

## **Assessment of Robert Sweeny, Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849**

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### Article abstract

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## Assessment of Robert Sweeny, Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849

KATHRYN MCPHERSON

### *Abstract*

*In Robert Sweeny's book Why Did We Choose to Industrialize?, changing gender relationships between women and men constitute one of the "tension-filled relationships" embroiled in Montreal's transition to an industrial economy. My paper assesses the author's success in mobilizing feminist scholarship in his analysis, both in terms of the book's content and its form.*

### *Résumé*

*Dans le livre de Robert Sweeny Why Did We Choose to Industrialize?, l'évolution des relations entre les femmes et les hommes constitue l'une des « relations tendues » de la transition de Montréal vers une économie industrielle. Mon article évalue dans quelle mesure l'auteur a réussi à mobiliser la recherche féministe, tant du point de vue du contenu que dans le style du livre.*

In recent decades, the status of economic history in Canada has faded considerably. Where once debates over staples and super-staples, commercial empires and mercantilist policies, metropolis-hinterland relations, the impact of industrial production and even underdevelopment theory animated graduate course syllabi and conference proceedings, now questions arising from gender and sexuality, post-colonial history, Indigenous history, migration/diasporic histories and cultural studies inspire much Canadian historiography.

Bob Sweeny's *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849* promises to reverse this trend, offering an engaging and passionate analysis of the economic activity of early-nineteenth century Montreal. Cords of firewood, manifests for goods shipped across the Atlantic, monetary protests, urban property

ownership, and labour contracts are all counted, calculated, and interpreted in Bob's quest to explain why and how industrial production gained assent in Canada's largest city. Bob does this by exploring what he admits to be an "inordinate number of ... tension-filled relationships" (p. 329) of which "men vs women" is one. My assessment of his book focuses on this particular tension, asking whether Bob successfully mobilizes feminist scholarship into his analysis. To do so I consider both the form — that is, how the author presents his material — and the content — what he actually argues; this is a separation which, I admit, runs counter to a central tenant of this book.

*Why Did We Choose* is in many ways a scholarly and Canadian equivalent to the 2015 blockbuster film, *The Big Short*. Those who have seen that film will know that through its ensemble cast *The Big Short* exposes the backroom dealings that provoked the 2008 economic crash in the United States. The film is unique in that it doesn't just follow the fictionalized histories of a series of "players" in the economic crisis, but permits one key character, played by Ryan Gosling, to "break the fourth wall" by speaking directly to the audience: throughout, the movie shifts from dramatic action to Gosling speaking to the camera. The narrative of the film is also punctuated by "explanatory moments," a sort of "heritage-minute" approach to teaching audiences about the complex economic transactions tracked in the film. Selena Gomez uses black jack to explain "collateralized debt obligations," chef Anthony Bourdain shows how "bundling" weak mortgages with strong was akin to a chef using yesterday's fish heads in a stew for today's menu, and glamorous Australian actress Margo Robbie — lounging in a bathtub full of bubbles while drinking champagne — explicates the structure of prime-sub loans.

In *Why Did We Choose* Bob uses comparable techniques, disrupting his analysis of the early nineteenth century "economic crisis" to address readers directly, explaining his thirty year-plus journey of finding, recording, analyzing, and comparing documents which chart the economic activity of early industrial Montreal. Though these interventions, readers learn how Bob grappled with his evidence, why it was created, how it has been

interpreted, who influenced his thinking and where he went wrong in his early analyses. There is a drama and urgency to many of these explanatory interludes. For instance, Bob describes how he was called by the archivists at the *Archives nationales* to help authenticate Viger's 1825 manuscript census, located in a storage room in a "bleak industrial landscape in the north end of Montreal... as I scurried through the empty streets in the fading light of a cool spring evening in 1999...." When they failed to win the manuscript at the auction, Bob writes of the defeat: "Crushed, I was offered a ride to the nearest metro" (p. 172). These engaging and highly personal interventions disrupt the text, making the complex, detailed, and even dry data series feel urgent and imperative. The book is thus not just a presentation of the evidence, it illuminates how the historian grappled with the data, what he first thought he was finding, where his questions came from, and how he responded (rightly or wrongly at times) to what he thought he was seeing. We are asked to understand how he felt.

