

# A Scholarly Tribute to Bettina Bradbury, Feminist Historian of the Family

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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## ***A Scholarly Tribute to Bettina Bradbury, Feminist Historian of the Family***

**Liz Millward**

I CAME TO CANADA FROM ENGLAND in 1995 to pursue an MA and then a PhD in Women's Studies. Bettina supervised both my master's thesis and doctoral dissertation. The first compared discourses about women and aviation in Canada and the USA before 1920, and the second dealt with women in imperial airspace from 1922 to 1937, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between England and New Zealand. During my MA I wrote a paper on the pilot Katherine Stinson for Bettina for a graduate course in Women's Studies that she was team teaching. Although aviation history is quite far from Bettina's own areas of expertise, she was willing to take me on for the thesis. I think that she was up for the challenge in part because her own scholarship has been part of large shifts in the way history is done with its linguistic and spatial turns and because in her own research on family, widows, law, and empire she is constantly willing to ask new questions and to ask questions in different ways.

In the process of writing the paper on Stinson, Bettina pushed me to undertake two tasks. First, she wanted me to find newspaper accounts about Stinson in 1917 and 1918, so I had to learn to use microfilm. I spent hours after classes in the Scott Library at York University making my head swim as I toiled through the *Manitoba Free Press*, the *Calgary Daily Herald*, and *The Globe*. The second task she set me was to find out what happened to Stinson in the end: obviously, the newspaper accounts could not tell me. The only major book on the Stinson family, by John Underwood, was in the great tradition of aviation history. It focused on the family's glorious youthful years because part of the mythology of flying is to be young, as Bernhardt Rieger demonstrates so well in his work.<sup>1</sup> So I had to learn how to trace a person once their early fame had evaporated. Bettina's prodding, over the amount of detail that I needed to know in order to make any claims, completely changed my intellectual life. In the end, she showed me that my argument would begin to emerge from the welter of detail. Up until then my exposure to history had been reading textbooks for the history unit in my American Studies undergraduate degree. I therefore imagined that in order to write about women pilots (not something that any serious scholar was doing at that time) I would read histories of aviation (which were mostly histories of particular aircraft types or organizational or military histories) and try to add women in. I also thought I should note

1. John W. Underwood, *The Stinsons: The Exciting Chronicle of a Flying Family and the 'Planes that Enhanced their Fame* (Glendale: Heritage Press, 1969); Bernhardt Rieger, "'Fast Couples': Technology, Gender and Modernity in Britain and Germany during the Nineteen-thirties," *Historical Research* 76 (August 2003): 364–388.

what their class status was and whether they were lesbians or Black women. And then I should stir.

Fortunately, Bettina had a different set of expectations, and these clearly came out of her own work. She encouraged me to understand that my job was not to just follow what previous scholars had said about aviation, as if their interpretations were sufficient or accurate; it was to find out what aviators themselves said about aviation, in context. This meant I had to go into archives. In explaining this to me, Bettina pointed out two perspectives on working in archives that, on the one hand, were so obvious that I should not have needed to have my attention drawn to them, and, on the other hand, radically altered my viewpoint. After all, I came out of a British education system which emphasized that the English brought civilization to all the “great races” of the world, and I had to unlearn those ideas and my own assumption that I automatically knew what was important. I had to decentre myself. The first perspective that Bettina presented was that people in the past were just as complex and led just as complicated lives as people do today. What she was saying, in effect, was do not be seduced by the myth of progress, or, in Foucauldian terms, always interrogate the “repressive hypothesis.”<sup>2</sup> So the scholars of today do not actually “know better” than people in the past. The present does not supersede the past. In addition, people’s motivations and goals were most likely to have been messy, confused, and contradictory. This awareness has been particularly salient in the research I undertook with three undergraduate Women’s and Gender Studies research assistants, Nadine Boulay, Mylène Gamache, and Jen Portillo, in the Canadian Women’s Movement Archives (CWMA) at the University of Ottawa in 2010. In Women’s and Gender Studies programs it can seem as if feminist theories get discarded and replaced almost every other year, and because of this it appeared that before we visited the CWMA the research assistants had all learnt, somehow, that lesbian feminists in the 1970s were grim, repressive, ideologically stringent and strident, and, since sex was based on eroticizing power differences, they were anti-sex. But once the three of them began to read women’s letters, diaries, and community groups’ newsletters in the CWMA they encountered a completely different set of stories. These lesbian feminists were young – the same ages, or even younger, than they were. These women’s voices were confused, angry, hopeful, and trying to work out who they were – just like Nadine, Mylène, and Jen themselves. That experience in the CWMA challenged both what they thought they knew and what they believed they could learn from the past. They reflected on all this and wrote an article about their experience, “Desiring Young Les(bi)an Visionaries in the Archive,” published in *Australian Feminist Studies*.<sup>3</sup>

2. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

3. Nadine Boulay, Mylène Gamache, Liz Millward, and Jen Portillo, “Desiring Young Les(bi)an Visionaries in the Archive,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 27, 72 (2012): 189–203.

Bettina's second significant perspective was that I should not go into an archive with a pre-formed expectation of what I will find there, with an assumption that I already know which sources are relevant, or if I am simply looking for evidence to support an existing thesis. Instead, I should go into the archives and (within the constraints imposed by funding and available time, obviously) read and listen and build up a picture of what was considered important enough to be saved, what counted, what contemporary perspectives may have been prominent and what was missing. I should talk to the archivist about the history and content of the collection, because their knowledge is invaluable.<sup>4</sup> This might be obvious to an historian and fundamentally ethical, but it was a revelation to me with my background in American Studies and Women's Studies.

