

## Working [on Imperial] Families: Bettina Bradbury's Imperial Re(turn)

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## *Working [on Imperial] Families: Bettina Bradbury's Imperial Re(turn)*

Jarett Henderson

WHEN I RETURNED TO CALGARY after giving a version of this paper at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association this past May in St. Catherines, I opened my office door to discover a copy of Bettina Bradbury's *Working Families* resting on my desk. In my absence, my colleague Tom Brown, who, like Bettina has just retired, bequeathed me his copy of this thoughtful and terrain-shifting study. I was reminded of Tom's generosity as I began to revise this paper for *Labour/Le Travail* and I share this recollection here as a way to thank him for his kindness and for his unexpected help in bolstering my assertion that Bettina is best known for the award-winning study that I found on my desk. To be certain, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* originally published in English in 1993, in French in 1995, and then reprinted again in English in 1996 and 2007, continues to influence students of Canadian and Quebec, family and labour, women's and gender history.<sup>1</sup> An unintended consequence of this focus on *Working Families*, however, has meant that Bettina's more recent work on imperial families, and the important historiographical contributions she has made to the fields of gender and empire history through that research, have been overshadowed.

By tracing Bettina's shift from *Working Families* to *working on* imperial families I hope to illustrate that individual family histories and their transimperial kin as well as the politics of their daily lives not only anchor Bettina's imperial turn, but also mark a continuity between her earliest and most recent research.<sup>2</sup> Such a focus seems fitting, especially as Bettina plans her departure from Rusholme Road and imminent return to New Zealand. I begin by highlighting how Bettina's most recent monograph, *Wife to Widow*, especially the framing of that project, was inspired, in part, by international feminist historiographies of empire. I suggest that this not only led Bettina to situate

1. Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal*, (Toronto: Canadian Social History Series, McClelland and Stewart, 1993); (Republished Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996); and (3rd edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). See also: Bettina Bradbury, *Familles ouvrières à Montréal. Age, genre et survie quotidienne pendant la phase d'industrialisation* (Montréal: Boréal, 1995), Translated by Christiane Teasdale.

2. Bettina has reflected on her own scholarly contributions on at least two occasions. See for example, her Roberts Lecture at York University on 24 October 2012 entitled "Twists, Turns, and Tall Shoulders," which is available online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NraU1Wt6c60> as well as her remarks from her induction to the Royal Society of Canada in November, 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFULZ006Sv8>.

Montreal as part and parcel of the wider history of nineteenth-century British colonialism, but also led Bettina to her current projects that consider the political struggles, personal perils, and the predicaments of empire faced by colonists in the Cape Colony, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada over the long-nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

Following the publication of *Working Families*, Bettina turned her attention to questions of marriage and widowhood in Montreal, the industrializing city that she knows so well. That study – *Wife to Widow: Lives, Laws, and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Montreal* – the bulk of which was written while I was a graduate student at York University, traces how two cohorts of women who married in the 1820s and the 1840s, respectively, navigated their lives, first as wives and then later, as widows. It focused, Bettina writes, on the “negotiations and renegotiations of patriarchy in women’s individual lives, in the laws that framed marriage and widowhood, and in the politics of the period.”<sup>4</sup> As Bettina recently explained at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women at the University of Toronto this past summer, this project had stemmed, in part, from her dissatisfaction with how historians were using quantitative data. Rather than use such calculations to merely identify historical trends, Bettina explained that she sought to analyze what such data can teach us about the lives of individual historical actors and how those lives intersected with larger historical processes.<sup>5</sup> Whether lived in Montreal’s Sainte Anne ward or the Grange on Wadestown hill in Wellington, New Zealand, Bettina’s taking of individual life histories seriously is the tie that binds together all her research projects.

