

## *Jeannie's Demise: Abortion on Trial in Victorian Canada* by Ian Radforth

Janet Miron, PhD

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done well to remember that sacrificing the divergent and episodic for the sake of a singular chronological narrative line to the near present leaves out too much of what

readers find interesting and what is crucial to the history of Canada's political parties.

Colin McCullough, Ph.D.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Mordon, *Temperature Check: Canadian Democratic Attitudes in a Pandemic* (Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Wong, "History Students Hungry for a Broader, More Inclusive Portrait of the Past, 16 August 2021. *History students hungry for a broader, more inclusive portrait of the past* | CBC News

## *Jeannie's Demise*

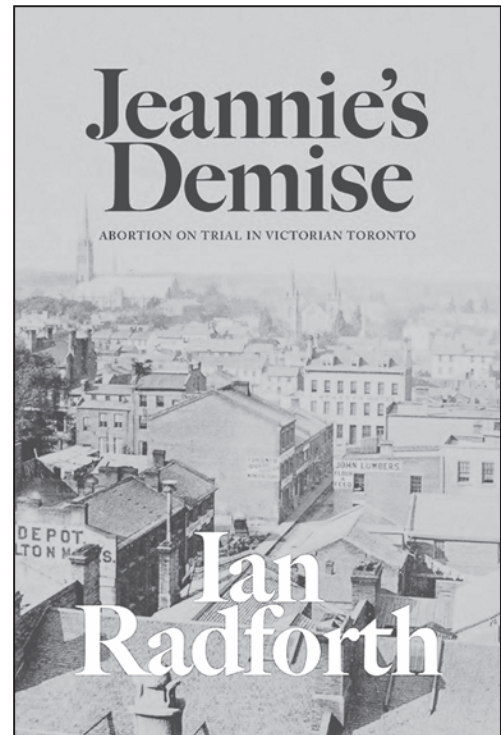
### *Abortion on Trial in Victorian Canada*

By Ian Radforth

Toronto: Between the Lines, 2020. 185 pages.  
\$29.95. ISBN 9781771135139. (btlbooks.com)

That access to legal abortion services remains an issue of debate in Canada in the early twenty-first century was made clear during the campaigns for the September 2021 federal election and the pressure for party leaders to identify their positions. Attention to reproductive rights in Canada furthermore was sparked in 2021 by recent events in the United States, specifically Texas's introduction of an almost complete ban on abortion, including cases in which pregnancy is the result of rape or incest. The fact that the most restrictive abortion law in the United States was passed in the same state where *Roe v. Wade* (1973) began highlights how contested and precarious access to safe abortion continues to be in the northern half of North America.

*Jeannie's Demise: Abortion on Trial in Victorian Canada* by Ian Radforth is a meticulous reconstruction of the story of a young unmarried woman who died in 1875 from a botched abortion in Toronto, Ontario. Weaving together an array of archival documents related to the history of one individual and the broader social land-



scape in which she lived, Radforth's retelling of Jeannie Gilmour's life and death is a grim and visceral reminder of the dangers women faced in Victorian Canada when both birth control and abortion were illegal. Contemporary issues are not delved into by Radforth in this relatively short book, yet the experiences of Gilmour, her death at age twenty-three, and the events and responses following her death provide

crucial background for discussions on reproductive rights today, despite the century and a half that separates Gilmour from women in the early twenty-first century.

While procuring or inducing an abortion was an indictable offence at the time of Gilmour's death and would remain so until 1988 in Canada, the law never prevented people from seeking an abortion or attempting to procure a miscarriage, clandestinely, desperately, and invariably under very unsafe circumstances. Although it is impossible to determine how common abortions or abortion attempts were when they were treated by the state as crimes, the traces of abortions left behind in historical records are chilling and tragic, regardless of whether they took place in the late-nineteenth century or in the mid-twentieth century. Employing newspapers, trial records, census reports, and an array of other historical documents, Radforth skillfully pieces together parts of Gilmour's life and death, from her family's migration from Scotland to rural Ontario to her relationship with her father and her experiences working away from the familial home. Radforth's focus, however, falls on the discovery of Gilmour's body in a coffin-like box in a ditch and the investigations, trials, and events that followed.

