

## *A Silent Revolution? Gender and Wealth in English Canada, 1860-1930* By Peter Baskerville

Glenna Harris

---

Volume 101, Number 1, Spring 2009

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065684ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065684ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

The Ontario Historical Society

**ISSN**

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Harris, G. (2009). Review of [*A Silent Revolution? Gender and Wealth in English Canada, 1860-1930* By Peter Baskerville]. *Ontario History*, 101(1), 113–115.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065684ar>

In his preface Carruthers refers to Toronto as the Middle Ground, connecting Ontario and Canada to the rest of world, and asserts that THE history of Toronto is contained within these pages. Hold on! A lot was not said; the authors had to be selective. I worry too about the word “heritage” as being soft history; too little is made of difficulties expe-

rienced by many.

Jim Lemon  
University of Toronto

*Bibliography:*

Lemon, James T. *Toronto since 1918: an Illustrated History*. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1985, 2002.

## *A Silent Revolution? Gender and Wealth in English Canada, 1860-1930*

By Peter Baskerville

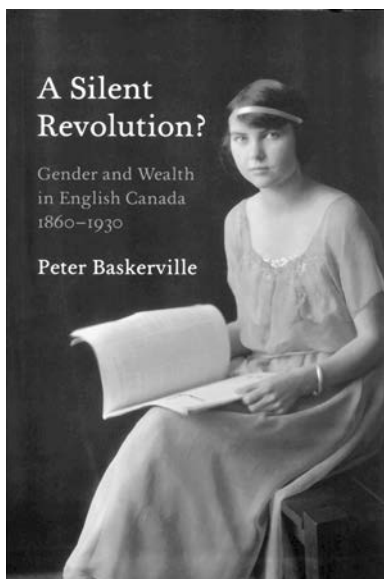
Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008. viii + 375 pages. \$29.95 softcover. ISBN 0-7735-3470-4 ([www.mqup.ca](http://www.mqup.ca))

Contemporary historical geography continues to turn an eye to the more complex readings of spatial identities that may be gained by examining gender. Traditional approaches have engaged with masculine and feminine identities through the division of public and private spheres, and have explored how women's roles have been historically shaped by more limited mobility and independence in their more private, domestic roles. Peter Baskerville's *A Silent Revolution* offers a direct challenge to these assumptions, through an examination of women as managers of property and wealth within the urban middle class. This narrative serves as a response to historians who have labeled women, Baskerville notes, as “crippled capitalists” or as individuals lacking in independence or mobility outside of the domestic sphere.

This text examines women's relationship to wealth in English Canada

between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Baskerville approaches this task through an analysis of probate documents, newspapers, wills, property investments, mortgages, and so on, for women in Hamilton and Victoria from 1860 to 1930. His goal in doing so is to present a national picture through localized stories of individual women and their economic worlds, asking “what do we know about the independent economic activity and wealth-holdings of married and other women in late-nineteenth century urban Canada?” (p. 8)

Much of Baskerville's focus is directed towards the introduction of Married Women's Property Laws (MWPLs), which allowed for dramatic change in the proportion of property owned by women. In contrast to the period before the introduction of this 1870s legislation, when it was not possible for women to own property in their own name or conduct busi-



ness free from their husbands' control, the introduction of the MWPLs significantly influenced the ability of men and women to operate independently in matters of financial control. The author notes, for example, that by 1901 in a Canadian city, every fifth house would have been owned by a woman, a significant change from three decades previously. Baskerville's analysis of historical data is both lengthy and detailed, revealing that in multiple respects—from the percentage of mortgage-holders to the gender of bank shareholders—women's participation in the world of capital and investment was increasing during this time. Much like their male counterparts, middle-class women increasingly oriented themselves towards participation in the market as individuals, even when married.

