A Successful Courtship in Nineteenth-Century Canada

1. Introduction

After the spoken words have vanished, the love letters remain. Immutable, they can be read and reread. But can one say, ‘I love you’ without sounding banal or resorting to clichés? What are the right words to seal a pledge of love, to declare one’s ardour, to share the secrets of the heart? How should one express one’s feelings in any given situation? Manuals on the art of writing offer assistance to the letter writer lacking in inspiration. But they also dictate standards of behaviour, appearance and etiquette.

In this presentation, we will examine the use of love-letter manuals as an aid to courtship in nineteenth-century Canada. We will see how these manuals became social instruments for regulating the private conduct of lovers. The manuals reveal a courtship ritual and dictate standards of behaviour, appearance and etiquette; and finally, newspapers and magazines reinforce this image, placing the woman on a pedestal of modesty, romanticism and marriage.

2. The nineteenth-century courtship ritual

The latter part of the nineteenth century in Canada was rife with rules and rituals governing every moment of life.

The nineteenth century fervently celebrated the ideals of romantic love. The ceremonial of writing is a part of this set of rituals and rules. Love was a serious
activity, engaged in with great care. It involved a considerable amount of correspondence, including letters, calling cards, invitations and valentines. The practice of using letters as a means of courtship was one of the rituals of the period. These letters were painstakingly preserved, as in this ornate box in the shape of a book. This little box is typical of the gifts offered by Quebec lumbermen to their fiancée. The sailboat represented the sailor departing from his Dulcinea, and his love letters would have united them. This scene is a highly representative folk art motif of the period.

Love-letter casket with carved date: 6 October 1888, Canadian Museum of Civilisation collection, 78-810

The process of courting the beloved had its own distinctive ritual. Popular amusements, such as balls, dinners, sleigh rides, snowshoe outings, concerts, picnics and skating parties provided young people with opportunities for courting. Even if a young man and a young woman moved in their own social circles, these recreational
activities allowed them to meet. Mary Gilmour records various such activities in her diary, written between 1843 and 1858, and it is apparent that these excursions played an important role in the life of a young, unmarried woman living in rural Ontario.¹ Although it was a very private matter, courting was nonetheless a social activity that took place in full view of society. There were formal rules governing this aspect of love, and these conventions played a major role in the lives of young lovers. According to Ellen Rothman, these conventions are tools for the social regulation of private conduct.²

The art of writing was one of the rituals of the period. It was part of a series of acceptable practices by which a young man could court a young lady. The principles of this type of conduct could be learned from a number of books on etiquette and

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¹The Pocket Letter Writer, Worcester USA (S.A.Howland), 1847, 160 pp., Canadian Postal Museum Collection, 2002.146.1
lessons on proper conduct. Articles in newspapers and ladies’ magazines also reinforced the image of the proper love ritual.

“Love’s Young Dream”, Canadian Illustrated News, 10 April 1875, Library and Archives Canada Collection

George Stephen Jones was a young clerk of 18 living in Quebec City. Between October 22, 1845 and April 1846, he kept a daily diary of his visits to Honorine Tanswell. He noted the details of their conversations, their activities, their signs of friendship, and their exchange of letters and gifts. This diary reveals profound, intimate feelings. It is a unique document on the relationship of young lovers in the
19th century. Although the parents were not in favour of the union, the meetings persisted and culminated in marriage.

3. Manuals on the Art of Writing

3.1. The corpus

In nineteenth-century Canada, there were two recourses for letter-writers lacking in confidence. They could either copy the formulas and models from letter-writing manuals, or visit a public writer who, for a price, would wield the pen in their place. Many Canadian newspapers advertised the services of public writers. There were also numerous little volumes intended as guides for letter-writers, helping them choose the right words and advising them on how to present the letter. Some manuals on the art of writing contained instructions on how to compose a letter in general, while others focused on a specific type of correspondence, such as love letters.

We consulted 21 different manuals of the latter sort. It should be noted that courtship letters and proposals of marriage were also included in the general letter-writing manuals. Two criteria for the selection of the corpus of manuals were that they had to be written in English and preserved in a Canadian institution.

3.2. The discourse of the manuals

Letters offered a ritualized means to broach difficult subjects dealing with feelings and attachment. For the timid or apprehensive, the letter offered a ritual for expressing affection. Undoubtedly, sending one of these missives could either further or initiate a
love relationship. Letters allowed for a ritualized exchange and the negotiation of a sometimes-difficult situation; they also lessened the risk of rejection.