But *Wife to Widow* is also much more than this. *Wife to Widow* marks a significant historiographical and intellectual transition in Bettina’s scholarship

3. Bettina Bradbury, “Colonial Legacies: Marriage, Inheritance and the Making of 19th Century White Settler Societies,” Current Manuscript Project. Other recent contributions and publications connected to this project, but not discussed here include: Bettina Bradbury, “Troubling inheritances: an illegitimate, Māori daughter contests her father’s will in the New Zealand courts and the Review Committee of the Privy Council,” *Australia and New Zealand Legal History* (2012): [http://www.anzlhsejournal.auckland.ac.nz/pdfs\\_2012/Bradbury-Troubling-Inheritances.pdf](http://www.anzlhsejournal.auckland.ac.nz/pdfs_2012/Bradbury-Troubling-Inheritances.pdf); Bettina Bradbury, “Caroline Bax, Edward Kearney, Their Children and His Final Wishes in Mid-Nineteenth Century, Victoria, Australia,” Melbourne Feminist History Group, University of Melbourne, 22 April 2013, Melbourne, Australia; Bettina Bradbury, “Affective Economies? Marriage, Property Accumulation and Inheritance in 19th Century White Settler Societies of the British Empire,” Social Science History Association, Vancouver, November 2012; and Bettina Bradbury, “White Widows’ Wishes in 19th century British Colonies.” International Federation for Research in Women’s History, International Congress of Historical Sciences, 22–28 August 2010, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

4. Bettina Bradbury, *Wife to Widow: Lives, Laws, and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Montreal*, (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 2011), p. 2.

5. Bettina Bradbury, “From Collective Genealogy to the Intersections of Law and Individuals’ Family Histories,” Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, University of Toronto, 24 May 2014.

that the book's title belies: the histories of Marguerite Paris, Émilie Tavernier, and Sarah Harrison, three of Bettina's women who became wives, and later widows, were not only woven into the streets, homes, and benevolent institutions of Montreal. *Wife to Widow* makes clear that these women as well as their husbands, families, and kin, also inhabited a larger imperial geography wherein the constitutive elements of marriage were being remade anew. Marguerite, Émilie, and Sarah lived, worked, and even voted in the white settler society of Lower Canada which was populated by British colonizers, conquered French Canadians, and other migrants, all of whom who had, for generations, dispossessed local Indigenous peoples:

In thinking about population movement as well as legal and political debates about marriage of the period, I [Bettina] found it useful to conceptualize Montreal as a particular colonial space in which the dynamics of race, class, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and the workings of difference can be fruitfully approached through the lenses of the rich and growing literature on gender and empire.<sup>6</sup>

Montreal was a colonial city. It was a "marriage metropolis" in a very particular sort of British settler society, and as Bettina's work makes clear, it is an urban geography in need of being reconfigured by historians within the realm of empire. To comprehend Montreal, and by extension Lower Canada/Quebec, within such an imperial frame challenges students of history to conceptualize the lives of the city's residents alongside the political, legal, and discursive structures that shaped the contours of and gave meaning to those lives, both locally *and* globally. Also captured above are the ways in which the work of feminist scholars, crafting new critical histories of empire over the past decades, profoundly influenced the conceptual frame of *Wife to Widow*. This scholarship continues to shape Bettina's research and has led her to explore questions of marriage and property, intimacy and inheritance across the nineteenth-century British imperial world that remain rooted in individual family histories.

When I arrived at York University in September of 2004, I had just completed a master's thesis at the University of Manitoba. That project explored the discourses of gender, race, and empire that late-nineteenth century immigration officials working for the Canadian government employed to attract colonizers to the Canadian northwest.<sup>7</sup> I fully expected to expand that project into a doctoral dissertation. I had no intention of researching or writing about the social, familial, and imperial histories of Lord Durham's fraught administration of

6. Bradbury, *Wife to Widow*, p. 21.

7. Jarett Henderson, "No Money, But Muscle and Pluck': Cultivating Trans-Imperial Manliness for the Fields of Empire, 1870–1901," in Christine Ramsay, ed., *Making It Like A Man: Canadian Masculinities in Practice*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press: 2011), 17–37; and Jarett Henderson, "Most of our country is wild and unspoiled': Advertising Gender, Race, and Empire for Western Canada, 1867–1911," MA Thesis, University of Manitoba, 2004.

