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**The Diaries of Andrew McIlwraith:
Work, Self-Improvement and *Refuge* in the Life of a Scottish Emigrant in Mid-Victorian Canada**

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This paper examines the life of one mid-nineteenth-century Scottish immigrant, Andrew McIlwraith, a draughtsman, patternmaker, and later bookkeeper in Canada West (now Ontario) and, for a brief spell, in New York City. McIlwraith was, in many ways, a very ordinary mid-Victorian craftworker, perhaps even a typical one. Alas, like Melville's *Bartleby*, insufficient material exists for a "full and satisfactory biography of this man." However, the discussion is based on one particularly rich source: McIlwraith's diary, 1857-1862, which provides an illuminating account of the constraints, ambitions, and strategies of one young man attempting to achieve his goals.¹ These diaries are valuable sources to social historians of Victorian Canada; they are the only known diaries of a craftsman in Canada in the mid-nineteenth century and they are demonstrably rich – they reveal the ways in which one man crafted *himself* and resolved to become something better.

Andrew McIlwraith was born in Newton, Ayr, Scotland in February 1830 and grew up with nine siblings, the son of a weaver. He was educated in Ayr and emigrated to Canada West some time in the mid-1850s, following his older brother Thomas, an engineer (later manufacturer) and an amateur ornithologist who, with his wife, settled in Hamilton in 1853.² If the younger McIlwraith had aspirations to make his way as a draughtsman and patternmaker in Canada West, his arrival was well-timed. Canada West was undergoing a railway "revolution" in the mid-1850s and the services he could offer were in high, if sporadic, demand.³ Andrew joined his brother in Hamilton for some months, but he stayed in no one place for very long, following work wherever it was available. From 1857 until 1861, Andrew McIlwraith worked as a draughtsman and patternmaker in several locations in Canada West and, for a short time, in New York City. He returned to

¹ The Diaries of Andrew McIlwraith 1857-1862 [typescript], Grace Schmidt Room, Kitchener Public Library, Kitchener, Ontario.

² Thomas McIlwraith (1824-1893) was a pioneer in Canadian ornithology, and author of the landmark 1886 treatise *Birds of Ontario* and several other important articles on the subject. He was a key figure in the development of avian biology as a scientific subject in Victorian Canada. See Henry James Morgan, ed. *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time* (Toronto, 1898) 741; *Dictionary of Hamilton Biography I* (Hamilton, 1981) 132; *Dictionary of Canadian Biography XII* (Toronto, 1994) 646-7

³ See Douglas McCalla, "Railways and the Development of Canada West, 1850-1870," in Allan Greer and Ian Radforth, eds. *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto, 1992) 192-229; Peter Baskerville, "Americans in Britain's Backyard: The Railway Era in Upper Canada, 1850-1880," *Business History Review* 55/3 (Autumn, 1981) 314-36.

Canada West in late 1861 to take up a permanent, more secure position as a bookkeeper for a large foundry in Galt, continuing his employment there until the late 1860s. He tried his own hand at business, as a foundry owner in tiny Listowel, Ontario, 1871-79, but returned to Galt in 1880 to work as an Accountant for the Gore Mutual Insurance Company until his death, of complications from Bright's Disease in 1891. He was 61 years old.

From the mid-1850s until the early 1860s, Andrew McIlwraith was a *liminal* man. He was (to borrow the Oxford English Dictionary's wording) "on the threshold," in a number of different respects. His liminality stemmed from his position as a journeyman worker, a man in between his present vocation and the promise of an independent, self-employed future. But connected to his workplace status were other factors. Like other young men seeking employment in the precarious economic environment of the 1850s, McIlwraith had difficulty nailing down steady work in one location and, as a result, was rootless for much of this time. He was propelled by a need to cultivate a polished demeanour, to become *respectable* in appearance, thoughts and behaviour. Finally, he was undergoing a crisis of masculinity. A single man who desired above all else to marry the woman he loved, he could not accomplish this goal until his other challenges had been met. McIlwraith's multiple marginalities pushed him to seek refuge in several cognitive harbours – at work (when he had it), in self-improvement, in his diary-keeping itself, and in *Canadian* places, locations in the Scottish diaspora that gave shape to his mental map of the world.

WORK

McIlwraith was engaged as a draughtsman on the Great Western Railway in Samia and on a variety of projects in Hamilton, and as a patternmaker for foundry work in Dundas and New York City. Draughting and patternmaking involved highly skilled work. It was "the most skilled," historian of Victorian Britain Diane Drummond has noted, "of all occupations concerned with foundry work."⁴ Work - respectable brainwork - was clearly an important source of identity for Andrew McIlwraith. In all of his weekday diary entries, the description of his work regimen took pride of place. For McIlwraith, the work of draughting and patternmaking involved a mixture of painstaking calculation and minutely specific drawing and pattern-building. Curiously, while these foundry-based jobs were intimately connected with the vanguard of change in industrial work, they seem to have maintained a remarkably pre-industrial character.⁵ Work was done by task, and periods of accelerated work pace were punctuated by periods of slow demand and even idleness.

⁴ A very good description of these skills can be found in Diane Drummond, "Building a Locomotive: Skill and the Work Force in Crewe Locomotive Works, 1843-1914," *Journal of Transport History* (1987) 6-7.

⁵ It was in metal-working trades - particularly in foundries, railway rolling mills and locomotive works - where the effect of industrialization on the nature of work was first and arguably most deeply felt in Victorian North America. See Gregory Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism 1867-1892* (Toronto, 1980) chapter 5; Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal, 1979); Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1976).