The earliest treatises on the art of writing appeared in Italian, offering both technical counsel and instruction. They include specimen letters and advice on the size of the pen and the preparation of the ink. Was there a tradition of love-letter manuals? One of the earliest was Giovanni Tagliente’s *Opera amorosa, che insegna a componer lettere et a rispondere a persone d'amor ferite over in amor viventi, in toscha lingua composta, con piacer non poco et diletto di tutti gli amanti, laqual si chiama il Rifugio di amanti*, published in 1535 followed by *Delle lettere amorose di diversi hvomini illystri, libri nove*, by Francesco Sansovino, published in 1565. After the sixteenth century, we see a proliferation of these manuals.

The love-letter manuals follow the form of books on the art of writing. These volumes generally have two sections, the first dealing with etiquette, how to comport oneself in society, and the second on letter-writing conventions, with specimen letters. These manuals are a mirror of nineteenth-century society.

Their popularity attests to the social and economic changes occurring across Canada in the mid-nineteenth century. The manuals served as an aid in manoeuvring in an expanding social sphere. British North America experienced considerable growth in the early nineteenth century. The population of the three maritime colonies of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island jumped from 80,000 in 1800 to more than 500,000 by mid century. That of Lower Canada doubled between 1825 (480,000) and 1851 (890,000). The population of Upper Canada increased six fold,
from 158,000 to 952,000. All sectors of the economy experienced growth, including wheat production, coal mining, forestry, fishing, etc. There was considerable expansion of settlements and growth of cities, but an even more significant change was the increased complexity of society. There was more and more need for communication.

These love-letter manuals were easy to find and were available at stationers’ or through mail order catalogues, such as the 1897 Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalogue. North’s *Book of Love-Letters* was here promoted as

a branch of correspondence for the various phases incident to love, courtship and marriage. Few persons are able to express in words the promptings of the first dawn of love, and how to follow up a correspondence with the dearest one in the world, and how to smooth the way with those who need to be consulted in the matter. The hundred and forty letters and answers in this book, aided in many instances by the author’s sensible comments on the specimen letters, and his valuable hints under adverse contingencies…

In the 1894–1895 Montgomery Ward & Co. catalogue, where books for lovers were advertised with practical guides on a number of subjects, such as hunting, elocution, cooking, music and dancing, four titles are listed under the Love and Courtship heading.
The Language of Flowers, described as ‘A complete dictionary of the language of flowers and the sentiments which they express’; The Art and Etiquette of Love, ‘A manual of love, courtship and matrimony. Containing sensible advice in relation to all the circumstances incident to the tender passion from the commencement of courtship until after marriage’; How to Win and How to Woo; and The Lover’s Guide to Courtship and Marriage, ‘A dissertation of love and lovers, with wise suggestions for successful courtship’.

The titles of these publications leave no doubt as to their contents. Books on the language of flowers were very popular during the Victorian era. Each flower had its own meaning and expressed a specific emotion. The authors of these manuals, and they are numerous, give full instructions on how to create ‘the floral love-letter’. Another easy way to learn of the existence of these manuals was the nearly weekly advertisements in many Canadian newspapers. They can be found among the ads for pens, paper and other writing materials.10
The frontispiece often contained an engraving of lovers or a scene showing a young lady or gentleman with pen in hand. Lithography was becoming widespread by the mid-nineteenth century, and the writing manuals were not exempt from this infatuation. The image conveys the intimate, special quality of the love letter. The frontispiece illustrations were of inferior quality, although often hand-tinted. The
artists remained anonymous. The image conveyed in these manuals was reinforced by the illustrated magazines of the period. The woman is depicted as pensive or in reverie, reflecting the cult of the feminine ideal.

Love-letter manuals were popular throughout the nineteenth century. They varied in length from 80 to 200 pages. Despite the inferior quality of the printing, they were advertised as offering a simple and ideal solution for the uncertainties of courtship. These books offered ample letters or phrases for those who lacked the inspiration or the courage to express their amorous sentiments in words. They also furnished replies to distance or discourage unwanted suitors. Like other kinds of letter-writing manuals, some of them offer advice on etiquette, proper writing posture, the correct way to hold the pen, the quality of the paper, the colour of the ink, relationships between the sexes, or how to comport oneself in society.

