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Sketches

Sommario/riassunto

Between 1856 and 1878, Robert A. Harrison kept a diary. Harrison, a Toronto lawyer often described as the outstanding common law lawyer of his generation, was Chief Justice of Ontario during that time and his diary is one of the most remarkable documents bequeathed to us by the nineteenth century. In it, Harrison provides detailed and intimate accounts of life and love among Toronto's upper crust, accounts that resound with ambition, passion, jealousy and rage as his life proceeds through courtships, marriages, deaths and all the throes and challenges of routine existence among the privileged classes. Not least important are behind-the-scenes insights into scores of courtroom battles fought before judges sometimes described as ignorant and thick-headed and juries who frequently succumbed to Victorian prejudices of race, gender bias, and religion. Although unusual in his driving ambitions and his consuming need to accumulate a fortune, Harrison remained in most respects thoroughly conventional and Victorian, and his diary offers unrivalled insights into the voice of the mid-nineteenth century Toronto male: confident, conventional, and smug. Harrison is forthright in his opinions on love, courtship, marriage, sexuality, medical practice, death, drinking habits, class, servants, technology, opera, and theatre in the city. In an extended biographical introduction, Peter Oliver provides an explanation and a critical assessment of Harrison's life and career which further illuminates one man's extraordinary record of an era.