

**Karen Dubinsky, *The Second Greatest Disappointment: Honeymooning and Tourism at Niagara Falls***

**Linda May Ballard, *Forgetting Frolic: Marriage Traditions in Ireland***

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Dubinsky, Karen. *The Second Greatest Disappointment: Honeymooning and Tourism at Niagara Falls*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1995. 290 pp., black and white illus. Paper, \$29.95, ISBN 1-896357-23-7. Co-published in the United States by Rutgers University Press.

Ballard, Linda May. *Forgetting Frolic: Marriage Traditions in Ireland*. Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast, in association with the Folklore Society, University College London, 1998. 186 pp., black and white illus. Paper, US\$19.95, ISBN 0-85389-666-6.

One of the primary assumptions of culture has been that marriage is a basic social unit: legitimized through a myriad of rituals, the union of bride and groom forms the nucleus out of which springs generational progression, thus conveying forward humanity, not to mention the values and beliefs collectively called heritage.

Each of these books, while having individual agendas, ultimately stimulates reflection on just this assumption, and on the attendant idea that marriage is a necessary, dare one say irreplaceable, institution that is the most desirable means of bestowing the greatest good on the participants. A challenge of the status quo may not be anticipated in a work that focusses on that capital of honeymoon kitsch, Niagara Falls, although the title opens the door to such a point of view. The waterfalls of Niagara, observed Oscar Wilde, "must be one of the earliest, if not the keenest, disappointments in American married life." If Karen Dubinsky implies that Niagara Falls was only the "second" greatest disappointment, she seems to be suggesting that the paradigm of conventional marriage itself, or at least the initial stages of married life, is the first. Such an impression is furthered by two personal allusions cited to justify her interest in the subject: that her parents, honeymooners at Niagara Falls, ended their marriage, and that, given her own sexual preferences, she herself

is unlikely to honeymoon at this destination. Linda May Ballard's study of marriage traditions in Ireland reveals its message much more indirectly, perhaps even unwillingly to some extent. Nevertheless, the practices that she illustrates may be read as evidence suggesting that marriage and married life created circumstances of hardship, perpetuated the exploitation of women, and reinforced hege- monically the perpetuation of religious prejudice. In short, while the subject matter of the two books consists of multiple and fasci- nating variations of "Here Comes the Bride," the underlying theme is more easily captured as a question: Where goes the Bride?

In neither case is the book's agenda solely to cast aspersions on assumptions about mar- riage. Noting the recent attention that Niagara Falls has received by historians, Dubinsky sees her task as being to "decode the waterfalls' gendered and sexual imagery, which...is central to [Niagara's] cultural meaning or 'imaginary geography'." This necessitates a two-part approach. On the one hand, she offers a careful analysis of the evolution of Niagara Falls as a tourist destination, concentrating on the bricks and mortar on which this imaginary geography resides. From this perspective, she charts the ebb and flow over time of visitors and their dollars into the area, considers the repercussions of such an unpredictable supply of tourists on its permanent inhabitants, and examines the strategies followed by concerned parties — government officials, hoteliers, tour operators — to offset the difficulties specific to this source of income. Woven into the narrative are oppor- tunities to gain insights into culture that reach beyond the subject and the location. For example, inter-racial and inter-cultural relations are approached through the myth, fabricated by the Niagara tourist industry, of the Maid in the Mist, a North American native who was forced over the falls by her father as punishment for having a relationship with a European.

The second theme addressed by Dubinsky concerns the social assumptions inherent in the

institution of marriage, as a means of providing a backdrop for the "greatest theme park of heterosexuality" she had ever witnessed. This is an intriguing study, which, by focussing on the ritual of the honeymoon, charts the social mores associated with the circumscribed sexuality of matrimony, and the connection made between these patterns and the rise and fall of Niagara as honeymoon mecca. If the overtly sexual aspects of the honeymoon were suppressed in the nineteenth century, and only came to the fore in the nineteen-forties, the connotations of the "Queen of the Cataracts" and "Mother of all Cascades" whose churning and thundering waters symbolically allude to the very act itself, were not lost on visitors or promoters. Nor was the potential of the site as indicator of cultural practices obscure: one American travel writer set off in 1926 to consider Niagara Falls as "a sort of laboratory for the study of Young Love:" his findings inspired him to conclude that all was well with the state of heterosexual romance.

Consider, then, the reasons for the fact that travel writing about Niagara Falls today is virtually silent about honeymoons, that motel rooms for honeymooners often look like sets for soft-core pornography, and that the flock of tourists to the Canadian side since 1997 is attributable almost exclusively to the casino (to the consternation of the Americans, on whose side gambling is forbidden). The role of the honeymoon as the period of sexual acquaintance has passed. Moreover, the vision of Niagara articulated by Canadian architect Raymond Moriyama, who was hired in the mid 1980s by the Niagara Parks Commission to project tourism for this region into the next century, now focusses on meeting the needs specifically of the "new singles." Dubinsky reads this as a desire to appeal to childless couples with large disposable incomes, and, at least in part, to gays and lesbians. Such a transition, it would seem, would allow Niagara Falls once more to reflect a wider realm of contemporary human relationships.

