produces a vivid world that challenges us to leave behind everything we know today. Her writings and drawings invite us to assume the persona of her confidant, and by unraveling their intricacies within a broad context, Burant allows us to more

readily perceive and more justly appreciate her character, personal relationships, and social standing. This strategy provides a true sense of the old world from which she emerged and of life in the New World into which she immersed herself.

In Chapter Four, Burant elucidates Chaplin's active relationships with the many other English amateur artists, such as Bainbrigge, Whitemore, Wright, Barnard, Hope-Wallace, Dartnell, Kirkland, Bayfield, Potter, and the others who constituted the small British watercolour sketching and printmaking community in Quebec. Like hers, their work was stimulated by their old-world perception of the picturesque landscape, but also motivated by the novelty of new-world garrison life and the unique multicultural Native and French-Canadian societies, in close proximity to that of the United States. The whole is framed by dramatic seasonal transformations, especially the intense grip of winter. In Chapter Six, Burant examines her close friendship with Fanny Bayfield, wife of the hydrographic surveyor Captain Henry Bayfield, and their shared interest in executing botanical illustrations of Canadian flowers. Each of the women collated their illustrations into near identical types of albums. Chaplin assembled two albums of very different character: the now disassembled *Chaplin Album of Views*, and the fortunately still intact *Fry Album of Botanical Illustrations*. An appendix describes these albums as objects and provides information about their history that necessarily also helps recover the shattered integrity of the *Chaplin Album*.

This study about a traveling artist lacks only a few good historical maps (England, British North America, United States) to help anchor the reader. Furthermore, the duplication of reproductions of some of Chaplin's paintings precludes access to more examples of her work. The material history appendix would also profit greatly from the judicious use of illustrations to convey the original album covers, inscriptions, folios showing typical page layouts of collated works and examples of a few diary pages. We must remember that existing publications of the writings of early Canadian women amateur artists are undeniably valuable. More often than not, however, their visual work is simply added to the text with no integrated appreciation of its creation or significance, relation to the written text, or its cumulative, expressive impact. Burant's carefully crafted study is unique as it presents both text and image as an expressive whole within a broad context. Not only does he offer a solid methodology for others to emulate, but throughout his enthusiastic study Burant identifies other salient areas of interest pertaining to amateur art that require further exploration and analysis. *Drawing on the Land* will surely encourage and stimulate new research endeavours in this rich and complex field of Canadian visual culture.

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