

## **A Personal Reflection on Robert C.H. Sweeny's *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849***

BETTINA BRADBURY

Volume 28, numéro 2, 2017

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1055325ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1055325ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

BRADBURY, B. (2017). A Personal Reflection on Robert C.H. Sweeny's *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849*. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 28(2), 102–107. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1055325ar>

Résumé de l'article

*Cette réflexion au sujet de Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849, de Robert C.H. Sweeny se fonde sur un examen de divers moments historiques, historiographiques et personnels, pour évaluer ce que signifie le travail de Sweeny dans divers contextes. L'ouvrage de Sweeny brosse le portrait complexe du changement et des les inégalités dans une ville du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, et propose d'importants points de vue et mises en garde théoriques et méthodologiques.*

## **A Personal Reflection on Robert C.H. Sweeny's *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849***

**BETTINA BRADBURY**

### *Abstract*

*This reflection on Robert C.H. Sweeny's Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849 is grounded in a consideration of various historical, historiographic, and personal moments, evaluating what Sweeny's work means in a variety of contexts. Sweeny's book offers a complex portrait of the changing inequalities of a nineteenth-century city, and important theoretical and methodological insights and cautions.*

### *Résumé*

*Cette réflexion au sujet de Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal 1819–1849, de Robert C.H. Sweeny se fonde sur un examen de divers moments historiques, historiographiques et personnels, pour évaluer ce que signifie le travail de Sweeny dans divers contextes. L'ouvrage de Sweeny brosse le portrait complexe du changement et des les inégalités dans une ville du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, et propose d'importants points de vue et mises en garde théoriques et méthodologiques.*

When I was asked to participate in the round table on Robert Sweeny's *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize? Montreal, 1819–1849*, I hesitated to agree. Although I have read much of Bob Sweeny's work over the years and worked alongside him at times, I was unsure what I would think of the book and what I might say. Most of what I will say here is my answer to that question. What did I think of it and why? I then raise the question of what other people, reading from a different personal history and living through different historical, historiographical and epistemological moments might think. This is a personal reflection rather than a critical review.

Rather to my surprise, I loved reading the book. Perhaps others could have predicted that. Perhaps that is why I was asked to speak at the round table. I am not sure that Robert will appre-

ciate my reasons for liking it so much. They seem very personal — a far cry from cold, objective academic criticism. But, then so too is his book that claims at various times to be a “journal” (p. xvi), or more explicitly, a “journey of discovery” (p. 5). At the simplest level, I liked reading the book because it offered me a trip down many memory lanes. Before I note these, I need to make clear my long association with and debts to Robert Sweeny.

We first met forty years ago when we were both graduate students in Montréal. I was doing my doctorate at Concordia. Robert was working on his Master’s research at the Université du Québec à Montréal. We were both researching aspects of Montréal’s history. Later, I became a member of the Montreal Business History Project (MBHP). Robert was one of its key members. It was with that group that I started a post-doctoral fellowship in which I began my explorations of widowhood. Later, it was from Robert, Richard Rice, Gilles Lauzon, Alan Stewart, Jennifer Waywell, Brian Young, and other members of that group that I learned to appreciate the richness of Montréal’s notarial archives and other sources beyond the censuses that I had mostly relied on for my doctoral study of working-class family economies. So, for some years we shared debates about ideas, explorations of sources, and conversations about how to use them as well as the long and sometimes tense, difficult meetings that led eventually to the end of the MBHP and the creation of the Montreal History Group. In the years since, Robert has been extraordinarily generous in sharing the databases he has created. My *Wife to Widow* would have been a different book without information drawn from sources he digitized and even more so without discussions we had years ago about widowhood, dower, and other such socially recognized rights and claims on property — and lots more.

We attended the same conferences; often the same sessions. Robert had a reputation as a harsh critic at conferences where his passionate commitment to particular politics, ways of interpreting sources, or of viewing history engendered dramatic conflicts with other historians. He speaks of some of these encounters from his point of view in the book. Sometimes presenters held their breath wondering what withering critique he would come

up with from the audience. So, I came to the reading of this book with some trepidation along with many shared experiences and understandings about how to do history — and also with a keen sense of the differences between our backgrounds, interests, and approaches to history. When I joined the MBHP they had been working their way through Marx and the writings of Marxist authors debating the causes of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. I had been reading Marx but was more engaged by the growing body of feminist writing and theorizing. We were all interested in critiquing the staples theory in part as a way to better understand Montréal's history. This was part of the memory lane traversed while reading *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize?*

It is a complex book that charts Robert's intellectual journey, proposes a particular method of doing history, and advocates for Cubist portraits against linear narratives and bourgeois history. It presents much that is new and important about Montréal history based on decades of data collection, analysis, rethinking, and on collaboration with others to produce impressive new data sets. It represents a life time of thinking, rethinking, research, and analysis, though Sweeny claimed at the roundtable to have written it in three months. Even more than Jacques Viger, the early Montréal mayor and investigator whom he cites as noting after he sought to enumerate Montrealers in 1825, "C'est un travail dont je n'avais pas d'idée," Robert clearly had no idea about the work that would be entailed at whatever moment he began the research that informs this book.