In many ways, these elements of the "form" of the book put into action methodological approaches advocated by feminist scholars. For instance, many feminist scholars have insisted that feelings are a core part of the research process — think for example of Nobel prize-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock who was successful because she had a "feeling for the organism."<sup>23</sup> So too does the personal reflexivity that Bob exhibits speak to feminist calls to acknowledge and understand the researcher's own social location and political investment in a project. We also see feminist methodology at work where Bob recognizes the silences in the archives. Feminist historians have argued that patriarchal societies produce patriarchal archives; throughout this book Bob interrogates where and when women's productive activity actually changed, as compared to when it was not, or was no longer, recorded (p. 265). I really like one of the early observations in *Why Did We Choose* where Bob notes that newcomers to Montreal might have needed to formalize their economic transactions through notarial records precisely because they did not have the extended kin networks which long-standing residents had, and

which served to cement and regulate economic relations through the social and familial ties and influence. Throughout this study, Bob considers where the work of women and children may have been hidden by the formal records of economic exchange.

This text speaks to feminist scholarship in another way, which is that *Why Did We Choose* is kind of gossipy. “Ouch,” you say — but think about it. The drama of the research journey is underscored by personal recollections of who did what where at which conference, take for example page 36:

The hall, like the hotel, had seen better days. Proximity to the Rimouski train station and a moderately good restaurant was about all one could say for the place. In 1977, trains were out of fashion, and few had chosen in late October to take the long drive down the south shore of the St Lawrence to the administrative centre of the Gaspé peninsula. So for this annual meeting of the *Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, there would be no concurrent sessions. At the front of the almost full room, two young graduate students, Margaret Heap and Joanne Burgess, began with some trepidation to present their results.

True, there is a footnote at the end of this paragraph, but readers have no way of knowing *if* the hotel was shabby or *if* attendance was poor. Yet such passages provide a window on the isolation experienced by these early scholars in the field, the outsider status felt by a group of young historians asking new questions with potentially controversial answers. Feminist scholars have argued that gossip — once characterized as an illegitimate form of knowledge and speech — has been used by women precisely because they lack social power, are isolated and marginal in their way of knowing. A feminist definition of gossip presents it as “a way of talking between women, intimate in style, personal and domestic in scope and setting, a female cultural event which springs from and perpetuates the restrictions of the female role, but also gives the comfort of validation.”<sup>24</sup> When Bob writes of his first conference paper which “proved a disaster,” he admits

that he and his younger colleague Gilles Lauzon “seriously considered throwing in the towel then and there,” readers are brought into a personal and intimate portrait of the pain felt, but also into the process of “validation” (p. 81).

In these ways, then, the form of *Why Did We Choose* brings the insights of feminist scholarship into economic history in powerful and productive ways. Of course, there are also substantive analyses of gender and power presented here. For instance, *Why Did We Choose* shows that the industrial economy emerged as a contest among men, a process wherein women’s social and economic power were restricted and made invisible. The decline in women’s property ownership, for example paralleled the rise of what Bob terms “a profoundly gendered urbanity” (p. 304). Equally important, Bob locates the need for laboring classes to enter into the industrial economy because of the crisis of social reproduction. When families too dedicated to agricultural and craft production, along with merchants and traders, were no longer able to establish the financial stability for a new generation and to reproduce their way of living, this crisis of social production occurred. Bob is clear that household size, including the distribution of female domestic servants, is one way to measure changes in social reproduction, but we learn little in *Why Did We Choose* about those other reproductive strategies, such as fertility. Did Montreal’s families seek to expand or contract their family size as they responded to the new industrial economy? Such strategies have been documented in other industrial economies, and an analysis of fertility in early nineteenth century Montreal is needed.

The question of social reproduction, though, raises a further issue with which historians of economic transitions must grapple. How did the emergence of an industrial economy rely upon the social reproduction of Europeaness, or Euro-American society, on Indigenous lands? In *Why Did We Choose* Bob acknowledges that agricultural families could expand onto farm land along the St. Lawrence River because it was available. But that availability came at the expense of dispossession of Indigenous people. Historians Sarah Howdle and Dan Rueck have both investigated the

social tensions created within Mohawk communities when traditional land became vulnerable to “sale.”<sup>25</sup> How do we rewrite the economic history of the transition to industrialization by “counting” dispossession of Indigenous people, by valuing their labour in the production of firewood, by recognizing their presence in and around these “colonial” or “cosmopolitan” or “imperial” cities? Building on the pathbreaking work of feminist economist Marilyn Waring (which Bob acknowledges and cites), not only do we need to produce economic analyses as “if women counted”<sup>26</sup> so too do we need to move the field to produce economic history where the activities, contributions, exclusions of Indigenous people are recognized. *Why Did We Choose* is an important book precisely because it provokes critical questions such as these, through both its form and content.

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