These love-letter manuals offer precise rules on how to court the beloved. There are numerous specimen letters, in a style that could be characterized as “florid”. However, we observe that some of these manuals contain letters of refusal. Young ladies thus had the option of refusing a proposal of marriage.

In reading some of these manuals, we can see how they choreographed the love relationship. We will mention that, compared with other books on the art of writing, the love-letter manuals are extremely detailed regarding the marriage proposal and the reply. In these manuals, it all begins with letters stating the writer’s admiration for the recipient. Many specimen letters express and even insist, in the case of a rejection, on a desire to share these feelings. There then follow letters of declaration, both to the
beloved and to her parents. We also find other examples of correspondence that the lover might require, whether letters or replies dealing with uncertainty, jealousy, separation, discord or entreaty. Reading these manuals is rather like attending a play in two acts: Act I is the Expression of Love, and Act II is the Marriage Proposal, the culmination of the entire courtship process.

While the suggested expressions may sometimes seem hackneyed, they were still serviceable and popular. They offered a way to express difficult emotions in phrases or in rhyme, with poetry that was facile and accessible. The copies of these little manuals that have survived are earmarked and filled with the owner’s marginal notes. Society was changing rapidly, as is clearly reflected in another type of discourse conveyed in these love-letter manuals.

*Essays on Love, Courtship and Matrimony*, New York (McFarlane and Long), 1807, 84 pp., Canadian Postal Museum Collection 2002.144.1

It is impossible to state with certainty precisely how these love-letter manuals were used. We can propose several hypotheses.
Firstly, from the considerable number of these manuals, their successive reprints and the ease with which they could be procured, we can assume that they were popular. We should also mention the social context of the period. There was a postal reform in Canada in 1851, and the price of a letter became affordable for a greater portion of the population. Between 1869 and 1898, the number of letters sent by mail rose sharply, from 733,000 (for a population of 3,511,000) to 5,673,350 (for a population of 5,175,000).11

Even where there is no specific mention of the use of a manual in the letters, we can see that the form of the letter observes the codes laid out in the manuals.

We also believe that, despite the fact that the manuals are full of advice on behaviour and attitudes, they offered women a degree of emancipation. Unlike the eighteenth-century manuals, these books provide examples of very explicit letters of rejection. For example, the objective of the manual *Essays on Love, Courtship and Matrimony* is to advise readers on the how to comport themselves in society, improve their moral sensibilities and help heal a broken heart. One section, standard in this type of manual, is devoted to social conventions. It discusses directions for choosing a husband or wife, the dangers of flirtation for both sexes, the bearing of a young lady in society, love, virtue, the books that a young lady’s library should contain, and how to dress and converse. What is interesting and revealing in this manual, is the ‘Directions as to the choice of a husband’ on p.17:

Choose a man of sense. Not necessarily a man of great learning, for you will frequently find men of learning who have very little sense. But a man who has
a rational and judicious mind, who is capable of managing his own business to advantage, and whose conversation can entertain and instruct you in the hours of leisure and recreation.

This type of instruction offered young women an alternative and opened the door to pragmatic reflection on possible considerations in choosing a mate.

All of these manuals on amorous correspondence agree that the love letter acts as an ambassador. One’s presence was replaced by that of one’s pen. In the nineteenth century, it was difficult for lovers to express intimacy, and the letter provided the necessary discretion to allow amorous feelings to blossom. A message written by the hand of the sender had a sincere and intimate quality that picnics and excursions could not provide. In conclusion, love-letter manuals reflect the moral values of nineteenth-century Canadian society. But they are not confined to a single model. While on the one hand, the iconography found in these manuals or in the newspapers of the period portrays an idealized image of women, some of these love-letter manuals reflect the emergence of new social and cultural concerns in a rapidly changing society.

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Canadian Postal Museum/ Canadian Museum of Civilisation

1 Library and Archives Canada (LAC), R10700-11-X-E.

2 Ellen K. Rothman, Hands and Hearts, A History of Courtship in America, New York (Basic Books),
3 George Stephen Jones, Diary, MG24, 1155, LAC.


5 Bibliothèque nationale de France, Rare Books Department.


7 A Catalogue of Books, 1840-1860, Scobie & Balfour, Booksellers and Stationers, 10 King Street, Toronto, listing 10 titles of manuals on the art of writing.


10 For example, an advertisement in The Quebec Mercury, 16 December 1851.