

One has the sense that there is a much larger story to be told, and the reader would be well served by knowing more about the archives created by this artist's work, how it is being preserved and whether transcripts of the tape recordings are accessible. This should not, however, overshadow the positive dimensions of creating an awareness of this remarkable woman, and so should be seen as a stepping stone to further feminist research.

It is impossible to do justice to all of the contributions in this book. It is also impossible to pick up the book and not learn something about any one of a number of women, either individually or collectively, whose challenges and experiences have contributed to shaping a wider community. There is much to praise about *Framing Our Past*. It has penetrated some uncharted territories and opened up a tremendous amount of untapped information that has expanded our parameters of historical inquiry and methodology. The editors have also attempted to bridge the dichotomy between conventional social history and the more unconventional personal histories of women. *Framing Our Past* is a notable contribution which provides us with an opportunity to learn more about the details of women's lives, and highlights the need to glean this information not only from oral reminiscences and personal histories, but also from new interpretations of written and visual documents that provide new dimensions to the study of women's history.

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Walk Towards the Gallows: The Tragedy of Hilda Blake, Hanged 1899. REINHOLD KRAMER and TOM MITCHELL. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2002. 320 p. ISBN 0-19-541686-4.

Capital punishment may hold a ghoulish curiosity for many people, but it encourages few archival instincts. Creating and keeping records of judicial executions can almost make one feel complicit in such brutish activity. We are usually left with the case file and the newspaper grotesquerie in a death sentence case, which careful scholars such as Carolyn Strange and Kenneth Avio have been able to reconstruct sensitively for the Canadian cases.

Now we have this new study, *Walk Towards the Gallows*, which ambitiously attempts to re-construct *The Tragedy of Hilda Blake, Hanged 1899*, by contextualizing her young life in late-Victorian, Anglo-Manitoban culture. The method is not new. Its models could be Brian Simpson's superb case studies, starting with *Cannibalism and the Common Law* (1984), and Martin Friedland's three neatly crafted monographs on the capital cases of Valentine Shortis (1986), Israel Lipski (1984), and Old Man Rice (1994). What is new here is that Reinhold Kramer and Tom Mitchell attempt a psycho-historical

dimension, rather like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), by wondering out loud, at page 5: "What did a late nineteenth-century domestic servant think about and fantasize about?" The authors seem to believe that, although Hilda Blake's archived case file is now missing, a look at her library card, so to speak, will reveal reading habits that identify where her thoughts, including those that informed the murderous act, came from. The archivist's blunt question might be: is this how we get inside a dead head a century later?

And why should we care? After all, Hilda confessed and invited the death penalty at age twenty-one for gunning down her mistress, in what appeared to be an impulsive act. Was it also the result of a plot or psychosis? Furthermore, can we explain that act as the culmination of a patterned social conditioning, produced by her poverty and by being an immigrant orphan? She at some point saw these as curses on her life and then, with the gallows only weeks away, reached deeper into a more instantaneous, "the-devil-made-me-do-it" causation. One compelling reason for reading this book, therefore, is that its authors document a diversity of explanations intelligently, thoroughly, and with a deftly engaging prose style.

Make no mistake, however, this is first and foremost a meticulous empirical reconstruction. Its authors believe that the past exists in and for itself, in the ample primary evidence that Hilda's life and Canada's legal system produced. And they confidently write a vigorous narrative that they believe tells truths, not mere perspectives, about that life and system. There is a subtle distribution of Brandon University talents here, in the literary sources known to Reinhold Kramer (English Department) and the exhaustive primary and secondary researches by Tom Mitchell (History Department and University Archivist). In between references to the novels of Charles Dickens and the Brontë sisters, we get a treasure trove of footnoted secondary data about everything from late-Victorian immigration practices to local Canadian village histories.

Much of this is drawn from rummaging in the local newspapers of the 1890s, when each transplanted nationality in each prairie town had to have at least one. Legal records of course are *de rigueur*, in terms of the court case files and parliamentary bills, statutes and debates, wherever extant. Both the National Archives of Canada (NA) and the Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM) have had their correspondence files productively searched. All this reveals, step-by-step, day-to-day, the events and the views and responses to this case and the social issues it still raises. Gallows evidence remains central to the story, and any study of Canadian capital punishment must begin with Lorraine Gadoury and Antonio Lechasseur's wonderfully detailed finding aid for such cases, *Persons Sentenced to Death in Canada, 1867–1976: An Inventory of the Case Files in the Department of Justice (RG 13)* (NA, Finding aid 13–39). All such cases were routinely transferred to the Department of Justice so that the Governor General could review the decision and determine whether to allow the execution, or instead to commute the sentence. This is

why almost every capital trial case file has been transferred to the NA for preservation in the Department of Justice fonds, and has not been returned to its province's government records archives. The Blake case file, however, is missing.

