

## *Writing the Empire: The McIlwraiths, 1853-1948* by Eva Marie Kröller

Victoria Seta Cosby

Volume 114, numéro 1, spring 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088111ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088111ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

### ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce compte rendu

Cosby, V. S. (2022). Compte rendu de [*Writing the Empire: The McIlwraiths, 1853-1948* by Eva Marie Kröller]. *Ontario History*, 114(1), 118-120.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1088111ar>

nificance—its existence invites several fundamental questions: What is the social and intellectual motivation that nurtures these albeit invisible groups? What accounts for their doctor-driven longevity, especially in light of their relatively informal structure and organization? To be clear, *Making History* addresses none of these matters, but a quick analysis of an appendix that lists the titles of all papers presented at the TMHC from 1957 to 2018 (322 in all) offers clues to answers for such questions. From study of this information, along with personal phenomenological experience as president of TMHC and also through a similar role in clubs in London (Ontario), Washington, DC, and St. John's, Newfoundland, I surmise that active participation in these groups by doctors amounts to the equivalent of episodic micro-sabbaticals. The op-

portunity to explore an historical topic, often uplifting biographies, grounded in one's vocation yet chronologically removed from the quotidian harsh and grinding realities of it, can be intellectually reinvigorating and healthful. A paper presented at the TMHC or one its sister clubs can be seen as edutainment, but it also can prevent burnout for thinking medical practitioners. The admittance of academic (medical) historians to these clubs, I would argue is a bonus, as their inclusion confers scholarly validation. Their contribution is much more than ornamental, however, as they can leaven the level of historical discourse as the identified list of topics presented by them indicates.

J.T.H. Connor  
Memorial University, St. John's

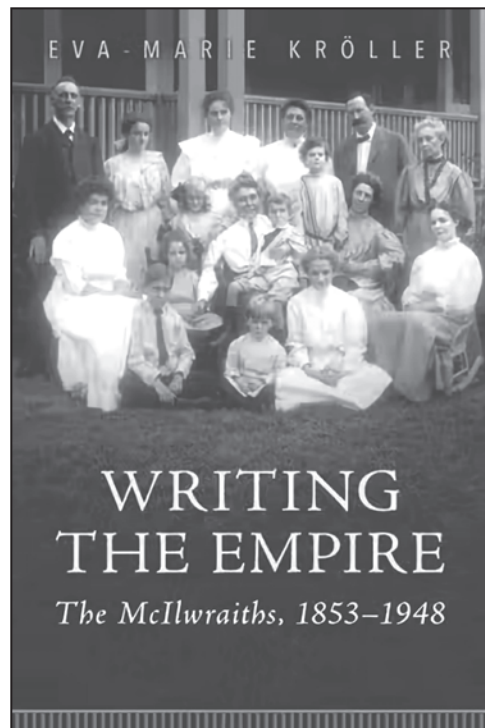
---

*Writing the Empire*  
*The McIlwraiths, 1853-1948*

By Eva Marie Kröller

Toronto: University of Toronto Press,  
2021. 536 pages. \$82.50. ISBN 978-1-  
4875-0757-2 (utorontopress.com)

Eva Marie Kröller's new book on the McIlwraith family follows a family for multiple generations and extends through multiple regions in the British Empire and beyond. This type of study is known as prosopography—the story of several people all connected in some way—in this case through familial connections. The first thing that strikes the reader is the impressive body of varied sources from a wide variety of archives. The author's mastery of the archival material is impressive as she explores generations of a family that was mobilized by education, war, and their careers.



One of the central themes in the book is the role of education in the making and maintaining of familial connections that span nations and generations. The written communications of the family took on a variety of forms, through letters, but also books, magazines, articles, and pamphlets that were circulated between family members. (15) It is interesting that the Kroller chose to begin the book in 1853, as the 'flash point' of the family story because that was when John McIlwraith arrived in Australia, and Thomas McIlwraith arrived in Ontario. (22) This choice focuses the story of the family into two distinct geographical categories: North America and Australia, a critical decision as it allows the reader to better organize the complicated family trees in their own thoughts.