Rich in detail and eloquently written, Radforth treats Gilmour's story with empathy and care, yet even his remarkably thorough research cannot overcome the silence that surrounds Gilmour. Radforth writes, "Jeannie is at the heart of this tragedy, and yet she remains elusive." (155) As a result, *Jeannie's Demise* is not a complete portrait, and the gaps addressed by Radforth speak to the lack of power and autonomy Jeannie had as a woman in patriarchal Settler Canada. In contrast, other figures surrounding her death emerge from the historical record with greater clarity—

unlicensed medical practitioner, abortionist, and purveyor of "treatments" for venereal disease Arthur Davis, who was charged with Gilmour's murder; police court magistrate Alexander McNabb; the accused seducer of Gilmour, John Clements, a married middle-class man; and a range of other individuals associated with Gilmour either before or after her death. Radforth's ability to re-create the texture of the past and his striking attention to detail, including the intricacies of the criminal justice system, popular attitudes and notions of morality, the role of detectives, and the workings of prisons, help paint a snapshot of colonial life in the streets, in government offices and institutions, and in private homes. As well, readers are provided with a few glimpses into how variables such as class, ethnicity, and race may have affected people's experiences within these realms, and how anti-Indigenous attitudes, colonialism, racism, and ableism potentially rendered life even more violent and oppressive than that experienced by Gilmour.

Since the publication of his first book, *Bushworkers and Bosses: Logging in Northern Ontario, 1900-1980* (1987), Ian Radforth has played an influential role in shaping labour, social, and cultural history in Canada. The approach he employs in *Jeannie's Demise* is similar to that of his *Royal Spectacle: The 1860 Visit of the Prince of Wales to Canada and the United States* (2004) in that he focuses on the history surrounding one event as a window onto Victorian Settler Canada. Through the death of Gilmour, he sheds light on the limited control women had over reproduction, the ostracism and economic strife women could face as unwed mothers, the spectacular nature of the criminal justice system in the 1800s, and everyday life on the bustling streets of Toronto. Ultimately, Gilmour's tragic story is the systems and

structures that marginalized some while privileging others in the late-nineteenth century, and the dangers that arise when rights over reproduction are denied and bodily autonomy is criminalized. Consequently, as access to abortion continues to be an impediment in parts of Canada, Radforth's book is a portent reminder of

how debates on and policies surrounding reproductive justice must be informed by the historical realities and experiences of women in the past.

Janet Miron, PhD

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***Biographical Dictionary and History of Victorian Thunder Bay (1850-1901) Including Prince Arthur's Landing, Port Arthur, Fort William, Neebing, Nipigon, McIntyre, Oliver, Paipoonge, Rossport, Savanne, Schreiber, Shuniah, and Silver Islet***

By Frederick Brent Scollie

Thunder Bay, Ontario: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 2020. 376 pages.  
\$30.00 softcover. ISBN 978-0-920119-88-4 ([www.thunderbaymuseum.com](http://www.thunderbaymuseum.com))

Northwestern Ontario, as described by noted historical geographers, W. Robert and Nancy M. Wightman, has been “an important geographical and historical fulcrum in Canada.” (10) Within the region, Thunder Bay is a relatively isolated metropolitan area, which nonetheless has played a part in many national political and economic events. The former cities of Fort William and Port Arthur started off as the inland headquarters and transshipment point for the North West Company during the fur trade and later became inland ports for the movement of grain, coal and freight. The area also played a role in other events of importance including the Red River Expedition of 1870-1871, the movement of the North West Field Force in 1885, the construction of two transcontinental railways, shipping on the Great Lakes, as well as the shaping of mining and northern development policies in Ontario. There was also the Neebing Ho-

tel corruption and patronage controversy, connected to land sales and the Canadian Pacific Railway, which played a part in the defeat of Alexander Mackenzie's Liberal government in 1878. Connections to these events and more can be found in the *Biographical Dictionary and History of Victorian Thunder Bay (1850-1901)*.

