

Bettina Bradbury, *Caroline's Dilemma: A colonial inheritance saga* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020). 362 pp. Paperback \$34.95.

Caroline's Dilemma is a book born of Bettina Bradbury's mastery of diverse bodies of scholarship and the historian's craft. Through painstaking archival and genealogical research, Bradbury narrates the "extraordinary story of one fairly ordinary middle-class woman" named Caroline Bax Kearney (1834-1886), who left Britain with her parents and siblings to settle in Australia in the 1850s (7). The monograph is organized chronologically in three parts focused on Bax Kearney's migration and marriage to Edward Kearney, her widowhood and legal struggles, and the later lives of herself and her children.

The narrative charts the fallout from Edward Kearney's attempt at the "testamentary extradition" of his widow and children after his 1865 death (3). Through his last will and testament Kearney hoped to compel his Protestant widow to relocate with her young children to Ireland, where Kearney's brothers would oversee their Catholic upbringing and education. Caroline Bax Kearney would be denied ongoing support from her husband's estate or a role in the guardianship of her children if she refused to cooperate with his wishes.

By focusing on this dilemma, Bradbury lays bare the damage wrought by patriarchal systems of law, inheritance, and social control in the nineteenth-century British Empire, but also the ways that women and children actively challenged and resisted these systems. Bax Kearney undertook a number of court challenges to free herself from the posthumous control of her husband and secure a future for herself and her children, who each found ways to resist their father's efforts to circumscribe their agency.

Throughout, Bradbury is attuned to the material realities of Bax Kearney's daily life. As a young settler mother she faced the challenges of mastering new forms of labour like butchering and gardening and of navigating new social and physical landscapes. Bradbury fleshes out the detail of Bax Kearney's new life as an urban Protestant widow in Dublin raising five young men, subject to the whims and wishes of her husband's family, with whom she continued to quarrel in the courts before gaining a measure of freedom to live out her days in London.

Caroline's Dilemma is a genuinely enjoyable read that also makes important historiographical and methodological contributions. Most importantly, the research and emotional labour of uncovering the experiences of a historical actor are explicitly engaged throughout the monograph. Bradbury brings readers along for the "eureka moments and disappointments" of the research process, encouraging them to share in the emotional work and experience of the researcher, but also "to use

their own imaginations when concrete evidence is missing” (6). The reader feels the disappointment of learning that Irish court records were lost to fire or that Kearney descendants recalled a mysterious trunk of records whose contents were consumed by ants. Bradbury embraces silences, ambiguities and contradictions and never gets ahead of her sources, such as when trying to ascertain details about Edward Kearney’s life before leaving Ireland (35) or the range of conflicting stories about the accident that eventually caused his death in 1865 (86).

Indeed, Bradbury is candid about the emotional labour of historical and genealogical research. As historians we become invested in the foibles and struggles of the historical actors we spend so much time with, and attempt to understand or explain choices that seem illogical or counter to their own interest. Of Bax Kearney’s mysterious secret second marriage, Bradbury writes “this apparently impetuous move completely puzzled me. It still does” (191). In reckoning with Bax Kearney’s final days estranged from her children, Bradbury hopes that she was comforted by a friend or neighbour (219). In the coda, Bradbury ends by reflecting on the complexities of family relationships and life choices, emphasizing the humanity of her subject while also linking nineteenth-century family experiences to those of the present (251-2).

Caroline’s Dilemma contributes to the growing number of family histories of the British Empire but does so through a focus on everyday settlers rather than the colonial administrators, elites or explorers who are so often the subject of such studies. As Bradbury points out, it was white settlers whose presence on Indigenous territories made settler colonialism possible. They built fences for livestock and homesteads, severing Indigenous migration routes, hunting patterns, and lifeways that had existed since time immemorial. The Kearneys came into conflict with the Indigenous people whose homeland they occupied (57) and relied on the colonial police force (59) that was established to safeguard white supremacy in southern Australia. Woven into Bradbury’s narrative are reminders that ordinary settler families like the Kearneys were central to colonial projects in Australia and elsewhere.

Bradbury contributes to legal history broadly, but to imperial legal history specifically, by moving beyond the most common areas of study, criminal law and the top-down administration of law by colonial officials. By focusing on inheritance and civil litigation, Bradbury highlights the ways that civil law in colony and metropole indelibly shaped family dynamics and the intergenerational transfer of wealth across the nineteenth-century British Empire.

As a result of its engagement with comparative legal history, Irish history, and histories of settler colonialism, women, families, migration, inheritance, and sectarianism, scholars from many fields will find points of connection between *Caroline’s Dilemma* and their own work. Scholarly monographs that also appeal to audiences outside academia are all too rare. *Caroline’s Dilemma* bridges that gap and will be enjoyed by genealogists, local historians, and those interested in the histories of Ireland, southern Australia, and the British Empire. The book will evoke wide-rang-

ing discussion in senior undergraduate or graduate seminars by providing students with a window on the labour and craft of historical writing and research.

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