McIlwraith's diary reveals the intermittent pace and wide variety of work involved in mid-century draughting and patternmaking. In the first half of 1857, his time was consumed in planning the Great Western Railway's infrastructure at its Sarnia terminus. "Calculating the weight of bridge iron," "at plan of wood[en] platform," "tracing engine house plan," "drawing pipes... [and] brick tank house" and "drawing plan of Sarnia depot grounds" were the jobs he described in his entries. He described similar tasks concerning his brief stint with the City of Hamilton and his work at the Gartshore Foundry in Dundas in late 1857 and early 1858. "[W]ork on Plan of Hamilton," "work on Hamilton Pump House," "Worked all day at the valve patterns," and "[a]ll day at pumping engines," were repeated descriptions. In New York City, McIlwraith engaged in an even greater variety of work, such as "patching up old patterns," "repairing and altering old columns... for a shop front in Memphis, Tennessee," and work on "valve casing pattern," "2 [inch] pipe patterns," "slide valve pattern," "Cross head patt'n," "large Pillow block for Beam engine," "air pump guards," "Piston patterns," "steam chest pattern," "crank," and "drawing of cylinder." Versatility was an important part of McIlwraith's craft.⁶

Fortunately for him, "Full time at work," or "full time in the shop" were common entries throughout his diary. Occasionally, as in June of 1860, a burst in foundry business meant overtime work and wages for him. "Made 11-1/4 hrs. at work to-day," he reported on June 11 and June 13, and on the following day, impressively, "Made 13-1/2 Hrs..." The downside to these bursts in foundry work were occasional slack weeks which, if they continued for long, meant the laying off of foundry workers, including even the most highly skilled. Even after a very steady summer of full employment in New York in 1859, the first signs of slackening business were interpreted ominously. "One of our pattern-makers [was] discharged this morning", McIlwraith noted on August 15 while in the employ the Novelty Iron Works, "so am thinking my time is soon coming."⁷

Even in this uncertain environment McIlwraith and his fellow patternmakers seemed to have retained a good deal of control over the daily work process and, in particular, the location and timing of assignments when employed. Though he spent most workdays in the shop where he kept his drawing instruments and tools, occasionally McIlwraith worked at home. On February 24, 1860, he reported spending "All day in the house finishing the cylinder drawing" which he had undertaken for the New York firm Duncan & Crampton the previous day. In other instances, McIlwraith felt free to leave the workplace early once he had completed his current assignment. "Left the office early and walked into the woods," he reported in Sarnia, in March 1857. "[M]y job being done, went off for a stroll a round town and spent the day mostly among book stores," he wrote in September 1859. "Took a quarter to-day and went down to the City Hall..." he wrote on Tuesday, June 26, 1860, and on the next day "Spent from 11 till 3 down town," all of this taking place while in the employ of New York's Novelty Iron Works.⁸

⁶ Diaries, March 4, 1857; May 11, 1857; January 28, 1858; March 12, 1858; April 23, 1859; May 4, 1859; November 22, 1859; December 6, 1859; December 19, 1859; January 5, 1860; January 13, 1859; January 19, 1859; January 23, 1859; February 7, 1859; February 24, 1860.

⁷ Diaries, June 13, 14, 1860; August 15, 1859.

⁸ Diaries, March 7, 1857; June 26-27, 1860; September 5, 1859; February 24, 1860; October 11, 1860.

It is unclear exactly what kind of formal training, if any, qualified McIlwraith for his work as a draughtsman and patternmaker. He was obviously an able hand; his competence was never reportedly called into question. Whether he first learned his craft through schooling or apprenticeship is not certain; the 1851 Scottish Census lists him as a “patternmaker” at the age of twenty.⁹ What is clear, however, is that the job market for skilled draughtsman and patternmakers in North America became increasingly competitive in the 1850s and 60s. Staying competitive in the job market meant keeping his skills honed. McIlwraith’s diary is shot through with entries describing the efforts he undertook to improve his professional skills during his non-work hours. During the long winter and spring evenings he spent in Samia, McIlwraith read technical books on mechanical drawing, and stone-cutting, and practised his “Logarithmic Calculations.” On separate occasions in 1857 and 1860, he engaged professional artists to give him drawing lessons, a skill not unuseful for his work as a draughtsman and patternmaker. From time to time, moreover, McIlwraith spent free hours repairing and sharpening the tools of his trade.¹⁰

For all his diligence, off the job and on, McIlwraith was rewarded in pay only moderately well. Balancing the regular costs of lodging, meals, entertainment, and savings with irregular and sometimes unpredictable income was often a precarious act. For his work with the Great Western, McIlwraith was paid \$65.00 each month from January until mid-July, 1857, a pay rate which, given regular employment would have placed him toward the upper end of the contemporary white-collar range. He was, however, without regular employment again until January of 1858. While at Gartshore’s Foundry in Dundas in 1858 and early 1859, McIlwraith’s remuneration varied: for each month in which he was “full time in shop,” he was paid \$63; for more intermittent work, he received only \$6.00 every two weeks.¹¹

⁹ General Record Office (Britain), 1851 Census, St. Quivox District, Newton, Ayr, Scotland, 612/00-002/00-021.

¹⁰ Diaries, May 4, 1857; October 15, 1857; April 11 1859; May 28, 1859; October 19 and 20, 1860; October 31, 1860.