How then to contextualize Hilda Blake's case? The authors divide their narrative into sixteen chapters. The first four focus on the plight of the "work-house child" and on a rural culture hungry for cheap domestic servants and farmhands. Immigrants who got to the prairies first had formed the churches, to thank God regularly for successes and to beg for more. While satisfying spiritual needs, they also formed the farming hamlets, from which to control law and orderly expansion for the right sort of folks, like themselves. Parachute into this agrarian culture, England's cast-off children and the potential for human exploitation could smoulder and then ignite. Most had been herded from orphanages and English city streets, shipped by well-meaning Christian societies, and then placed in families by clergy and magistrates. Most had lived a decade in Canada before their mid-teens, when they became really vulnerable: too healthy not to be over-worked, and too young to flee families in which they were misfits among the parented siblings. That was Hilda Blake's world, as reconstructed by Kramer and Mitchell. It was full of righteous religion and conscientious family duties.

The next seven chapters, designated Part II, trace Hilda's downfall, crime, guilt, and shame. The authors find enough evidence to link the victim's husband, Robert Lane, to her domestic servant, thanks to that murdering servant's own doggerel poem, entitled "My Downfall," penned in gaol after conviction, while awaiting execution. It echoes the metre, rhyme-scheme, and impoverished orphan theme of a ballad in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, but it adds enough suggestive eroticism to its crude tale of seduction and betrayal to make all the Brontës writhe in their Yorkshire graves. Hilda versified that "one day the devil, in the form of a man, Came smiling towards me ... [and] I followed the tempter ... [and] Saw the phantom of Pleasure, still beckoning me on" (p. 82). The authors even suggest influences by Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* as another source for Hilda Blake's "... romantic objection in love, a close knot of sexuality, hidden pleasure, and death" (p. 87).

Much of this literary connecting rests on a newspaper report (13 November 1899) two days before Blake's one-day trial, which asserted that she had been reading books by Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens and "other high class novels" (p. 74). Several probables are suggested: *Rob Roy*, because there the servant girl successfully becomes the mistress of the house, *Great Expectations*, for the orphan Pip, and of course *Oliver Twist*. But this all presumes that a person becomes at least part of what one reads! It would help here if we knew when this literate domestic servant had such sophisticated reading habits. Did this precede the murder, helping her to rationalize justifications for an intentional plan? Or was this only a gaol cell pastime, as the newspapers

claimed, self-helping her to redeem herself heroically by identifying with fictional characters and situations? The authors' psycho-speculations remain rather unconvincing.

Part III begins after the courtroom judgment and sentencing. It contains five fascinating chapters, each designed to put Hilda Blake's fate into five co-ordinated contexts in 1899. The first sets the psychological and feminist standards of the day, focussed mainly on Dr. Amelia Yeomans's diagnoses and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union's morality. Next, the authors describe in touching detail how Blake actually "passed her time in jail" (p. 208), reading, writing, and singing so-called "coon songs." Thirdly, we get the executive appellate review of the judicial trial and sentencing, under the recently created *Criminal Code* of 1892 and alongside parliamentary debates about the female age of consent. The authors develop delightful mini-portraits of the main actors in this automatic review of capital cases by the Governor General in Council: Prime Minister Laurier, Justice Minister David Mills, Interior Minister Clifford Sifton, Governor General Lord Minto, and the Manitoba trial judge, A.C. Killam. The fourth chapter in Part III reconstructs the small towns' newspaper feeding frenzy for the story; the fifth chapter attempts to put Blake's hanging into the death penalty's context for late-Victorian Canada. Overall there is a lively sense of scholarly adventurousness as the many dimensions of tale-telling unfold.

If there is a disappointment, from the legal historian and archivist perspectives, it is two-fold. As already noted, the authors stretch their literary evidences like a Procrustean bed, with every imaginable example of contemporary novels, newspaper reports, poems, letters, and religious texts that Hilda "might" have read, until the reader has to shout: "Stop, until I can see some empirical connection that Emily Hilda Blake actually encountered all of this, and that these things had some measurable impact on her life and its one defining act of homicide." We are not even told what schooling, if any, she had during her first ten years in England and last eleven in Canada: where did she learn to read?

Secondly, the law's institutional context gets lost, or is at least so scattered that one can miss knowing exactly what English criminal law had been transplanted to pre-1870 Assiniboia and then to Manitoba, in order to define the standard and process by which Blake was judged. Crime had, what Professor S.F.C. Milsom once called, a "miserable history," and not just regarding homicide. Even regarding Manitoba capital cases, the authors might have put the Blake case into that context of the previous eight commutations and six hangings, not to mention the total of 105 Manitoba capital cases out of 599 in all of Canada, through the 1960s. The authors do have that one large, particular problem: although there is a specific file number reference for the Blake file (National Archives of Canada, Records of the Department of Justice, RG 13, file 316A), the file itself is noted in the finding aid as missing! Presumably it

was intact before the Governor General in Council, in December 1899, and thus could have provided us with, for example: the trial judge's report, preliminary inquest report, medical report, coroner's inquest, police reports, fingerprints, photographs, newspaper clippings, correspondences, and trial transcripts. That is what one finds in most of the capital case files preserved at the NA. Without this specific case file, however, the authors are still admirably able to make provocative, albeit speculative, windows that greatly open this case's little Manitoba world.

This is not a "who-dun-it" mystery, but it is a most engaging re-contextualization of a single case. Do the authors get us into Hilda Blake's mind? Not without a great deal of literary licence. Should archivists take special note of this book? Definitely yes, as a readable example of how the records that they gather and make available can be used imaginatively. And with luck and strong promotion, this book also deserves to reach a wide audience, whether seated on summer porches or in front of winter fireplaces.

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