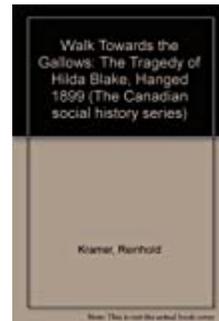




Reinhold Kramer, Tom Mitchell. *Walk Towards the Gallows: The Tragedy of Hilda Blake, Hanged 1899.* Toronto and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. viii + 318 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-541686-2.



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Published on H-Canada (February, 2003)

Not Your Ordinary Murder Mystery

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This is not your ordinary true-crime murder mystery. One learns at the very outset from the title that Hilda Blake was hanged. The hanging took place in the Brandon, Manitoba jail on December 27, 1899. Moreover, Hilda did not have much of a trial. She pleaded guilty without a lawyer, stating at her trial: “I want to say that I am guilty, and I want you to inflict the severest punishment upon me that is all.” Still, the book keeps you reading because there are a number of important unanswered questions: whether Wilfrid Laurier’s cabinet should have commuted the sentence to life imprisonment, whether Blake was mentally ill, and whether she acted alone. Three federal cabinet meetings on the case were held in late December 1899 and the decision was made by the cabinet—contrary to Governor General Minto’s view—to let the law take its course.

Ten-year-old Hilda Blake, an orphan, had been sent to Canada in 1888 from the East of England to join a farming family west of Brandon. Her mother had died the previous year and Hilda had been placed in a workhouse in England. The Canadian family that took her in had re-

quested “a couple of poor orphan children to be brought up” on their farm. The authors point out that about 80,000 pauper children arrived in Canada between 1869 and 1925, the Barnardo children being the best remembered today. Hilda became a domestic servant, but was very unhappy in her new home and the year after she arrived she ran away, eventually—after a well-documented legal fight—being returned to the farm family. Shortly thereafter she ran away again and this time no effort was made to bring her back. Hilda went from one domestic service to another throughout the province, primarily in Winnipeg. She moved to Brandon and, for a year before her arrest, became the domestic servant for the Lanes.

One day in July 1899 she was helping Mrs. Mary Lane hang some curtains in their large home—the Lanes had four young children. Mrs. Lane was shot in the back, ran outside, and died, without identifying who had shot her. Hilda said that it was a tramp, with a foreign accent, who had come to the door looking for something to eat. The authorities scoured the city for a person who matched Hilda’s description. The police chief had doubts about her evidence and within a matter of days she had given

a confession, saying that she had purchased the gun in Winnipeg.

What was the motive? Hilda told the police that she had shot Mrs. Lane in a sudden and overwhelming fit of jealousy. Rumors circulated that Mr. Robert Lane, a handsome 36-year-old businessman, was having an affair with Hilda. This was never mentioned at the trial because there was no trial. The trial judge, A. C. Killam (later a member of the Supreme Court of Canada), arranged for Hilda to meet with a lawyer, but after a fifteen-minute discussion the lawyer concluded that Hilda had no interest in a defence. No evidence was presented and the judge found her guilty, sentencing her to be hanged.

Few women were convicted of murder in Canada. Between 1867 and 1899, of the 274 individuals convicted of murder, only 13 were women. Half of the twelve cases excluding Blake's were love triangles. Of those women convicted, most had their sentences commuted. Between 1873 and 1922 only two women were executed in Canada: Blake and, earlier the same year, Cordelia Viau. Homicides were rare in Brandon. Before Mary Lane's murder, only two residents of the city had been shot to death and only one of these was a homicide.

Petitions were sent to Ottawa to commute the sentence to life imprisonment. The principal objection was that Hilda was "morally insane" and should not be hanged. There was other evidence before the cabinet suggesting that Robert Lane had been behind the event. Hilda would say little about her relationship with Lane. The most she would say publicly came through a poem that was published in mid-December 1899, after the trial, entitled "My Downfall," which included suggestive verses such as:

"But one day the devil, in the form of a man,/ Came smiling towards me; said he 'You can/ Know more, if you'll take them,/ Of joy and pleasures,' I heard him say,/ 'Than e'er you have dreamed of; I'll show you the way.'"

The Globe perhaps went the furthest, stating on December 18, 1899, that "a certain man who wronged her promised to marry her if she murdered her mistress, Mrs. Lane." The newspapers, however, were careful not to implicate Robert Lane, obviously fearing a libel suit.

Many prominent citizens, including the crown attorney who obtained the conviction, sought a delay of execution. Moreover, the Attorney General of Manitoba formally requested a delay. The cabinet, however, refused to delay the execution or to appoint a commission to en-

quire into Hilda's mental health.

The authors' chapter on Hilda's execution is outstanding. The newspapers covered the execution in great detail and the reconstruction of what took place—what she wore, how she walked up the steps to the gallows, what executioner Radclive said—is more thrilling than one usually finds in an Oxford University Press book. One keeps hoping that she will say something crucial on the gallows. Even though we know she is hanged in 1899, I was hoping that the title was a trick by the authors and that she would be saved.

As some of the readers of this review may know, I have published three true-crime books covering much of the same time period as the Hilda Blake case. In each case, the most dramatic aspect of the case was the fight for a commutation. In *The Case of Valentine Shortis*, a Canadian case from 1895, the cabinet records were very rich and extensive. Unfortunately for Kramer and Mitchell, the capital case file on the Blake case was missing. It had been sent to the Governor General who apparently returned it to the secretary of the cabinet, but it seems that it was never returned to the department of justice and so was not transferred to the archives.