¹¹ Even more financially uncertain was his work regimen in New York City, where he was most often paid on a daily rate, and sometimes, by piece work. The uneven pace of mid-century metalwork business pushed foundries to expand and contract their workforces quickly to meet demands for specific jobs. In many cases, a “skeleton crew” of “permanent” employees were augmented when necessary by short-term workers who hoped to catch on with the firm. Newcomers, like McIlwraith, made up the lion’s share of this auxiliary workforce. Mid-nineteenth-century New York, Iver Bernstein notes, was “host to what was no doubt the nation’s most fluid labor market.” Payment methods reflected this impermanence. “[I] presume my pay is fixed at \$1.50 [per day],” he wrote of his first job in New York in April 1859. From there things improved, somewhat: “[I] Got paid at an advanced rate as near as I can make out \$1.90 per day,” reads an entry for June, 1860. If work was full-time, these rates would have secured him between \$390 and \$500 a year, a little below the median of white-collar pay. Given the elusiveness of full-time work, however, even this reduced pay rate was not achieved. Diaries, “Memoranda,” December, 1857; “Accounts,” December, 1858. In late January, 1858, McIlwraith agreed to do some draughting work for his brother Thomas who was, at that time, Director of the Hamilton Gas Works. Andrew did with the promise to himself that “I won’t take pay for it” but later relented, taking \$10.00 for the work, presumably because he really needed it. Diaries, January 28, 1858. Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 9; Diaries, April 25, 1859; June 18, 1860. From March until November 1860, McIlwraith was paid \$1.75 per day. See Diaries, March 5, 1860.

In this labour market and in the depression years of the late 1850s and early 1860s, the advantage lay clearly with employers, who had their pick of employees, skilled and unskilled. Though the 1850s were years of ferment, protest and, occasionally, rebellion among workers in mid-nineteenth-century North America, patternmakers were notably peripheral to the mid-century labour revolt in New York and elsewhere in North America. They saw themselves alternately as “labour’s aristocrats” or as “junior members of the middle class,” in either case a cut above the mass of discontented workers. Patternmakers were not averse to some of the workers’ tactics, however, and seemed well aware of the potential gains from organizing to control the entry of newcomers into the trade and, perhaps, to set a standard pay scale. McIlwraith apparently supported these aims. He “became a member of a Patternmakers’ Association” in June 1860 at the suggestion of a fellow worker and was elected the “club’s” Vice-President in the following September. The diary is disappointingly silent, however, on his assessment of the association’s aims and purposes, and the likelihood that it could be an effective instrument to mitigate the worst effects of an unstable job market.¹²

SELF-IMPROVEMENT

In the meantime, Andrew McIlwraith sought to “make it” in other, more immediately achievable ways. His diary portrays another quest: to become respectable, or in the words of contemporaries, *cultivated*. On the exterior, cultivated performance encompassed personal appearance, dress, carriage, speech, and demeanour. But the socially aspirant were expected to cultivate themselves on the interior as well; to have substance as well as polish. The two goals were not considered to be uncomplimentary; proper deportment was, to many, a window of sincerity; a polished exterior reflected a noble and honest interior. Victorians learned cultivation from practical, “how-to” etiquette books as well as from diffuse sources: art galleries, respectable theatres and “serious” reading.¹³

In these years, Andrew McIlwraith cultivated himself, on the outside and on the inside. Although his work placed him in or near dirty workshops, he seems to have taken care to attire himself respectably. “Had a stroll down to Grand St. and bought a pair of gaiters in the evening,” he noted in August 1860. “I went and bought me a coat and pantaloons,” he noted two months later. It is apparent that he placed some importance on demeanour too. “[P]urchased a book of etiquette, etc. from a young Scotchman,” he reported in December 1857, and in the next month he spent several evenings “in the house reading

¹² Bernstein, chapter 3, and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984) chapter 10 and Epilogue; Diaries, June 21 and September 6, 1860. McIlwraith’s attitude toward the election of pro-labour Democrat Fernando Wood in December 1859 is revealing: “Yesterday being election day, it is this morning made publick that Fernando Wood is elected Mayor of the City. Think it is a pity the atrocious rascal has gained the day.” Diaries, December 7, 1859.

¹³ See Andrew C. Holman, “‘Cultivation’ and the Middle-Class Self in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Canadian Journal of American Studies* 23, 2 (Winter 1993) 183-93, and *A Sense of Their Duty: Middle-Class Formation in Victorian Ontario Towns* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000) chapter 6; Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Home Front: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880* (New York, 1991).

[a] treatise upon ‘How to do Business’ etc.” One of his library selections in February 1861 was, perhaps, telling: “‘Self-Help’ by Samuel Smiles.”¹⁴

McIlwraith engaged in regular exercise; he was a prodigious walker, for example. While in Hamilton and Dundas, he engaged in regular weekend perambulations around the Dundas Valley, between Hamilton, the Half-Way House (near what is now Copetown), Webster’s Falls, and Dundas, a total distance of about fifteen miles. On many weekend afternoons, he trekked through the Dundas (or Desjardins) Marsh with his brother, most often hunting birds for his brother’s collection and gathering butterflies for his own.¹⁵ In New York, though the sights and sounds of his walking environment were strangely different from those in Dundas and Hamilton, McIlwraith continued a rigorous regimen of walking. He ventured out walking four days of the week on average, in all seasons, and often over long distances. Most often, his walks included tours up Broadway, down the Bowery, and sometimes to the Battery district, a route that was designed no doubt to afford him access to the most vibrant parts of mid-nineteenth-century New York City. On occasion, he took his pedestrian routine further afield, as he did on September 16, 1860. “Started early and took the Peekskill m[or]ning boat. Landed at Haverstraw and had a fine ramble and scramble to the top of the ‘High Turn,’ a high rocky peak, the culmination of a serrated range of hills overlooking the village and the Hudson River and surrounding country.”¹⁶