Lower Canada, to say nothing of its controversial nature.<sup>8</sup> What I did know, however, was that I was especially interested in the burgeoning field of gender and “new imperial history”. I had always enjoyed history, but this new feminist history of gender and empire excited me because it offered opportunities to reframe historical debates, to alter chronologies, and to move static historical narratives beyond the confines of the nation-state. I quickly discovered that Bettina, too, found this scholarship engaging and helpful for thinking about how to conceptualize the manuscript that we now know as *Wife to Widow*. As a wide-eyed graduate student this timing could not have been more perfect: it allowed us both numerous opportunities to share ideas, books, and articles. As we became better acquainted, coffees, lunches, and dinners became opportunities to discuss the work of Antoinette Burton, Phillipa Levine, Angela Woollacott, Kirsten McKenzie, Catherine Hall, Ann Laura Stoler, and others.

In the summer of 2003, Bettina presented a paper at the British World Conference held in Calgary, Alberta. This was the first time, at least that I am aware of, that Bettina applied the opportunities offered by comparative colonial history to the question of marriage (though she did publish an article on married women’s property rights in New Zealand in 1995).<sup>9</sup> I did not attend that British World Conference, but I, along with the other students in Bettina’s graduate seminar at York the following year, debated and discussed the unpublished version in a course that was neither about the history of nineteenth-century Montreal nor the family as many might expect. Rather, we read it in Bettina’s course on the comparative histories of women, gender, and colonialism; a course that provided me, my fellow students, and Bettina with an opportunity to engage with the debates that feminist historians of empire were having over the legacies and impact of imperialism on individuals around the globe.

The published version of this paper – “Colonial Comparisons: Rethinking Marriage, Civilization and Nation in 19th century White-Settler Societies” – appeared in *Rediscovering the British World* in 2005.<sup>10</sup> Drawing largely upon the arguments made by white, male, and predominately middle-class colonial politicians “Colonial Comparisons” explored the intersection between discourses of civilized colonial space and ‘appropriate’ heterosexual marriage practices. In short, this paper pushes students of history to think about marriage “as part of a broader colonial culture.” The cartography of marriage

8. Jarett Henderson, “Uncivil Subjects: Metropolitan Meddling, Conditional Loyalty, and Lord Durham’s 1838 Administration of Lower Canada,” PhD Dissertation, York University, 2010.

9. Bettina Bradbury, “From Civil Death to Separate Property: Changes in the Legal Rights of Married Women in Nineteenth Century New Zealand,” *New Zealand Journal of History*, 29, 1 (April, 1995): 40–66.

10. Bettina Bradbury, “Colonial Comparisons: Rethinking Marriage, Civilization and Nation in 19th century White- Settler Societies,” in Phillip Buckner and G. Frances, eds., *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, November, 2005), 135–58.

regimes Bettina identifies positioned developing white-settler societies like Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the Cape, with their systems of participatory government, as distinct from imperial spaces under direct rule and inhabited by so-called ‘uncivilized’ racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Marriage and civilization, then, worked in tandem to mark difference between colonies and nations while preserving white, male authority throughout the nineteenth-century British settler world.

Bettina remains engaged with the ever-expanding body of feminist scholarship on the history of gender and empire. While her work exposes the ways that different colonial spaces provided distinct opportunities to the men and women who inhabited them, it also serves as an example of how to write effective comparative colonial histories that focus on individuals and their families. A forthcoming chapter in *Within and Without the Nation*, written and researched while Bettina was completing *Wife to Widow*, interrogates how two couples, Mary Ann Blatchford and her husband (residents of the Cape Colony in South Africa) and Mr. and Mrs. Kerr of Quebec, profited not only from the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the possibilities offered by empire, but also from the spaces of difference created by the persistence of Roman-Dutch law in the Cape and the Custom of Paris in Lower Canada/Quebec.<sup>11</sup> “Debates about marriage or inheritance law”, Bettina writes, were both local issues and transnational questions, “[they] were never only about the intimate and economic rights of men and women within families”.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding Bettina’s current book-length project on marriage, inheritance and property in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the Cape Colony that charts family histories across generations and geographies, she and I co-authored a chapter that explores how British colonizers in the imperial parliament debated and defined race, demarcated colonists of French and British origin, and deliberated over what political rights (if any) ought to be conceded to those in the British colony of Lower Canada. This paper, which positions Lower Canada as part and parcel of the wider age of reform that took the British empire by storm in the late 1820s and the 1830s, stemmed as much from my doctoral research as it did Bettina’s own engagement with critical histories of empire. When we first set out to write this paper, which will be published in *Living in Quebec*,<sup>13</sup> our intent for doing so was to address

