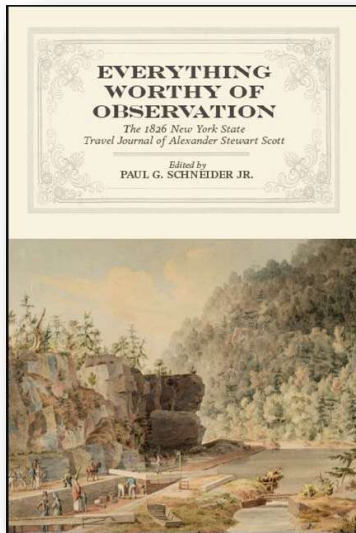




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BOOK REVIEWS



Everything Worthy of Observation: The 1826 New York State Travel Journal of Alexander Stewart Scott

Paul G. Schneider Jr., ed.

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Review by Annie Rehill, first published online 1 March 2022.

In 1826, British Canadian Alexander Stewart Scott traveled by steamboat on the St. Lawrence River from his hometown of Quebec to Montreal, and from there to La Prairie. A stagecoach then delivered him to Saint-Jean-de-Richelieu, from where another steamboat set off down Lakes Champlain and George. Scott then traversed upstate New York by carriages and boats for two more months, visiting family and meeting new

people all the while—and keeping a journal. In 2015, Ph.D. candidate Matthew DeLaMater (now an adjunct professor at SUNY New Paltz) discovered the journal in New York State Library's Manuscripts and Special Collections. He approached independent historian Paul G. Schneider Jr., who was based in Saratoga Springs and ideally positioned to undertake an in-depth study of this nineteenth-century primary source material. Working with DeLaMater and a team of librarians and



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other academics, Schneider transcribed, annotated, and contextualized the manuscript, in a project that led eventually to publication by SUNY Press. Schneider's knowledge and collaborative spirit frame the work and flesh out Scott's world throughout.

This was a world fraught with ubiquitous danger that seemed almost taken for granted by those who navigated it, even among the more comfortable socioeconomic classes of which twenty-one-year-old Scott was a part. As the starkest example of this, Schneider writes in the afterword that Scott died at age forty-one in a theater fire in Quebec while attending the presentation of an illuminated diorama—with his fifteen-year-old daughter, who also perished. The tragedy occurred in 1846, twenty years after Scott's New York journey.

His journal describes pervasive hazard as a matter of course, including close calls while passing under bridges of the Erie Canal, and one especially worrisome moment when Scott slips and slides along wet rocks to get as close as he can to Niagara Falls. Writing in his hotel of his preparation for the venture, he says he was "determined to see everything about the Falls at all worthy of a stranger's observation" (p. 71), the phrase that inspired Schneider's title for the edited journal.

To walk under Niagara Falls at Table Rock, Scott has to go "down to the Beach by a spiral stair case of about 140 steps and from there close to where the water falls into the River below—(a perpendicular height of 150 feet)." Edging "close to the stream" as he follows the guide, Scott's fear is palpable in his description of "the spray":

so blinding that for the first two minutes I could not distinguish a step of my way—if it had not been for shame I would have turned back—the noise of the Cataract is most awful, and I should think could not fail of inspiring with a reverential dread for the God of Nature even "the most desperately wicked." . . . The least slip of the foot here and we are irretrievably lost, nothing to prevent one from plunging right into the abyss into which the water falls and which is not more than twenty yards down—the principal difficulties this length in, are, the want of air and

dangerous walking—the path way is upon the side of an almost perpendicular rock, and the only way of getting on is by fastening the feet upon the out jutting parts of it, which from the continual moisture is by no means easy to do (p. 73).

After this hair-raising walk, Scott has dinner and departs for Buffalo, the next leg on his journey. His trip took place just fifty years after the United States had been established, twenty-two years after Lewis and Clark traveled to the Pacific Northwest (1804), and the same year that James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans* appeared. The well-read Scott refers to the latter in a critical comparison with Sir Walter Scott, a reaction that Schneider elaborates and contextualizes in his introduction (p. 5).

As a historian steeped in his region's storied past, Schneider brings to Scott's journal an extensive introduction (30 pages); an afterword with information on what became of Scott after he stopped writing the journal; two appendices, the first identifying some of the people mentioned in the journal, the second recreating the record of expenses that Scott kept at the back of his journal; ample and helpful notes; and a decent index, although I did find myself adding to it in the margins as I read. The endnotes, organized by chapter, provide not just information about the references, but also often deeper understanding and background.

The illustrations are numerous and very useful, in that they flesh out the period and those who inhabited it, enhancing Scott's written descriptions. Schneider also helpfully includes several maps, but two more would have been most welcome—one for an overview of the region as a whole; another to trace the entire Erie Canal, which features prominently in Scott's journey. The canal was built between 1817 and 1825, meaning Scott traveled along it just one year after its completion. More history and information on the canal would also have been appropriate in the introduction, though Schneider does include the main facts (p. 13) as part of his overview of the Lake Champlain/Lake George regional development.



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Schneider's introduction also brings Scott to life for the reader, summarizing his situation in life and his mentality and views in the context of his time and place as well as his family's background and situation. The historian's perspective deepens the reader's understanding of the travel narrative that follows, despite a few undergraduate-level observations such as defining what "provenance" means (p. 24). This section features quite a bit of speculation on the editor's part, educated guesses that are necessary in the absence of evidence—but this fact needed to be stated only once. This this could indicate simply a lack of confidence on Schneider's part, for which there is no need, as the suitability of his credentials to study and present the work is clear. Finally, the concluding paragraph of the provenance section, which explains how Schneider came across the manuscript in the first place, would have been more helpful placed closer to

the beginning. Instead, the reader wonders throughout the section about a question that could have been dispensed with quickly.

These are minor quibbles. Overall, Schneider offers a useful and intriguing contribution to the ready availability of early American primary sources. One aspect of the book is noteworthy for scholars who toil away independently. Schneider, an NCIS member who, as a retired museum professional, already worked with and was known to local historians, collaborated with an academically affiliated team to comb through and explain a piece of history that had been hiding since 1954 in the New York State Library's special collections. The project must have been exciting, and its fruit adds to knowledge not only about travel in the still-young United States, but also about socioeconomic conditions in upstate New York and the Canadas.

Dr. Annie Rehill (Ph.D. Modern French Studies, MFA) specializes in the literature and history of Francophone Canada, focusing on intercultural expressions and implications.