

The Castleton Massacre: Survivors' Stories of the Killins Femicide by Sharon Anne Cook and Margaret Carson

Nancy Janovicek

Volume 115, Number 1, Spring 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1098790ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098790ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Janovicek, N. (2023). Review of [*The Castleton Massacre: Survivors' Stories of the Killins Femicide* by Sharon Anne Cook and Margaret Carson]. *Ontario History*, 115(1), 144–146. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098790ar>

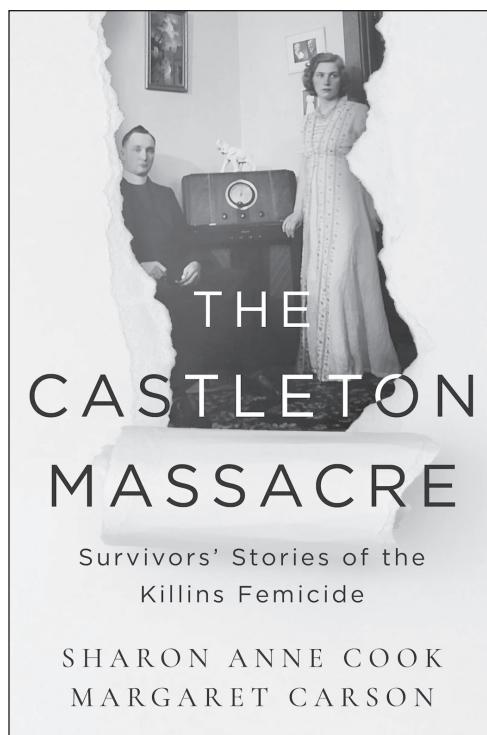
The Castleton Massacre
Survivors' Stories of the Killins Femicide

by Sharon Anne Cook and Margaret Carson

Toronto, Ontario: Dundurn Press, 2023. 260 pages. \$24.99 softcover. ISBN: 078-1-459-74986-3
 (www.dundurn.com)

The Castleton Massacre tells a story that should never have been forgotten. But it was. In May 1963, an estranged husband murdered his wife, Florence (nee Fraser) Killins, and his eldest daughter, Pearl; both were pregnant. He also shot his sister, Gladys, who was visiting the family in Northumberland County, Ontario. The murderer did not leave a letter to explain why he murdered these women. The authors posit that it was because he was losing control over Florence and Pearl and felt betrayed by Gladys because she supported her sister-in-law. The other victim was seven-year-old Patsy, Florence's youngest daughter. It is unclear whether he planned to kill the little girl or if she died because she was in the path of his rampage. Two children survived: twelve-year-old Peggy and her ten-year-old brother Brian.

The authors are cousins. Sharon Anne Cook, respected scholar of women's and gender history, is known to many readers of this journal. Margaret Carson is Peggy, one of the survivors of the massacre, who has had a successful career as a college instructor and administrator. The book begins with Cook's recollection of the day after the massacre to news that her parents were flying from Calgary to Ontario. They had just heard on the CBC that her father's brother, Robert, had been on a deadly shooting spree that also injured the male spouses of Florence and Pearl who were trying to protect them. Robert died



in hospital shortly after the killings. Peggy and Brian moved to Calgary to live with relatives they barely knew, but the relationship between the girls soon became close and they have been lifelong friends. They wrote this book to make sense of the tragedy that they continue to struggle with and to help the survivors recover from the trauma of the massacre. This is a deeply personal memoir that is informed by scholarly analysis of domestic violence and feminist

organizing to make this private issue political.

The authors write that “families are complex structures” (5) that are understood differently by different members of the family. Families provide care but the relationships within them are unequal and reflect broader politics and social norms that have changed over time. The first chapters of the book discuss the histories of the Killins and Frasers, two Canadian families from modest backgrounds who aspired to upward mobility. While the Killins earned enough to send their children to university, the Frasers lived in dire poverty. Based on survivors’ memories and scant family documents, these chapters examine bonds and rivalries within the families and draw on social history to examine the gender and class relations that informed how they may have understood their families and their roles within them. This helps to explain why the Killins family expected greatness from their eldest son, Robert, who became a United Church Minister. He did not have a successful career and was relocated to smaller parishes many times because he clashed with congregation members. Despite living most of his life as an eccentric recluse whom many feared, his parents and brother continued to revere him as an intelligent and good man.