The title *Forgetting Frolic* can also be seen to refer to a less-than-enticing aspect of marriage, namely the need to put by thoughts of self-amusement or satisfaction in attending to one's marital duties. However, Ballard's ambition is not directly, at least, to challenge the underlying values of this cultural practice. Her approach is ultimately more descriptive than analytical, and relies on material culture (she uses the term) and other sources to reflect

"the individual in society." Consequently, she divides the book into chapters that chart the history of wedlock in Ireland from courtship, to the celebration of marriage, to everyday life in the married home.

And Ballard does provide a wealth of most interesting material. Researchers of Canadian culture may find the book rewarding as a study of possible sources for marriage practices in this country. For example, she refers to the tradition of bundling, a courtship custom eventually introduced by Irish labourers to the English fens. A Canadian example is cited in the short story by Thomas H. Raddall entitled "The Wedding Gift," set in Nova Scotia at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

*Forgetting Frolic* has certain flaws, however, which detracts from its usefulness. The first derives from the desire on the part of the author to be as comprehensive as possible, considering both the North and the Republic, and using examples from medieval times to today. Such an ambitious approach makes it simply impossible to do more than create a pastiche of images, and the value of each entry she cites is reduced almost to the anecdotal because it often stands for the practices of a generation or even a century. Ballard was determined to show "the persistence of a given attitude through time." It seems that she has taken this task too literally, thus trying to link particular patterns without showing sensitivity to cultural evolution and transformations in the wider context.

Moreover, this work would have been more revealing if Ballard had attempted to develop a thesis through which to address the numerous examples she cites. At times she makes attempts to interpret the meanings of small clusters of traditions. For example, she deduces that the preoccupation of divining potential marriage partners (everything from "he loves me he loves me not" to much more elaborate rituals) "underlines the importance attached to finding a suitable marriage partner." But she makes no attempt to work through her data sufficiently to answer a larger question, one which looms over the material and even over her conclusions to individual sections of the work: what effect, finally, did marriage have on the participants?

For a reader of this text, trying to reach such a conclusion, certain patterns suggest a negative diagnosis. At the courtship stage, "tensions inherent in preparations for marriage and in marriage itself, not only for the bride and groom,

but to a lesser extent for those around them" are "dramatically underlined." Religious prejudice — Northern Ireland's residual crisis — could be exacerbated because of demands imposed by the traditions associated with marriage, one case in 1994 necessitating the absence of the bride's father at her wedding to a Catholic man because the father was a member of the Orange Order.

Ballard herself seems unwilling to make such a conclusion categorically, as evidenced by her unsuccessful navigation through an issue she herself raises, namely the degree to which marital status confers social status and advantages to the participants or is ultimately detrimental to one's social situation. On one page she observes that "marriage enhanced the status of individuals, both male and female," that "Mrs was sometimes used by friends addressing unmarried women, as a mark of respect," and that "amongst the poorest classes, the married enjoyed greater credibility and were more likely to be regarded...as 'deserving' than were the single." However, on the very same page Ballard asserts that among the Irish poor, "marriage was unlikely to enhance one's status in the eyes of one's peers;" "...in certain circumstances refusing to marry a partner actually extended a women's rights;" and "men too perceived that they stood to gain from not being married." So was marriage desirable or not? The reader is left to try to gather the various threads and create his or

her own thesis. Perhaps a strategy of presenting both sides in an organized and systemized fashion might have facilitated the interpretation of data.

Tacitly, Ballard seems drawn to a negative conclusion herself, especially if her last words in the book are meant — as is often the case — to resonate impressionistically. She writes: "the infinite variability of experience of marriage is reflected in folktale and oral tradition, which help to highlight ambivalences and suggest the enormous range of possible responses." She then ends with two stories. One tells of the tombstone of a first wife that is a lesson to the second, because it is inscribed "Be thou also ready." The other relates the conversation of a young woman pretending to be trying to find a job at a hiring fair. The prospective employer's list of requirements, unreasonably substantial, precipitates her response: "Howl [hold] yer tongue, man, it's a wife you're lookin' for."

Stimulating from both a material and popular culture perspective, both books have revealing tales to tell. In an era when the very definition of marriage is under scrutiny, when divorce and single parenthood are commonplace and partners in same-sex relationships are deemed, in some countries, to have as much right as heterosexual ones for spousal benefits, the problematization of this once-considered sacred institution is all the more timely and necessary.

#### NOTES

1. Thomas H. Raddall, "The Wedding Gift," in *The Wedding Gift and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1947).

## Robert Fox, ed., *Technological Change: Methods and Themes in the History of Technology*

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Fox, Robert, ed. *Technological Change: Methods and Themes in the History of Technology*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998. 271 pp. Paper, £12.99, ISBN: 90-5702-337-7.

This book is a collection of papers from a conference on the history of technology held at Oxford University in 1993. The purpose of the conference was to take stock of the major historiographical methods, theories and themes pursued in the history of technology at the time.

This is the second edition of the book, which was originally published in 1996. What is the value of a collection of essays on "current" historiography published some six years after the fact? How have the essays held up?

To start with the good news, the book contains two very nice theoretical papers by Trevor Pinch and Donald Mackenzie. Pinch offers a restatement of main features of the social construction of technology (SCOT) as well as a defence against various attacks made on the SCOT position since its arrival in