My appreciation of the book has many reasons. The first is Montréal and its history. I am now retired and live in New Zealand. I read most of it in Australia. On a train between Melbourne and Geelong where I was to visit the archivist of a Catholic girls' school and orphanage for my current book, I was struck by a sudden pang of nostalgia for Montréal and early- to mid-nineteenth century Montréal in particular. This was accentuated when I turned page 229 and saw on page 230 the detail from the Duncan panorama of Montréal, 1842. Second, I admire his honesty and openness in the sections of the book where he discusses the limitations of some of his early thinking. And, I applaud his

ongoing commitment to writing engaged history that deals with the enduring legacies of the paths taken in the past. I also liked it because I agree with many of his arguments. Obviously, he is not the only critic of the staples thesis. Generations of students and scholars have now highlighted some of the inadequacies of the theory that Canadian economic development can be explained by focussing on the extraction and export of successive staple products from fur and fish to grain. Still, I think Sweeny does a masterful job at presenting evidence of why it was so woefully misleading. I agree with his insistence on the importance of the dialectic between agency and constraint and the creative tensions between them. And while I appreciate his late conversion to integrating gender (p. 269), I certainly don't agree that it is a "relatively new concept." Nor do I think he has grappled adequately with feminists' insistence on intersectionality.

Sweeny places great weight on the decline in the value of immovable property — the kind of property women were most likely to contribute to family fortunes on marriage — as determining an overall decline in women's status. Yet, I wonder, could a fall in the "value of wives' contributions" to new households fully explain why growing numbers of young couples were not "able to afford real property?" Or lead to a "different kind of mastery of the household?" (p. 202). Given the significance of land and property to his research, I regret that his engagement with a postcolonial perspective did not address the significance of the occupation of indigenous land to settler colonies and colonial cities or acknowledge that many First Nations peoples do not consider themselves residents of a postcolonial society. I was one of the very few people in the room at the session of the Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique française that he discusses in chapter 5 when two First Nations women presented their very different methods of dealing with oral histories. One had organized sections of her transcripts thematically, hence losing the integrity of the life stories told. The other insisted on importance the cultural integrity of First Nations women's stories as they had recounted them. From that discussion he offers the suggestion that there are parallel challenges between seeking to understand indige-

nous historical consciousness and that of pre-industrial popular classes. Here, I would push him to rethink.

It was Sweeny's discussion of evidence and sources, both the particular sources that I know well and the ones I don't that most appealed to me. He is eloquent about the importance of understanding the unequal power relations present at their making. Again and again, I found myself nodding my head in agreement. But, of course, we sat around the same tables and discussed these ideas and I no longer know what I learned from Robert or Richard Rice or others in the MBHP or the later Montreal History Group, and what I concluded independently.

Clearly much of my appreciation of the book is based on my having lived in Montréal, researched the city's history, traversed many of the same theoretical and historiographical debates, been a member of the same research group for some years, worked with similar sources, debated their use and meanings, and attended the same meetings and panel sessions as Sweeny. How, then I wonder, will scholars of a younger generation, living in a different part of Canada or of the world respond to *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize?* Will they care about Sweezy, Dobb and the Transition Debate? Will they get excited about what was once the very hot topic of the nature of the Agricultural crisis in Lower Canada? In locations not blessed with the immensely rich notarial archives found in Québec, how will the discussions of sources resonate? And, will they be interested in Robert's personal journey through the thorns and fruits of epistemological, theoretical, and historiographical debates and moments? Will they see coherence arising from those engagements? It would have been good at the round table hosted by the Canadian Historical Association to have had fewer grey haired, white colleagues commenting on the book and to hear from younger scholars who work outside Québec and Montréal history. Hopefully readers from a different generational and locational place will read the book and form their own answers to these questions.

And, what will such readers learn about Montréal, that city whose transformations he describes with such passion? I believe there is lots to be learned here — perhaps I might dare to cite

Sweeny on another historian — there is “a wealth of detail and considerable wisdom” (p. 268). It offers a complex portrait of the changing inequalities of a nineteenth century city. It offers important theoretical and methodological insights and cautions. Not everyone will agree with or be capable of painting a cubist portrait, but we can all practise the historical reflexivity, epistemological humility (p. 117), and rigour that he proposes and usually achieves here. Whether it tells us why “we” chose to industrialize Montréal might be debated. It certainly charts aspects of the broader shift that everyone should be concerned about — the move from a moral to a liberal economy that has accelerated with devastating results into the neo-liberalism that pervades today.

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**BETTINA BRADBURY** is a Professor Emerita in the Department of History and in the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies, at York University, Toronto, Canada and an adjunct at Victoria University of Wellington. She now lives in New Zealand. Bettina is best known for her publications in the field of feminist family history and social legal history, including, *Wife to Widow. Lives, Laws and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Montreal*, 2011 and *Working Families: Age, Gender and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal*, Toronto, 1993; republished, 1996 and 2007. Her current research explores issues of marriage, inheritance and the law in the nineteenth century British Empire.

**BETTINA BRADBURY** est professeure émérite de la Faculté d’histoire et de la School of Gender, Sexuality et Women’s Studies à York University (Toronto), et est également professeure attachée à l’Université Victoria de Wellington. Elle vit à présent en Nouvelle-Zélande. Bettina est reconnue pour ses publications dans le domaine de l’histoire féministe de la famille et de l’histoire sociale et juridique, avec, entre autres, *Wife to Widow. Lives, Laws and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Montreal* (2011) et *Familles ouvrières à Montréal. Âge, genre et survie quotidienne pendant la phase d’industrialisation* (Montréal, Boréal, 1995). Dans ses recherches actuelles, elle se penche sur la législation du mariage et de l’héritage dans l’Empire britannique au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle.