

Mothers and Children in Canadian History

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L'histoire de l'enfance et des rapports mère-enfants font l'objet depuis quelque temps de recherches socio-historiques. On vous présente ici quelques extraits des carnets d'Isabel Merkly, vivant à Morrisburg en Ontario, qui vers 1886 se mit à écrire au sujet du développement émotif et physique de son bébé.

The history of childhood and of the relationship between mother and child in history have recently become topics of interest and research for social historians. Recent scholarly publications touching on these subjects include Veronica Strong-Boag, 'Wages for Housework: Mothers' Allowances and the Beginnings of Social Security in Canada,' *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Spring 1979) and Suzanne Buckley, 'Efforts to Reduce Infant Maternity Mortality in Canada Between the Two World Wars,' *Atlantis* (Spring 1977). Both articles introduce intriguing questions for future research. The document which follows is one example of a type of source remaining to be explored. When her daughter was eight months old in 1886, Isabel Merkley of Morrisburg, Ontario, began to keep a diary in which she recorded her child's emotional and physical development. The diary also exposes something of this mother's hopes and fears as a parent. The excerpts reprinted below are taken from the original diary held by the Public Archives of Canada. Additional excerpts were published in Alison Prentice and Susan Houston, eds., *Family, School and Society in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975).

Nov. 2/86 My little Edith is eight months old to day and what a little treasure she is; she is bright and happy and smiling always. She does not walk or creep yet and has no teeth. She takes one good sleep in the forenoon and very often does not sleep anymore until I put her to bed at seven or half past. Her first present was a brush from her uncle James Jarvis, Her Aunt Minnie gives her very many little things and Hugh and Harry are very good to her. Her first plaything was a little rubber doll from Aunt Maggie which she enjoyed very much. Her first visit was made to Mrs. R.H. Bradfield's when she was about six weeks old on a very stormy day. When she was five months Helen



The Picture Book, 1905*

Maxwell who calls her her baby and Dr. Rutherford took her away and had her photo taken with them.

The Dr. brought her a very handsome high chair from Montreal in Sept.

Her Aunt Nellie gave her a pretty hood for winter. She got it in Montreal. It is white.

Nov. 3rd/86 Helen found baby's first tooth to day and she was delighted. She has been as good as usual and I did not know it was coming but Helen has been watching for it and was so glad she happened to be the one to find it, she is real well all the time and has only had one sick spell when she was two months old, she got a cold and had a sore throat we supposed as she could not swallow and once she choked so that we thought she would never get her breath she was purple. Her father went right away and got Mr. Horrell and she was christened in her nightdress, all over goose-oil and we did not think of her christening dress I was trying to get done to have her christened in. . . .

Nov. 21/86 Baby has gone out for a ride with her father the first time he ever took her out unless I was with them.

I hope she will be good.

Dec. 31/86 The last day of Edith's first year. God grant that she may remain as pure and sinless as she is to night is the prayer of Her Mother.

Jan 2nd 1887 Edith is ten months old to day. We commenced to wean her yesterday she is not one bit of trouble and not

at all cross. She can get all round the floor now but does not creep.

March 2/87 My little daughter is one year old to day & what a little gleam of sunshine she has been although I thought my life was as happy as it could be before she came. She in some way has got another cold but so far it is all in her head. She calls her father "Da" although I try to make her say Pappa.

Louise gave her a pretty pin for a birthday gift that is all she has got so far.

May 6th/87 I find her with more temper and harder to get along with all the time. She is getting more teeth and makes her fretful I suppose at times. . . .

May 21st/87 I am sorry to have to put in here that I had to punish my little darling to night by making her go to sleep by herself. . . . She cried a long time over it but finally dropped over. I watched her all the time through the door and when I thought she was sound stepped over to see her and kiss her when I found her dripping with perspiration. I could keep back the tears no longer but she wakened up again and cried a little while but soon sleep got the mastery but she sobbed as though her little heart was broken. She has a great deal of temper and I pray God I may be able to deal with her alright. . . .

Jan. 22nd/88 Edith is up at her Aunt Minnie's to day and it is so lonesome without her. How changed our home would be without her now. . . .

March 2/89 Edith's birth day but she did not get any presents but some money from her Father for her bank. She is more like a girl of four years old than three her hair is so long and she is so old fashioned. She is always pretending she is Laura and sometimes will not sit down to her meals because "Mamma did not say I could stop for dinner". I wish I knew how to train her aright. She has not a bad disposition and is very tender hearted.

Nov. 30/90 Today Edith went to S.S. (Sunday School) and knew the first page in the Calvery Catechism. I wonder when she will know it all and I pray to God her lessons in S.S. may not be in vain. She is up to every thing now that can be thought of.

*These photographs are available for purchase at Baldwin Street Gallery, Toronto.