McIlwraith was no less committed to mental self-improvement. He was, in these years, a voracious reader, but not an indiscriminating one. His reading interests were tied closely to the goal of self-improvement, ranging in type from the practical to the inspirational. He shared his brother’s interest in ornithology and he read widely in biography, religious works, and novels of the higher order. Among the books he purchased or borrowed were Irving’s *Life of Washington*, *Astoria*, and *Sketch Book*, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Cummings’ *Evidences of Christianity* and Hogg’s *Instructions*, along with Southey’s *The Doctor*, Stowe’s *Sunny Memories*, and Bulwer’s *Lady of Lyons*.¹⁷ He took out library memberships wherever he went. In Sarnia, Hamilton and Dundas, he frequented the bookstacks at each place’s Mechanics’ Institute; in New York, his favorite haunts were the Cooper Institute, the Brooklyn Reading Room, the Astor Library, the Apprentice’s Library, and the Mercantile Reading Room. On many occasions he took books home: “Kept house in the evening reading” was a frequent sort of entry. Almost as often,

¹⁴ Diaries, August 28, 1860; October 31, 1860; December 7, 1857; February 32, 1861. See also Diaries, May 15, 1860.

¹⁵ See, for example, Diaries, January 2, 1858; March 14, 1858. On this perspective of health, see James C. Whorton, *Crusaders for Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers* (Princeton, 1982). Curiously, McIlwraith’s diary refers to his diet only rarely, unlike other Victorian diarists.

¹⁶ Diaries, September 16, 1860. “Called for Charles [MacKenzie] at his lodgings, both of us lame-footed with walking so much.” (Diaries, May 22, 1859); “Had a walk round town down Broadway and across to Chatham St. past the five points.” (Diaries, July 16, 1859).

¹⁷ He reported reading Jaeyer’s *American Insects* in May 1859 and Wilson’s *American Ornithology* in November 1859. Other books listed in the diary are *Gsaidee*; *Alton Locke*; Herbert’s, *The Wager of Battle*; *The Club Book*; poems of Crabbe, Heber & Pollock; Crabbe, *Tales of the Hall*; Aiton’s, *Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers*; Bremer’s, *Tales*; *The Virginians*; *A Life for a Life*. To this was added a constant reading of local and international newspapers and journals, including old copies of the *Ayrshire Express*.

however, he spent “awhile” or “some time” in the library reading rooms, most often alone, but sometimes with a friend.¹⁸

McIlwraith enjoyed other intellectual exercises, such as formal lectures and debates, which could often be found in the same libraries and other institutions that he frequented for free, undirected reading. The discourse that emerged from these activities was a product of the mid-century middle-class world view, and in particular the desire to provide enlightened, moral, and “useful” ways of thinking to combat the spectre of disorder, vice, and class hatred that many feared was on the rise in urbanizing Victorian North America and threatening to contaminate the minds of young men. The general message of the discourse was that respectable young men should engage in uplifting and instructional education, rational recreation, proper public conduct, and above all else, self-control. Those who did so, could expect to make their way successfully in the world and become the next generation of societal leaders.¹⁹

McIlwraith made good use of this mental culture, likely because it seemed to fit well with the challenges he faced in these years and the kind of cultivation he felt he needed to rise in his field. Lecture material often provided important prescriptions for proper conduct and examples to be emulated. Lectures were an occasional evening attraction for him, in Canada West and in New York. “[I] Attended a lecture by Bayard Taylor on ‘Humboldt’ in the large hall of the Cooper Institute in the evening,” he reported in December, 1859. More than this kind of passive learning, however, McIlwraith enjoyed the active thrust-and-parry of formal debates. Debating required preparatory study and careful articulation of thoughts. To many minds, debates were wonderful training grounds for the proper cultivation of the public middle-class man. McIlwraith reported in his diary the debates he attended in these years and, despite his short stay there, he was appointed Secretary of the Mechanics’ Institute Debating Club in Dundas, a mark of his interest and participation. “[I] went to [a] meeting of [the] debating society in the old engine room” his entry for April 1, 1858 reads, “and made my maiden speech on the question ‘Whether had War or Intemperance caused the greatest misery to the Human Race. I, trying to maintain that Intemperance had.’”²⁰

¹⁸ See, for example, Diaries, August 15, 1858; January 6, 1860.

¹⁹ See David I. Macleod, “A Live Vaccine: the YMCA and Male Adolescence in the United States and Canada, 1870-1920,” *Histoire sociale -- Social History* XI, 21 (May, 1978) 5-25; Holman, “Aspects,” chapter 4. McIlwraith must have come by all of this honestly. Scotland was a particular epicentre of this craftworker culture of self-improvement, where it was encouraged in part by a relatively open and accessible educational system. It obtained particular potency in the Lowlands in such places as Ayrshire where McIlwraith was born and raised. His personal penchant for self-improvement was likely nurtured in the bosom of his family. His father, a master weaver, had the financial wherewithal to list his seventeenth year old son William, his youngest, as a “scholar” in the 1851 census. Weavers in Lowland Scotland boasted especially high literacy rates and had a particular reputation for an active autodidacticism organized around generally short working hours and financed with relatively good pay. See, for example, Anne Secord, “Corresponding Interests: Artisans and Gentlemen in Nineteenth Century Natural History,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 27 (1994), Anne Secord, “Science in the Pub: Artisan Botanists in Early Nineteenth Century Lancashire,” *History of Science* xxxii (1994).