This analysis begins by acknowledging that historians have largely ignored the possibility of women as investors or financiers, accepting them as unimportant in the field. (p. 32) While it is true that men reported higher incomes across the employment sectors than did women, and that men were more likely to be connected to wealth through investment and entrepreneurship than were women, Baskerville shows over several chapters how women's roles in these areas warrant further consideration. The very wealthy tended to be men, but below this class *stratum* men and women were largely equal as financial actors. He argues, for example, that “[if] it can be shown that Canadian women in the urban workforce were equally or even more likely to be involved in business in the early twentieth century than were men in that era and than were women a hundred years later, then we are encouraged to rethink our view of the possibilities for women's economic agency in that time period” (p. 193).

Baskerville systematically shows that middle-class women in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century urban Canada were commonly occupied as self-employed busi-

ness owners, mortgage-holders, and investors, in contrast to their predominantly domestic identities prior to this period. Women at this time were therefore negotiating between responsibilities in the home and their increasing inclination to participate in the traditionally male, public sphere of financial management. Baskerville's findings would seem to confirm that men's responsibilities remained predominantly connected to public, professional life, yet we cannot assume that women's roles in this time period were only domestic. Baskerville concludes that women straddled the public and private worlds, allowing us to question the traditional separate spheres model.

As Baskerville attempts a balance between a narrative and an analysis of considerable data, however, a broader aim to establish women's identity in the social context of the time period is often lost. He clearly presents a careful and detailed picture of women's growing strength in the world of capital in a time when Canada's market economy was also growing and encouraging individual attention to investment. But it is comparatively less clear what sort of personal or familial motivations underwrote this transformative period. Certainly women's property ownership often increased stability in times of risk for their male spousal counterparts, and was directly facilitated by the MWPLs, but what broader social or cultural transformations may also have supported this “silent revolution”? Baskerville's analysis is confined to the period between the 1860s and the 1930s in large part because, after this era, the balance of equality in investment, property ownership, and financial responsibilities shifted once more towards men. In his conclusions Baskerville is unable to offer much in the way of explanation for why this was the case. It is disappointing that such a project, which attempts a nuanced analysis of gendered identity, cannot provide some speculation

regarding this shift.

Overall I find *A Silent Revolution* an intriguing addition to Canadian historical geography and a text that would be fascinating for exploration at higher levels of undergraduate or graduate classroom study. This text would be invaluable to those seeking to explore aspects of historical change in Hamilton and Victoria, as Baskerville's meticulous attention to records of the time communicates a vast amount of detail. Still, I find

this volume most significant in its broader contributions to understanding historical gendered identities. Baskerville's findings provide an intriguing examination of women's identities as property owners, and of the shifts in laws and governance that influenced the ability of women to conduct themselves as people in control of wealth.

Glenna Harris,  
McMaster University

## *Wellington County*

By Fred Dahms

Erin: Boston Mills Press, 2008. 158 pages. \$39.95  
hardcover.

ISBN 1-55046-502-3 ([www.bostonmillspress.com](http://www.bostonmillspress.com))

Fred Dahms' interest and background in geography is evident throughout the readable text and abundance of lavish photographs in *Wellington County*. A founding member of the University of Guelph's Department of Geography, Dahms' enthusiasm and appreciation for his subject is clear. Author of several non-academic books exploring the history and geography that characterizes the small communities and landscapes of Canada, Dahms' newest work is a treat for amateur historians and geographers, as well as residents of Wellington County or day-trippers searching for an afternoon's adventure.

Dahms begins with the natural environment, exploring the ancient geographic development of the area and the impact of water and stone on the settlement of Wellington County. From the gorges on the Grand River, to Luther Marsh and the kettle lake at Puslinch, Dahms clearly describes the natural history and heritage. He explains how settlers exploited these natural features, by harnessing the power of water for mills or quarrying limestone for building material and gravel. *Wellington County* also addresses

the impact of the human exploitation on the natural environment—the intensification of the annual flooding throughout the watershed, for instance—and responses, such as building dams for flood control along the major waterways.

The second chapter is devoted to the architectural history of stone building in the county, especially the abundance of limestone structures in Guelph and Fergus. Dahms' text reads like heritage walking tours of these communities, highlighting the significant architectural treasures as well as providing tidbits of historical background. Throughout this chapter he links the past with the present, providing stories and examples of how cherished and well-preserved historical buildings have been transformed for new uses. The Wellington County Mu-

