

Jo Fraser Jones, ed. *Hobnobbing with a Countess and Other Okanagan Adventures: The Diaries of Alice Barrett Parke, 1891-1900*. Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2001. Pp. 349, illustrated.

If social history is essentially about the ordinary people who are categorized into class, gender, or ethnic groups, the personal letters and diaries of such individuals serve as useful reminders that their lives do not fit neatly into abstract social categories. Still, the personal life histories of such people are generally of interest to those without a family or community connection to them only insofar as they inform us about broader social questions. While the editor of this well-illustrated volume, Jo Fraser Jones, has done an excellent job of providing the family and community context of Alice Barrett Parke's diaries, she makes very little attempt to address the broader social or theoretical issues that one might expect of a university press publication. Instead, in the true fashion of non-academic local history, Parke is presented as an exceptional woman, though also as a representative of the hardy pioneer generation whose sacrifices we should honour and whose virtues we should emulate.

Historians will, nevertheless, be grateful to the editor for facilitating their research by reorganizing these diaries thematically, with individual chapters addressing issues such as religion, local politics, economic development, and racism. Few will have the stamina to read the entire volume, for, even though less than a quarter of the original material has been included, the journals are a tedious read, at least for one not specifically interested in the history of Vernon, British Columbia, or Port Hope, Ontario. Alice Barrett Parke was an intelligent, active, and generally humane woman who faithfully recorded the daily events of a varied life for nearly a decade prior to the turn of the twentieth century, but she was not particularly introspective or intellectual in nature. She herself admitted early on that "it may be a waste of time and paper to write when one has no thoughts to put down – but I'm afraid my diary would grow by very slow degrees if I waited for ideas to fill it" (p. 6).

Furthermore, this is not an intimate journal, but a letter-diary whose purpose was to keep Parke's Ontario relatives informed of her daily activities. Perhaps in part because she also sent letters to her parental family on a regular basis, these diaries lack the descriptive qualities that characterize early-nineteenth-century

counterparts written by British newcomers to the colonies such as Elizabeth Simcoe, Anne Langton, Mary O'Brien, and Lucy Peel. While Parke claimed to be impressed by the northern Okanagan landscape, for example, she failed to create many memorable images of it. And, because of her tight-laced sense of propriety, the members of her wide circle of women friends generally remain (in the words of the editor) "shadowy, undeveloped figures in her pages" (p. 58). On one tantalizing occasion Parke wrote, "I had quite a little romance told to me. I would like to re-tell it here, but the characters are too much in real life for me to do that" (p. 76). But Parke did spice her pages with the tales told her by some of the colourful old pioneers, as well as the adventures of her husband during the years he served as the local police constable. And the diaries certainly do reveal how highly social life was, even on a farm, for Parke's chores were constantly interrupted by uninvited though generally welcome visitors. One of the most crucial roles women played in the northern Okanagan region was clearly to serve as a social glue within a community that included many lonely bachelors.

The member of a well-established Irish family in Port Hope, the diarist moved to the northern Okanagan area at the age of twenty-nine in order to do housework for her beloved bachelor brother and irascible uncle. Even though she had resigned herself to spinsterhood before moving west, Alice Barrett was soon courted by a number of eligible suitors. She chose to marry the very capable and supportive Harry Parke, a civil war veteran whose upper-middle-class Ontario background stood him in good stead despite his restless, adventuresome nature. Harry would continue to occupy a wide range of positions after he married Alice, including ranch manager, postmaster, police inspector, and farmer. The tensions such changes in livelihood must have entailed are glossed over in Alice's diary, which expresses unfailing support for her husband even though he resisted her strong desire to return permanently to the east.

Despite her lack of introspection, Alice Barrett Parke clearly also experienced the internal conflicts of a middle-class woman who expressed a deep interest in politics, yet valued convention and respectability too much to support women's suffrage. The reluctance with which she joined the local branch of the National Council of Women organized by Lady Aberdeen during her brief residence in Vernon (making the title of this volume somewhat misleading) suggests that Parke may have subconsciously perceived the organization as a threat to the recognition she

gained from her more personal charitable endeavours. We also witness how Alice began to question her racist assumptions about the Chinese after she met the kind and intelligent cook for the BX Ranch. But the reader must slog through a good deal of repetitive, mundane material which does very little to add to our knowledge of the themes that each chapter focuses upon. Also, the failure to include a list of brief biographies makes it difficult to identify or remember many of the numerous characters referred to, and the index isn't always helpful in this respect. Finally, while there are a good many helpful footnotes to the journal, the sources for the information they contain are not consistently identified.

J.I. Little
Simon Fraser University

Michel Verrette. *L'Alphabétisation au Québec 1660-1900. En marche vers la modernité culturelle*. Sillery, Septentrion, 2002. 191 p.

Le Groupe de recherche en histoire socioculturelle de l'Université Laval, sous la direction de Claude Galarneau, avait produit, au milieu des années 1980, plusieurs recherches sur l'alphabétisation dans quelques paroisses de la Nouvelle France. L'un des membres du groupe, Michel Verrette nous présente maintenant un ouvrage de synthèse sur la progression de l'alphabétisation au Québec, recherche qui permettra certainement de faire avancer nos connaissances sur cette importante question. L'A. semble surtout intéressé à invalider la thèse de Lionel Groulx : l'impact négatif de la Conquête sur les progrès de l'alphabétisation. L'auteur aborde la question dans la longue durée, près de deux siècles et demi, et utilise essentiellement la méthode des signatures des conjoints dans les registres paroissiaux des mariages. Courageux chercheur qui a examiné plus de 52, 000 signatures (ou absences de signatures!).

Un premier chapitre expose les données essentiellement méthodologiques qu'il qualifie de « problèmes théoriques » (p. 15) : la constitution d'un corpus de 49 paroisses créées avant 1870, assurant la représentativité de la répartition historique, géographique et linguistique de la population. L'ampleur de la