²⁰ In New York, he did not participate in any debates, but he attended several of them in the Mechanics’ Institute there, such as one on the timely subject “whether slave labour was beneficial to the United States...” See Diaries, December 2, 1859; March 18, 1858; April 1, 1858; April 9, 1858; June 8, 1859.

McIlwraith pursued respectable cultivation in other ways too. He attended church services nearly every week, and sometimes twice on Sundays. A Free Church Presbyterian, his primary attraction was to that denomination, but he also attended services in Episcopalian, Methodist, and Universalist churches.²¹ He enjoyed singing, both as a listener and as a participant. He reported taking formal singing classes in these years to learn how to “sight sing” and strengthen his voice, and he attended occasional concerts and opera performances. In April 1859, he went “to hear Piccollomini sing in the Academy of Music, 14th St. The piece performed being the opera of Don Giovanni.”²² In these years, moreover, he developed an appreciation for fine paintings. His resources for this in Canada West were somewhat limited, but once in New York, McIlwraith devoted several evenings to art viewing in places like the National Academy of Design, the Dusseldorf Gallery, and occasional exhibits at the Cooper Institute. “In the eve[nin]g [I] visited the International Gallery of Paintings and spent an hour or two,” he noted in May 1860.²³

²¹ See Diaries, January 3, 1858; May 6, 1859; May 15, 1859; May 22, 1859; June 5, 1859; July 17, 1859; August 14, 1859; September 4, 1859; October 23, 1859; December 25, 1859; January 1, 1860; January 29, 1860; February 5, 1860; September 2, 1860. McIlwraith’s diary entries reveal a man who was not evangelical in his approach to religion. He seems to have regarded church attendance as offering him two fruits: a respectable, moral appearance that came along with being a regular attendee; and the opportunity to hear some of the finest orators that New York had to offer. He reported hearing (and being favourably impressed by) the oratory of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, for example.

²² Diaries May 18, 1859; also March 10, 1858; March 16, 1858; April 5, 1858; August 3, 1859; July 28, 1859; August 24, 1859; September 14, 1859; December 29, 1859; January 5, 1860; January 9, 1860.

²³ Diaries, May 10, 1860. Evidence of McIlwraith’s attachment to the Victorian middle-class pursuit of respectability can be found in two other of his attributes: temperance and frugality. Throughout the course of his diary, he never admits to drinking alcoholic beverages (although he reports having been in taverns where they almost certainly would have been served). Snippets of information point towards McIlwraith as having been an abstainer, if anything. “I..attended a temperance meeting” he reported in May 1860, “and heard Miss Marshall, a sister of Jesse Marshall, a shop mate of mine, sing ‘The Drunkard’s Wife’.” McIlwraith’s frugality, moreover, is evidenced in the money that he regularly deposited in the Mariner’s Savings Bank, New York, and the occasional notes he sent to Thomas to buy stock in a Hamilton-based Building Society. See Diaries June 22, 1860; July 2, 1860; October 10, 1860.

In his pursuit of other forms of entertainment, McIlwraith’s choices were more curious. He enjoyed the theatre a great deal, and seems to have spent almost as much of his non-work hours watching stage performances as he did with books in his hands. He took in both “highbrow” and the “lowbrow”. In New York, “Went to the Metropolitan Theatre at night and saw ‘Romeo and Juliet,’” he reported in April 1859; in June he saw “Antony and Cleopatra.” Other performances included Scott’s Rob Roy, and Bulwer Lytton’s Money. But he also frequented Barnum’s museum, Wood’s Minstrels, Christie’s Minstrels, Drayton’s Parlor Opera, “Old Grizzly Adams’ California Menagerie,” “Anderson, the Wizard of the North,” and a venture to “the ‘Melodian,’ an indifferent place of amusement on Broadway.” After one such outing to the Bowery Theater for a variety show of pantomimes, feats of strength, animals acts, and the like in summer 1859, McIlwraith remarked: “Thought the entertainment passable but audience not at all select.” In all of this, his sampling of intellectual culture and popular entertainment in the metropolis mirrored the liminality he experienced in other aspects of his life. See Diaries, April 26, 1859; April 29, 1859; May 16, 1859; October 15, 1859; October 29, 1860; November 22, 1859; September 21, 1859; September 10, 1859; April 18, 1859; May 20, 1859; May 23, 1859; December 15, 1859; July 7, 1860; September 8, 1860; August 26, 1859; August 19, 1859. On New York’s entertainment scene, see John F. Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York, 1990); Matthew Hale Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (New York, 1868); George C. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light: With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine* (New York, 1850) and David Scobey, “Anatomy of the

DIARY KEEPING

Why Keep a Diary? The McIlwraith diaries – like many diaries of this era – were more than just quotidian records of one man’s activities. They were also practical tools of social mobility that liminal men such as McIlwraith used to reflect on their lives and resolve to become something better. The diaries were, in other words, a *narrative project* undertaken by McIlwraith to negotiate his way through his young journeyman’s life toward established notions of craftsworker independence and manhood. Social historians have in recent years paid increasing attention to life-writing as a source for understanding craftsworkers and other workers in the past, though most have been more concerned with autobiography than on diary-keeping.²⁴