The story of the McIlwraiths is the story of a wealthy family with powerful connections. (21, 27) At the beginning of the book she discusses the network of business partners in Australia who were very politically involved (43), after this section "... the narrative moves on to the McIlwraiths who emigrated to Ontario, and it switches from the high stakes of imperial politics to empire as lived in the intimacy of close-knit family and local geographies" (65). Only one chapter focuses on the Australian McIlwraiths because they left behind less familial correspondence, most of the sources were focused on imperial politics (65). Because of these differences in source material, the majority of the book is focused on the imperial intimacies of the Ontario-based McIlwraiths.

One of the most intriguing parts of the book occurs when Kröller delves into the history of the postcard and how it impacted familial communications—in 1871 Canada was the first non-European country to utilize postcards, which allowed for lower cost of mail for personal and business

reasons. (75) This evolution of postage history impacted the McIlwraiths' personally, but also allowed them to conduct business and expand their wealth at a fraction of the cost.

Though this book discusses multiple members of the McIlwraith family, Thomas McIlwraith materialises as a central character. He a well-known ornithologist, and his books connected bird species to Canadian nationalism and promoted ancestral memory through 'old world culture,' (114-17) The connection between empire, family, and ornithology was not something that I have ever encountered before and it raised many questions about other ways that imperialism and the study of nature interact in my own research. Jean McIlwraith, who features in two of the chapters, emerges as a most compelling figure of the book, as the author follows Jean's life story from her childhood contributions to the 'family album' to an adult writing for magazines and publishing novels in her own right and in collaboration with other contemporary authors (171-79, 190). The 'family album' is a document that was created by the family to record the day-to-day activities of the branch of the family in Hamilton which many of the McIlwraith children contributed to, though Jean and her love of writing meant that she contributed to the album more generously than the other children (121-28). This document is playful in nature because it was mostly created and recorded by children, and includes many of the games, sports, and activities which the children participated in their daily lives. This exploration of life from the point of view of the child is fascinating, as we so rarely see the past through such young eyes.

One of the difficulties that comes with reading this book was the plethora of characters, many of which had similar names,

and the generations of criss-crossing communication which can make it difficult to follow. Some parts lack a narrative flow as the authors attempts to do justice to the minutia of their many materials—but the number of direct quotes taken from letters, articles, and stories does make some parts difficult to follow.

Kröller is to be commended for her exploration of the gendered relationships between family members and other intimate connections are well-explored in this book, specifically gender related to schooling, travel and career choices. She took on a monumental task to synthesize an enormous amount of material and pull out cohesive themes for each section, and yet she

still managed to include an intersectional lens to her analysis. A reoccurring theme that emerges in the author's exploration of the McIlwraith family is their emerging and evolving relationship with conceptions of empire—the author's engagement with this topic is admirable and ambitious. Each of the chapters could likely be a book in their own right, as it is clear that the author is incredibly familiar with the mass of materials which remain on the McIlwraith family and managed to tell a fascinating and nuanced story of family and empire.

Victoria Seta Cosby  
 Doctoral Candidate, History Department,  
 Queen's University

## *The Queer Evangelist* *A Socialist Clergy's Radically Honest Tale*

By Cheri DiNovo

Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2021, 212 pages. \$29.99 hardcover, \$15.99 e-book.  
 ISBN 978-1-77112-489-8 (hardcover), 978-1-77112-490-4 (EPUB) (<https://www.wlupress.wlu.ca/>)

Towards the end of Cheri DiNovo's *The Queer Evangelist: A Socialist Clergy's Radically Honest Tale*, the author writes that "leaving politics is like getting clean from methadrine—and I can compare... Everything seems more important than perhaps it is." (185) Indeed, this autobiography, split roughly evenly between DiNovo's life as a private citizen and career with the United Church and her long career in politics, could be summed up as a meditation on separating true personal and political reform from

an exhausting and traumatic sea of noise. DiNovo's story recounts everything from childhood abuse, to time spent living on the streets of Toronto, a period which provided the skills to thrive as a business woman in the '80s, her pursuit of (Christian) ministry, and her time as a New Democratic Party Member of Provincial Parliament. DiNovo passed more LGBTQ+ bills than any other Canadian politician, was a master of navigating backroom politics and grassroots activism, and was undermined by both external