This book shatters the myth, entrenched in popular culture, of the 1950s as a simple time when everyone lived in happy nuclear families. Robert was 31 when he met 17-year-old Florence and they had one child together after he left the clergy. The marriage was unhappy, and she left him after a fire destroyed their home. Florence met A.D. Hall and had three children with him; they never married because Robert refused to grant her a divorce. Robert insisted on a relationship with his daughter, which gave him access to the en-

tire family. Photographs published in the book show that the children were happy with each other and their mother, but they were afraid of Robert. The family moved often to escape his surveillance. He stalked them for a decade, building a shack near their properties so that he could monitor them. Florence did not adhere to social conventions, but she had to protect her children from the shame of being “illegitimate.” A.D.’s children thought that Robert was their biological father, and they did not know the truth until his funeral in 1962. Just before the massacre, Florence had begun a new relationship and the couple had plans to move to Northern Ontario. Pearl lived under the constant scrutiny of her father, who became more controlling when she started to date. Despite his violent attempt to end the relationship she eloped with her boyfriend. The mother and daughter lived in separate homes on the same property outside of the town of Castleton, where Robert had built another shack. Gladys stayed in a shack built for her when she visited.

Media coverage of gendered mass murderers today often resorts to narratives about troubled young men and ignores the systemic reasons for the crimes. Newspaper stories of the 1963 massacre focused on Robert’s ill physical health to make sense of how a former United Church minister “snapped” and became violent. Cook and Carson acknowledge that Robert most likely also suffered from undiagnosed mental illness, but they draw on feminist analysis of domestic abuse to understand the increasing control and violence that led to the victims’ deaths. While they draw comparisons to current analysis of domestic violence, they remind readers that this was not available to help Florence protect herself and her children. Weaving subtle political analysis throughout the book is a

sensitive and effective way to examine continuity and change.

How could this story have been forgotten? It was widely covered in national and international press, including reports in *The Chicago Tribune*. There is a growing literature about women's lives, work, and organizing in the postwar period, but there is still much we need to learn about domes-

tic violence in this period. This memoir seeks to "make visible in Canadian history" (238) this family's experience of abuse. It may inspire future study of the countless other women whose stories have been ignored and forgotten.

Nancy Janovicek
Dept. of History, University of Calgary

Transforming the Canadian History Classroom *Imagining a New "We"*

by Samantha Cutrara

Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2020. 245 pages. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN 9780774862837
(<https://www.ubcpres.ca>)

Teaching and learning history are foundational to citizenship education. The controversies in history education are often rooted in whose history is taught as canon and how that content should be learned. In the Canadian context, these debates were fanned into flame in the late 1990s and early 2000s where some argued for a specific 'Canadian' content, while others proposed a procedural approach.¹ The procedural approach, recognized as *Historical Thinking*, has emerged as a framing theory of history education in curriculum documents across the country. In Ontario, the 2018 social studies curriculum asks students to use "concepts of disciplinary thinking" to investigate issues and events in the course.² Dr. Cutrara's book, *Transforming the Canadian History Classroom*, is a welcome addition into this discussion. While the Historical Thinking approach elaborates on the 'how' of history education, Cutrara dives deeply into the 'who,' arguing that the silenced stories of Canadian history are essential to disrupt the grand narrative that

have been promoted uncritically in history education.

Transforming the Canadian History Classroom offers educators a theoretical structure to reconsider the role of history education in shaping society. Cutrara notes that critical theory and critical pedagogy offer lenses to deconstruct historical narratives that students, and their teachers, often take for granted. She writes "it is through postmodern and poststructural theories that we can better explore how history is not a canonical narrative of the past, but rather a medium for constant refashioning, remoulding, and retelling what happened in the past for the purposes of the present" (22). Refashioning and remolding the narratives of the past is the active process of thinking historically. Addressing historical silences and debating significance are important aspects that should be present in history classrooms. Uncovering difficult or contrary narratives encourages disillusionment in students, which creates an opportunity for learning and hope. Cutrara's vi-