Even in a cursory reading, one is easily struck by the thick and regular reportage of its author’s self-improvement activities. But the diaries didn’t just document McIlwraith’s attempts at self-improvement towards masculine independence; they were themselves an *exercise* in that activity. They were a narrative of masculine independence that its author was *willing* to happen. This process of self-creation requires periodic bouts of self-examination, of “taking stock” of one’s progress towards this greater goal. Thomas Augst found in his analysis of the diaries of twenty-odd nineteenth century clerks in the northeastern United States, that young men used diaries as forms of accounting for their moral and spiritual development: “independence became a matter of quotidian accounting.” In the midst of an increasingly impersonal economic system, diaries became detailed account books in which all improving actions, big or small, could be recorded in an attempt to will an individuals passage into the next stage of life, masculine respectability and independence.²⁵ It is no accident that McIlwraith’s diaries grow more sparse after he achieves a permanent situation in Galt in 1861 and end completely after he marries in 1862.

Augst has identified New Year as the day in which most young diarists engaged in such self-examination.²⁶ It is no wonder then, that we find McIlwraith’s views on the function of his diaries most strongly expressed in the Preface to his 1858 diary:

In an essay, remarkable at once for the originality of its views and the practical good sense it contains, John Foster recommends the propriety of every man writing memoirs of himself, not as an exercise of ingenuity - not as a means of drawing the world’s regard - but to fix in a man’s own mind, a sense of the progress he has made in moral and intellectual ideas to mark the change in his sensations which a prolonged experience of life produces and to excite a feeling

Promenade: The Politics of Bourgeois Sociability in Nineteenth-Century New York,” *Social History* 17, 2 (May 1992) 203-28.

²⁴ See John Burnett, *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1974); *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1982); Mary Jo Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road : Life Course in French and German Workers' Autobiographies in the Era of Industrialization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London: Europa Publications, 1981); and Martin Hewitt, “Diary, Autobiography and the Practice of Life History,” in David Amigoni, ed., *Life Writing and Victorian Culture* (Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

²⁵ Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale : Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 22-23.

²⁶ Augst, *Clerk's Tale*, 44.

of gratitude for those many providential interpositions which the most careful observer can scarcely fail to recognize as exercised in his behalf.

McIlwraith's diaries functioned as moral account books, providing a running scorecard of his progress toward the goal of masculine independence. Reaching that point would still require continued use of his diary as a tool of self-creation and further improvement of the self. They were both a pacifier and a tool.

CANADIAN PLACES OF REFUGE

If work, self-improvement and diary-keeping acted as refuges for liminal men like McIlwraith in this era, so too did place. For McIlwraith, "making" himself involved establishing connections to New World locations. "Rootedness" in character meant ultimately the ability to be rooted in place. A sedentary life was the mark of personal success. And yet, for McIlwraith and many other workers in the mid-nineteenth century, transiency, as Michael Katz wrote over forty years ago, was one of the central facts of life.²⁷

Transiency marked the lives of Andrew McIlwraith and many of his contemporaries in the 1850s and 60s. In the span of five years, McIlwraith lived in five different towns and cities, boarded in at least eight different homes, and worked for eight different employers.²⁸ His environments changed abruptly from quaint but bustling, "go-ahead" towns like Sarnia and Dundas, to the larger and more anonymous industrial centres of Hamilton (repeatedly championed in this era as the "Birmingham of Canada") and, of course, "Gotham" - New York City. He domiciled in places diverse in comfort and appearance. One might imagine that a rather stark contrast existed between his brother's middle-class Hamilton household and his other "homes": rented rooms in single-family dwellings and large rooming houses. His living situation in Sarnia, Hamilton and Dundas occasioned little commentary in the diary; more notable were his quarters in New York City which seem to have provided the least amount of comfort and a certain degree of anxiety. "Tormented with the Paddys kicking up rows thro' the night in the house," he noted ruefully after moving into Logue's Hotel the night before in April 1859. "Bed bugs most abominably numerous in our room this season," he wrote in August of the next year, "breeding among our books and crawling over them." More often than not, McIlwraith was forced to share accommodations with one or two roommates, a situation not unacceptable when it involved someone like Connel, a friend and iron turner from Dundas, but less comfortable when it was with strangers.²⁹

²⁷ Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, MA, 1975) chapter 3.

²⁸ The towns were Sarnia, Hamilton, Dundas, New York City, and Galt. McIlwraith boarded at a private home in Sarnia, his brother's house in Hamilton, and at boardinghouses in Dundas and in New York City. In the latter location, he lived at various places: Franklin Hotel, Brooklyn (April 16-24, 1859); Paddy Logue's Hotel (April 24-30, 1859); Mrs. Smith's (April 30-November 25, 1859); Mrs. Furey's (November 25-December 1, 1859); Mrs. Skinner's (December 1, 1859-February 25, 1860); [returned to] Mrs. Smith's (February 25-November 2, 1860).

²⁹ Diaries, April 24, 1859; August 17, 1860. "Woke up this morning and found two Irishmen occupying beds in the same room with me", McIlwraith entered on November 27, 1859. Three days later he moved out. Diary, November 27, 1859. See also Diaries, August 30, 1859.