Beyond this early training, Bettina's work continues to influence my scholarship. Her writing is grounded in archival research with an emphasis on the everyday. It considers the material and practical, using a marvellous level of detail that brings the past to life. I first encountered this approach in reading her "Pigs, Cows and Boarders" article, in which she takes dry census data and transforms it into a rich picture of changes in Montreal over a relatively short period.<sup>5</sup> In reading this article I can almost see how the fresh air (pungent with horse, cow, and pig manure) starts to be shut out through speculative building, the appearance of infill housing, and the building that takes over plots of green space. The light is narrowed down until there is not enough reaching the ground for vegetables to be grown. Add to that her attention to new bylaws, which essentially promoted modernity by enforcing class differences, the wage economy, and hygiene in uneven ways, and Montreal springs to life. And in part because of Bettina's own biography, this work is profoundly geographical: while the abundant detail which reanimates Montreal in her writing is obviously about location, her scholarship always brings a geographical sensibility about mobility and place to the analysis. Who is moving, when, where, how, and why?

Bettina's ability to combine the practicalities of everyday life with the wider picture of social, political, legal, and economic changes has profoundly shaped my own approach. In terms of my research into recent lesbian history, for

4. The lesbian and gay community in Canada was, historically, very suspicious about what might happen to our histories if they were housed in public institutions where heteronormative, patriarchal, and moralistic categorisation could be imposed by homophobic archivists placing restrictions on access to sexually explicit material. This does not appear to have happened, and remaining community archives, such as the BC Lesbian and Gay Archives housed by Ron Dutton in Vancouver, or the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives held in Toronto, are paradoxically less accessible, because they rely on dwindling volunteer time, than are community archives which have been transferred to institutions such as the Saskatchewan Archives Board or the University of Manitoba.

5. Bettina Bradbury, "Pigs, Cows, and Boarders: Non-Wage Forms of Survival among Montreal Families, 1861–91," *Labour/Le Travail* 14 (1984): 9–46.

example, one of my questions has had to be: how did lesbians get around in order to meet each other and thereby to form community? From that initial query other questions follow: what was the railway network like? Did they have access to cars? Were these reliable Volkswagens? Were roads surfaced or dirt? Where did they (the lesbians and the roads) go? How did they pay for their journeys? Where did they sleep? And so on. Some of that information comes from Transport Canada statistics and reports and could be very dry, but it is fleshed out with lesbians' own stories though newsletters, diaries and letters. All of these help me to ask how this mobility created a sense of self for individuals and made possible social and political networks.

Bettina's ongoing attention to patriarchy as a key organizing concept that intersects with class, race, and empire has had an even more significant impact on my own teaching, research, and writing. As she notes in *Wife to Widow*, "patriarchy has been widely criticized for being ahistorical and essentialist, for ignoring women's agency, and as an inadequate tool for capturing the complex ways class, race, and gender intersect." And yet, as she goes on to argue, "patriarchy was equally a cultural system that produced and policed gender difference. It was one axis of power that was constantly negotiated and renegotiated in individual relationships and through legal, political, and institutional changes. Those negotiations were historically specific and diverse, shaped by class, age, religion, ethnicity, sexuality and other individual characteristics, as well as by gender."<sup>6</sup> I find what she calls this "broad way" of thinking about patriarchy extremely helpful.

In my Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies classes I use her arguments about the different forms of companionate patriarchy which were in conflict in 19th-century Montreal to illustrate for first-year undergraduates just how complex patriarchy is and how it is always historically specific. That specificity is built up in her book through her genius for detail, which never drowns us but instead reveals a web of power relations which everyone had to negotiate. This complex picture really helps to stifle the two bugbears of the Introductory course: the equally unhelpful and simplistic assumptions that either feminists are all man-haters or that all men are oppressors of all women. It is also important because although one might expect the concept of "patriarchy" to be central to Women's and Gender Studies programs, it is increasingly replaced with the idea of the "gender binary." My frustration with that is that power — particularly power differences — is easily evacuated from discussions about the "gender binary," whereas this broad and intricate "patriarchy" maintains a steady focus on power. And patriarchy is central to my research and writing, whether it is on the Women's Engineering Society in interwar England or lesbian feminists in 1970s Canada. In very different ways, in their newsletters, speeches, and letters, patriarchy keeps appearing as the

6. Bettina Bradbury, *Wife to Widow: Lives, Laws, and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Montreal* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 18.

concept through which the women themselves explained their understanding of how the world was organized, and which they were determined to change.

In these ways I believe that while Bettina's work has obviously been enormously influential for historians, it has also reached across into Women's and Gender Studies. For those of us (and our students) who find that current Women's and Gender Studies approaches do not quite fit and do not allow us to ask the questions that we think matter, Bettina's scholarship provides a guide to alternatives. Her work basically asks: what are the material conditions of people's lives; what structures are in place at the time; what meanings do people make of their circumstances; what are their circuits of mobility (or where are they linked to); and how do they negotiate all of that? Theorizing about the past or the present emerges from the detailed answers to these questions.