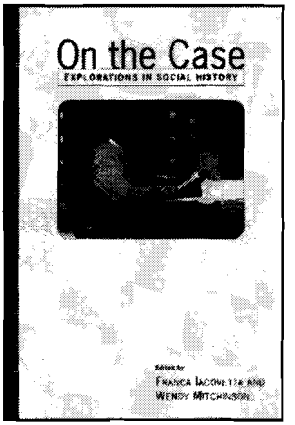
Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson, eds. *On the Case: Explorations in Social History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. Pp. 369.



On the Case: Explorations in Social History is a revealing title for this edited collection. Both parts of the title tell us something about the intent of the editors. *On the Case* refers to case files, that is, records from numerous public agencies that have become available to researchers. The case files offer an intimate look into the trials and tribulations of individual Canadians, but they are much more. As the title announces, case files are also *Explorations in Social History*, explorations which further social history's brief, to uncover people and voices outside the mainstream. Although these goals are laudable, the volume is more than a look at individual cases and the aims of social history. It is also a contribution to historiography, how we handle the material available in case files and a welcome addition to ongoing debates about how and why we do history.

Surprisingly, given the large amount of academic and popular historical writing that is published, historians don't often discuss in print the "doing" of history. Historical records of all kinds present various theoretical and methodological challenges: oral history, where memory can be elusive; aboriginal history, where written records are not a part of the culture; and the history of childhood, where the subject and records are especially elusive. *On the Case* is a welcome addition to this literature—for the cases and for their examples of ways we can use material in such files as evidence of the past.

The editors have written an "Introduction: Social History and Case Files Research" outlining the difficulties of case file research. They review the development of social history in Canada in the last three decades and places case file research within the aims of social history, that is, "writing people's history and thereby rewriting all history." Iacovetta and Mitchinson confirm support for

> the progressive impulses and humanist tradition of social history, its commitment to politically engaged scholarship, its optimistic reading of

> the agency of the oppressed, and its potential for arming us with the critical intellectual tools for affecting social change. (15)

The fifteen cases/chapters are organized in five sections. Each part or section is on specific kinds of cases, from those that regulate community or adhere to community standards, to those that deal with problem families or contested perspectives. Carolyn Strange in the first essay, "Stories of Their Lives: the Historian and the Capital Case File," analyzes files that deal with murder. Her study raises more questions than it answers. Strange indicates we learn more about the operation of justice than about guilt or innocence. She reiterates that the problem with capital case files is one of almost too much evidence. How does one select what is crucial, germane to the trial? Who can be believed? How were the facts gleaned? What do we learn of motive and of justice?

Gregory Kealey's article on "State Security Archives in the Interwar Years" chronicles different problems: a lack of records; difficulty of access; and, when access is obtained, deleted paragraphs and pages. It also highlights the manner of collection and filing, and how this makes the historian's task particularly difficult. Did one field agent assess something as worthy of note while another ignored similar data? Did this have something to do with the background of the agent, the particular individual under surveillance, or the leadership of the security force?

"Males, Migrants and Murder in British Columbia, 1900–1923" by Angus McLaren documents the image of men as strong, macho, and in control. McLaren argues that BC cases indicate protecting one's home and family could justify murder. He was only "acting like a man" was often cited as the reason for a particular crime. Physical skill and strength were important male characteristics, particularly in the West, and judges and juries acted accordingly.

Constructions of masculinity take a different turn in Annalee Golz's chapter, "Uncovering and Reconstructing Family Violence: Ontario Criminal Case Files." Although protecting one's family didn't justify violence against one's wife or children, it did tend to lessen the sentence imposed by the courts. Husbands were often treated leniently because the economic well-being of the family depended on them. Golz argues that the practices of the courts and the ambiguities of the law tended to "reproduce rather than challenge the unequal distribution of power and privilege and the sense of male prerogative." From murder to family violence, family men tended to be treated with more compassion. What this tells us about justice, community, and values are areas needing further consideration.

"A Case for Morality: The Quong Wing File" tells the story of the courts and a law that prevented white women from working in Chinese establishments. This Saskatchewan legislation, upheld in the Supreme Court of Canada, caused white women who were working in Chinese restaurants to be fired in order to prevent the business being closed by police. The white women liked their work and had no complaints against the Chinese owners, who were not accused of any criminal or immoral acts. This interesting case highlights how the case file can be supported by other records, including women's assemblage organizations, churches, magazine and newspaper ads, and articles. Walker argues that the issue here is that "race was common sense—one could read people's mental or moral character from their biological character." Gender would also seem to be common sense in that women were considered vulnerable and in need of protection, even if the women themselves did not think so.

Time and space do not permit a review of all the studies in this collection. The essays provide a wealth of interesting stories about people caught by legal, medical, governmental, military, and social agencies. Individual case histories bring to life a slice of history largely inaccessible, and the collection is a good read as well as an historiographical challenge. I recommend it to all historians and congratulate Iacovetta and Mitchinson.

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