McIlwraith's employers ranged from the paternalistic G.W.R. in Sarnia, on one hand, to a series of foundry owners seemingly indifferent to the plight of their transient workforce, on the other. He worked at the well-known Gartshore Foundry in Dundas for seven months in 1858, and during the nineteen months he spent in New York City, four different metalworking factories engaged him as an employee: Badger & Company Architectural Iron Works, Dunkin's Machine Shop, Duncan & Crampton's, and finally, the Novelty Iron Works, "at the time the largest metalworking and machine shop in the country."³⁰

In choosing to move, McIlwraith followed the path of previous transient workers, paths which were becoming increasingly well-worn in the 1850s and 60s. As far as the diary reflects his thinking, McIlwraith seems to have spent little time puzzling over the decision to go.³¹ Having finished his plan of the Sarnia G.W.R. Depot and his contract on the morning of July 18, 1857, McIlwraith wasted little time and emotion in departing. "In the afternoon packed up... Got certificate and pass from Mr. Gregory and bade good-bye." Even the decision to move away to New York City seems to have involved very little consternation. On April 8, 1858, McIlwraith recorded a visit by a Mr. Raphael. "Had a consultation about my taking a tour to look for work. Think of starting for New York." Five days later, rather unceremoniously, McIlwraith was on a train for New York.³²

His destinations do not seem to have been selected haphazardly, however. Mr. Raphael was one person in a loose network of contacts that McIlwraith used to find work in these years. Brother Thomas was McIlwraith's most active advocate and ultimately, his most valuable asset in finding permanent work. But what is apparent in the diary is that a host of lesser connections, friends, relations, and former coworkers from Scotland, Hamilton, and Dundas provided McIlwraith with extra eyes and ears to find employment opportunities and also with occasions for socializing. The Renfrew family of suburban New York was one of these connections, and a group of people with whom McIlwraith felt familiar enough to spend holidays and a brief summer vacation at their area farm. Listed also in the diary are a dozen or so metalworkers who had been working in New

³⁰ Bernstein, *Draft Riots*, 168. The dates of McIlwraith's employment were: Badger & Company Architectural Iron Works (April 19-November 7, 1859); Dunkin's Machine Shop (November 15, 1859-February 11, 1860); Duncan & Crampton's (February 23, 24, 1860); Badger's [again] (February 25, 1860); and Novelty Iron Works (February 25-October 31, 1860). On the G.W.R., see Paul Craven, "Labour and Management on the Great Western Railway," in Craven, ed. *Labouring Lives: Work and Workers in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto, 1995) 335-411.

³¹ On "the tramp," see Robert K. Kristofferson, *Craft Capitalism: Craftworkers and Early Industrialization in Hamilton, Ontario, 1840-1873* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) 89-90. See also, E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Tramping Artisan," *Economic History Review* 3 (1951) 299-320; Patricia Cooper, *Once a Cigarmaker*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); R.A. Leeson, *Traveling Brothers*. London, 1979; Eric H. Monkonen, *Walking to Work: Tramps in America*. (Lincoln, 1984); David Bensman, *The Practice of Solidarity: American Hat Finishers*. (Chicago, 1985); H.R. Southall, "The Tramping Artisan Revisited: Labour Mobility and Economic Distress in Early Victorian England," *Economic History Review* 44 (1991): 272-96; and Peter Bischoff, "D'un atelier de moulage a un autre: les migrations des mouleurs originaires des Forges du Saint-Maurice et segmentation du marche du travail nord-americain, 1851-1884," *Labour/Le Travail*. 40 (Fall 1997): 21-74.

³² Diaries, July 18, 1857; April 8, 1858; April 13, 1858.

York's foundries before McIlwraith's arrival or who had followed him there. "[I] saw Murray, a fitter from Dundas, who has now started work in the Novelty Works," McIlwraith recorded in July 1859. The presence of familiar names and faces in local workplaces must have provided some promise for transplanted Canadians and others.³³

Throughout this period, Andrew McIlwraith's emotional home and place of refuge was Ayrshire, Scotland specifically, his mother's house on Russell Street in Ayr. "Canada," writ large, was not really a concept that McIlwraith seems to have entertained in his diaries. For him, Canada was a finite collection of nodes on a broad transatlantic mental map; a series of situational havens where family members, Scottish friends fellow workers had settled down. The interstices between these nodes meant little. McIlwraith's Canada was the fragmented, diasporic map of the new emigrant. When his diaries end in 1862, McIlwraith's life had known Canada for fewer than ten years, and he had been resident there fewer than five. He had hardly had the time to invest much in his identity as a "Canadian." Moreover, there were in Canada West in the 1850s and early 1860s, only the faintest stirrings of an identity – *proto-national* perhaps – that distinguished itself as something separate from Britain and the blanket identity that all of its colonies shared.³⁴ In short, it would have been impossible for McIlwraith to conceive of Canada as anything other than an archipelago of safe havens; a series of refuges within a bigger *terra incognita*.