Having looked at a number of capital-case files I am sure that if there had been a file in the Blake case we would have learned a great deal more about the case than the authors were able to find. We would have had the trial judge's report, memos by officials in the department, detailed letters from persons in Brandon and elsewhere, and perhaps statements by psychiatrists. We might have known some of the arguments that were being advanced in cabinet. It could not have been a simple decision because they dealt with the matter at three cabinet meetings. We might have had letters and other evidence of the political considerations that led to a decision not to delay the execution. I would be surprised if they did not discuss the commutation in the Shortis case in 1895 which helped bring about Laurier's victory in the 1896 election.

Kramer and Mitchell are therefore forced to speculate on what might have been argued. They do a good job, stating, for example, that "the federal cabinet may also have allowed Blake's execution to proceed so as not to expose [Clifford] Sifton [the minister from Manitoba responsible for immigration] and the Liberals to political danger by rescuing someone who could at best be portrayed as a congenital deviant and at worst be associated ... with a too-permissive immigration system."

They would likely have had memos from departmen-

tal officials comparing this case to other cases, such as the Viau execution earlier that year and other cases where insanity was rejected as a ground for commutation. Laurier might have taken the position that Louis Riel was hanged, even though there was a recommendation of mercy, so how could they reprove Blake when the evidence of insanity was less clear and there was no recommendation of mercy by the jury?

Although the first minister of justice in Laurier's cabinet, William Mulock, took a merciful approach to capital cases, his successor David Mills took a hard line. In one case in 1898 the accused was hanged, even though the jury had recommended mercy and had signed a petition for commutation. In the three-year period between 1898 and 1900, as I point out in the Shortis book, twenty-three people in Canada were hanged—about two-thirds of the capital cases considered by the cabinet.

An important document that was in the cabinet papers was one prepared by Hilda Blake for the cabinet. No copy of this document survives. In it, according to documents in the papers of Minto and Mulock, she puts some of the blame on Robert Lane. It appears to have influenced Minto to favor a commutation. In a letter to Laurier he stated: "if her confession is accepted against herself, that confession lays bare the most horrible story I have ever read against Lane.... The confession tells the story of herself and Lane, and if it is true enough to condemn her it must be true enough to condemn him."

The absence of court records, without a trial, and cabinet records which have disappeared, may have initially discouraged the authors. But what they lost in narrative, they made up for through a social history of a number of important areas. Indeed, if there had been a trial, their book might have been in the Osgoode Society's series on legal cases rather than Oxford's Canadian Social History Series.

By focusing on a single case and drawing on other published and unpublished material they are able to shed light on a number of issues, such as the immigration of orphans, class structure in the west, the commercial and agricultural development in Manitoba, sexual relations at the turn of the century, and domestic service. They make important contributions in all these areas. Perhaps the most important analysis was that of the domestic servant. It is the major recurring theme in the book. The authors point out, for example, that 41 percent of the female workforce in 1891 worked as domestic servants. Interesting facts are sprinkled throughout the book. The rate of pay for domestic servants was low,

with Hilda Blake making perhaps \$150.00 a year. It was the lowest-status occupation, apart from prostitution, in which women could work. Domestic servants were frequently taken advantage of sexually by their male employer or his sons, and domestic servants were among the most likely to become unwed mothers. In one study of a Montreal institution, about 50 percent of young women who came for help between 1885 and 1900 were domestic servants. Servants who attempted to bring charges were generally unsuccessful. The authors cite Carolyn Strange who states that "from 1880 to 1930 not a single Toronto domestic who laid a complaint of indecent assault or rape against her master saw him punished." One of the issues then being debated before Parliament was whether domestic servants should be included in the protected classes of women. The minister of justice, Mills, agreed to delete "domestic servants" from the list which included factories, workshops, and stores, presumably because of the alleged danger of blackmail by servants. So, the book is a rich storehouse of material on the domestic servant.

Another interesting theme is discussed throughout the book—Victorian literature and how it both reflects and influences behavior. It should be noted that Reinhold Kramer is in the English department at Brandon University, while his co-author Tom Mitchell teaches in the history department. Some of the major pieces of Victorian literature involve orphans—Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, to give two examples. It appears reasonably clear to the authors that Hilda Blake had read *Jane Eyre*. The language in her poem "My Downfall" shows some similarities to the novel. Jane Eyre, "Victorian England's most famous orphan," is able to rise above her class. The authors suggest that this is what Hilda Blake was trying to do. "Novels did not *cause* her to act in certain ways," they write, "but the *form* her actions took often depended on her reading." I leave the analysis of these themes to others more versed in Victorian literature.

Kramer and Mitchell have written an intelligent social, political, and cultural history of turn-of-the-century Canada, wrapped in a mystery. I would, however, have liked more. I would have liked the authors to go a bit further and tell us their real beliefs about what they think occurred. They certainly give indications of how they interpret the events. They are careful, however, not to go very far. Here are examples of caution: "In many cases and, so the evidence suggests, in Blake's case, the employer made the domestic his sexual partner"; and "the climax of her probable affair with Robert Lane." I would like to have learned what, in their view, is the most likely

scenario that brought about the *Walk Towards the Gallows* and *The Tragedy of Hilda Blake, Hanged 1899*. But perhaps it is better for the reader to draw his or her own conclusion.

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Citation: Martin Friedland. Review of Kramer, Reinhold; Mitchell, Tom, *Walk Towards the Gallows: The Tragedy of Hilda Blake, Hanged 1899*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. February, 2003.

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