11. Bettina Bradbury, “In England a Man can do as He likes with His Property:” Competing Visions of Marriage and Inheritance in Nineteenth-Century Quebec and the Cape Colony,” in Adele Perry, Karen Dubinsky, and Henry Wu, eds., *Within and Without the Nation: Canadian History as Transnational History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

12. Bradbury, “In England a Man can do as He likes with His Property,” forthcoming.

13. Jarett Henderson and Bettina Bradbury, “A Difference of Race? Racializing, Difference, and Governance in British Debates about the Colony of Lower Canada, 1828–1838” in Raffaele Iacovino, Stephan Gervais, and Mary Anne Poutanen, eds., *Living in Quebec: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Intercultural Relations* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press: forthcoming).

the relative absence within Quebec historiography of works that place colony and metropole in one analytical frame. But we also wanted to consider how *Canadiens* were marked as different by imperial administrations and racialized in the broader debates and practices of empire. We found it helpful to grapple with the cultural and political significance of these tumultuous years not just within the colony, but also in terms of Lower Canada's place within the broader British empire. Debates over these years placed questions of race, difference, and politics at the heart of public and political discussions in the metropole as in the colonies, and, we argue, shifted cultural understandings of what it meant to be free or unfree, 'white', 'red', or 'black' as slavery was dismantled, Catholic rights established, and Indigenous peoples' possibilities of survival and civilization examined.

One of the debates we examined in that paper took place in the British Parliament over the 1828 Select Committee on Civil Government for the Canadas. We found that the Whig opposition in parliament contested some of the Tory government's representations of the colony of Lower Canada, its people, and the laws, while sharing others. One such Whig, Sir James Mackintosh, while addressing the work of the committee, omitted any mention of slavery's existence historically in the Canadas, or of its Indigenous inhabitants. Mackintosh, who had been a recorder in Bombay, India, for seven years, echoed the Colonial Secretary's assertion of the absence of "the slavery of the West, and the castes of the East." But Mackintosh also added to the cartography of colonial difference by stressing that Canada was also exempt from "the embarrassments of that other great continent which we have chosen as a penal settlement". In this mapping of colonies, then, Whigs and Tories agreed that Canada was untainted by being a colony of slavery or castes or a penal colony. These three threads constituted reminders that the colonists of the Canadas were understood as not black, not divided by caste as in India, nor peopled predominantly by unfree and mostly working-class convicts as in New South Wales or Tasmania. Indigenous inhabitants disappeared from the debate and the whiteness of both groups of European colonizers was taken for granted: it became the norm against which the inadequacies of other races were measured. In short, we came to the conclusion that directly and indirectly these debates shaped the ways Lower Canada and its peoples were incorporated into the rapidly changing "colonial order of things" that was particular to this period.<sup>14</sup>

When asked to do so Bettina has often described herself as a New Zealander who studies Quebec history. Yet how she has done so is of particular importance to that history, and the most recent chapter in that story is her turn to empire. Bettina's imperial turn demonstrates that although her intellectual interests have evolved, her work remains rooted in the feminist histories and politics that first inspired her research some thirty years ago. The imperial

14. Henderson and Bradbury, "A Difference of Race?" *forthcoming*.

family histories that now occupy Bettina's attention teach us about the workings of empire across the settler world, how to conduct thoughtful comparative, connective colonial history, and that individual family stories remain fruitful ways for historians to reckon with histories that are lived locally and globally. Moreover, Bettina's grappling with feminist and post-colonial histories of gender and empire provides students and teachers of history alike with an opportunity to reframe how we teach and write the history of northern North America. To celebrate and acknowledge the important contributions Bettina has made to the history of gender and empire recognizes the impressive scale and scope of her career and captures her scholarly evolution from *Working Families* to working on imperial ones.