Andrew McIlwraith's diaries reveal a growing sense of "haven" (if not home) in brother Thomas' house in Hamilton. Thomas – and Hamilton – was a window on jobs, family news and friends. Letters from both Thomas and his wife Mary brought news about Andrew's family and friends there. At all times, McIlwraith kept one eye on the job market in Canada West, regularly requesting and receiving updates on the availability of work. "[G]ot letters from Mrs. McIlwraith and from Jameson, Hamilton," he wrote on March 3, 1860. "Very dull times there yet." Thomas informed his brother of a potential job opening for a draughtsman with the Buffalo and Lake Huron railway in Brantford in May, 1860. Andrew hastened to reply, sending a formal application the next day, but was deeply disappointed when the prospect fell through. John Goldie's house in Ayr (Waterloo County) served a similar purpose; weekend trips to visit fellow transplants from Scotland seem to have been a source of comfort and invigoration. McIlwraith was on the move, but he was not a drifter, and he looked forward to the day when

³³ Diaries July 16, 1859. "[I] called upon Hector McKenzie and Connel, iron-turners, whom I knew in Dumbarton [Scotland]." he noted on March 14, 1858. Connel later followed McIlwraith to New York City. Diaries, March 14, 1858. Another contact, a Mrs. Guthrie was able to connect McIlwraith with several foremen in the metal trades in New York in his search for work. See Diaries, April 15, 16, and 18, 1859. Other Dundas acquaintances included A. Glen, Gowry, Thomas McDonald, the "two young McNeils," Murdock, Murray, and William Syme. See Diaries, April 29, 1859; May 13, 1859; July 8, 1859; July 22, 1859; August 22, 1859; October 17, 1859; November 15, 1859; June 5, 1860; July 18, 1860.

³⁴ See for example, J. Sheridan Hogan, *Canada: An Essay* (Montreal: J. Lovell, 1855). The cultural construction of a Canadian identity begins, painfully and in earnest, in the years after Confederation (1867). See, for example, Carl Berger, *A Sense of Power: Studies in the Idea of Canadian Imperialism, 1867-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970); Allan Smith, "Old Ontario and the Emergence of a National Frame of Mind" in F.H. Armstrong and H.A. Stevenson, et al., eds *Aspects of Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974) 194-217.

circumstances would allow of his return to family and friends in Canada.³⁵ Between bouts of work, in January 1858, McIlwraith captured this sentiment. “[I] spent the evening in the house thinking about what I am to do to earn a living or in other words, achieve independence.”³⁶

CONCLUSION

Andrew McIlwraith’s story has a happy ending. In November 1860, he accepted an offer from John Goldie (the father of his future wife, Mary Goldie) to be bookkeeper at the Dumfries Mills (later Goldie & McCulloch foundry) in Galt, a position he held into the late 1870s. Thomas had heard of the opening and lobbied for his brother. Though outside of Andrew’s training and background, the job supplied him with a steady, salaried, and expectedly permanent position, with a reputable employer in a fast-growing industry. McIlwraith did not report his new salary level to his diary, but it was apparently sizeable enough to afford him some comfort and stability. From the time of his return until the end of his diary in early 1862, no suggestion is made of dissatisfaction with his work; no consideration is mentioned of any further travel.³⁷

Moreover, stable, remunerative employment enabled McIlwraith to address other elements in his liminality. He continued, of course, his pursuit of respectability once in Galt. There he joined the local Mechanics’ Institute and became regular book borrower and debater in the association’s Debating Club. His diary entries in these months betray a confident and purposeful man, content with his new place in society. More significantly perhaps, McIlwraith established his own household. He began to look at houses with a view towards purchasing in September 1861, and by February 1862, he had succeeded in buying a “house on the hill” from a Mr. A. Scott. In the following weeks, McIlwraith was preoccupied with furnishing it respectably and could report proudly in early April: “Parlour looking very neat.” McIlwraith’s achievements were complete when he solved his emotional quandary. On Sunday, January 19, 1862, he noted: “M[ary] consented to come with me to Galt as my wife in March.”³⁸

³⁵ Diaries, March 3, 1860; May 4, 1860; May 5, 1860; May 14, 1860; June 13, 1860; June 20, 1860; July 16, 1860. “Had a letter from Thos. but no prospect of work in Canada yet.” Diaries, September 2, 1859.

³⁶ Diaries, January 7, 1858.

³⁷ Diaries, October 17, 1860; October 24, 1860; Diaries 1861-62, generally; Census of Canada, 1871, Galt, Ontario, 31-d. Goldie & McCulloch (now Babcock & Wilcox) was by the late nineteenth century the largest factory in Galt and among the most productive foundries in Canada. Although Mary was the daughter of John Goldie, the foundry’s co-owner, McIlwraith likely had more than his romantic involvement with her to recommend him. His former Dundas employer, Gartshore, had longstanding business ties with James Crombie, previous owner of the Dumfries Mills. On the founders, and the company, see Theresa Faulkner, “The Goldie Mill,” [typescript], Doris Lewis Rare Book Room, University of Waterloo, “John Goldie, Jr.,” *Waterloo Historical Society* 10 (1922) 258-60, “Hugh McCulloch,” *Waterloo Historical Society* 15 (1927) 387, and Katherine Hebblethwaite, *Babcock & Wilcox: A History, 1844-1977* (Cambridge, Ont., 1987) chapters 1,2.

³⁸ Diaries, February 23, 1861; September 2, 1861; February 7, 1862; April 12, 1862; January 19, 1862; “Galt,” *Lovell’s Province of Ontario Directory* (Montreal, 1871) 382.

By 1862, Andrew McIlwraith had found permanent refuge in Canada – at work, in his sense of “self” and in his place as a recognized, if not leading, citizen of a busy city in Ontario’s burgeoning industrial belt. How typical McIlwraith’s experiences were in this era is difficult to say at this stage of study. Similar examinations of other qualitative sources in this area will most certainly tell.