

Writing about Hilda Blake: A Note on Sources

Walk Towards the Gallows: The Tragedy of Hilda Blake, Hanged 1899 began as 'history from above' in an article by Tom Mitchell (published in the *Journal of Canadian Studies*) explaining why the state executed Hilda Blake at a time when the death sentences of women were almost always commuted. Our book-length treatment of the Blake case, however, slowly turned into an account of Blake's life both 'from above' and 'from below'. Traditional historical methods and sources were adequate to the former but not to the latter. A simple constructed narrative based on state documents and newspaper reports would tell a story of state action but could neither approach the less explicit levels of culture nor probe human subjectivity.

Writing a history that did not ignore Blake's subjectivity required a historical 'reading' of a wide range of sources, some of them traditional tools for the historian, some less traditional. British censuses, Heckingham & Clavering Workhouse records, materials in the Norfolk Record Office, Self-Help Emigration Society records in the National Archives of Canada, and the University of Victoria's cache of materials on Norfolk, England, allowed us to introduce Blake at the beginning of her journey. Various records of the Western Judicial District (Brandon), rich in detail, helped us flesh out both Blake's early encounter with life on Canada's agricultural frontier and also the contest to claim the youthful Blake's labour. Small-town Manitoba newspapers, as well as those in Winnipeg, Regina, Toronto, and Ottawa, were essential sources, mixing factual information with sensationalism and political opportunism, rumours with actual words from the principal figures in the drama.