

BOOK REVIEW

The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation Building in Western Canada to 1915. Sarah Carter. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008; illustrations; 400 pages; ISBN 978-0-88864-490-9; \$34.95 (paper).

This impressive and engaging book offers a carefully crafted historical account of efforts to impose a Christian, heterosexual monogamous model of marriage upon the heterogeneous population of Western Canada from European colonization to 1915. With a particular focus on Southern Alberta, Sarah Carter examines the wide-ranging strategies employed to reshape what was a diverse marital and familial landscape. A large part of the book is devoted to detailing concerted state efforts to regulate and thereby alter conjugal relationships of First Nations on the Prairies. In short, this book demonstrates how much *work* it took to fashion compulsory monogamy and its patriarchal gender order as 'natural'. Importantly, it also documents Aboriginal resistance and defiance of state attempts to enforce this marriage model.

Central to Carter's analysis is her argument that the intentional and intense promotion of "the importance of being monogamous" was key to gendered and racialized nation building of this period; it helped forge a British Canadian identity in Western Canada and was necessary for the wealth accumulation of white male settler society. By centring "marriage" as her entry point, Carter contributes to studies in feminist history that unravel how Western Canada was produced and understood as white "manly space" (283). That colonial authorities employed lifelong, heterosexual monogamous marriage as a tool to organize gender, racial and property relations on the Prairies is solidly grounded in the author's use of a wide range of primary materials and legal history. She brings abstract law and policies to life, illustrating the egregious consequences for women (especially Aboriginal women). The specificity of her site of historical research contributes a more nuanced understanding of widespread anxieties over the breakdown of marriage and families occurring at this time, highlighting the distinctiveness of Western Canada with its intersections of Indigenous and migrant peoples. The book includes numerous photographs that stand as visual artifacts to the author's clearly written narrative.

What is compelling about this work is the way the author draws connections through time, linking a particular historical moment to contemporary debates. One such example appears in the resonance between the objective of "saving" Aboriginal women from their own cultural marriage practices and that of "saving" women in Afghanistan and Iraq, both employed as justifications for imperial interventions. The book delineates past acknowledgement of Aboriginal marriage law by the Canadian state and struggles by Aboriginal peoples on the Prairies to live under their own laws, which reverberate in current

academic and political discourse whose aim is to recognize a “third” legal tradition of Aboriginal law in Canada. By mapping out the determined and conscious work it took to enforce heterosexual monogamous marriage in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries, the book also presents an important challenge to current conservative anti “gay marriage” discourse that defines such a model as timeless and universal. Finally, the historical analysis of marriage traced in this book makes an important intervention in contemporary conversations in Citizenship and Sexuality Studies concerned with marriage law as a project of governance.

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