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Locating widows in mid-nineteenth century Pictou County, Nova Scotia

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Abstract

This article takes up the challenge of how to begin to include women in the historical geography of the Maritimes. It makes an intervention through a case study of the place of widows in one mid-19th century county in Nova Scotia. For women, widowhood was a life-phase of conflicting emotions, replete with the contradiction that came from the loss of a patriarch. While it offered potential freedom, widowhood could also signal uncertainty, and often, dependence. The cultural identity and economic and legal treatment of widows represented a strongly patriarchal age in which the doctrines of a ‘cult of domesticity’ and an ideology of ‘separate spheres’ influenced the life-course of widows. Spatial change often accompanied widowhood, with widows moving into a room in their old house, or to a new location.

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Introduction

There is a strong tradition of the Maritimes capturing the attention of successive generations of historical geographers. From the ‘old masters’ Ganong and Clark,¹ to post-war baby boomers Graeme Wynn, Larry McCann, Peter Ennals, Deryck Holdsworth, and Patricia Thornton,² and most recently with the work of Stephen Hornsby and Rob MacKinnon,³ the major themes of North American historical geography have been pursued with quality, care and insight. This is, however, an historical geography that finds little place for women or feminist analyses. Over a decade ago, Jeanne Kay accused North American historical geography of producing ‘a historical landscape in which only half of the residents are normally visible,’ and of ‘giving scant attention to issues of gender, race, and carrying on analysis at levels that excluded women’s experiences’.⁴ At the same time, Graeme Wynn suggested that ‘there is need and scope for geographers to investigate further the role of women in shaping past places and the impact of those places upon women’s lives’.⁵ But how was a feminist historical geography to proceed? Kay suggested that the task ahead for including women in historical geography would not be easy

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as ‘the broad scale at which historical geographers still work cannot easily accommodate either gender-balanced research nor useful tests of cultural adaptation’.⁶

As feminism has gained importance in human geography, Anglo-American historical geography has been criticised for rendering women’s experiences invisible, and more generally, for promoting androcentric knowledges.⁷ Through the 1990s a sub-field of feminist historical geography did gain strength.⁸ By 1999, Morin and Berg were able to advance two schools of feminist historical geography: the ‘New Historical Geographies’ of North America, and the British-influenced ‘Feminist Historical Geographies of Empire’.⁹ This scholarship is influenced first by interdisciplinary feminist scholarship and, second, by work in other areas of geography that is in turn influenced by post-structural, post-colonial and post-modern theories and approaches. The result of these influences is that the work now considered to be feminist historical geography is far removed from work in historical geography that involves the in-depth study of geographical change in one region over time. Indeed, the domain for a dominant cluster of work concerning women and travel has been at once ‘home’ and ‘away’.¹⁰ In short, the challenge of including women in extant approaches has not been a priority, and instead, feminist historical geography has gone off in its own direction.

Taking a different tack, sympathetic both to the methods of traditional historical geography and a feminist agenda, this article lingers at Wynn and Kay’s challenge for the inclusion of women. This is a necessary pursuit, as Morin and Berg suggest that ‘the all-too-familiar observations made by Jeanne Kay years ago still seem relevant, including that historical geographies of the USA and Canada are often gender-blind and/or do not incorporate women’s spheres of influence’.¹¹ Methodologically, rather than examine often easily accessible women’s travel texts, this article re-interrogates a variety of standard primary documents not intended to reveal the life-worlds and geographies of women. This is a difficult task, and the evidence in this article about widows from probate records, court records, diaries, journals and newspapers is necessarily fragmentary.

This article also draws upon a strong tradition of Maritime women’s history.¹² Influenced by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s work on 19th century ‘uniquely female rituals’ that ‘drew women together during every stage of their lives’,¹³ work by Margaret Conrad revealed a ‘women’s culture’¹⁴ amongst Maritime women that stressed the need to look at particularly female ways of interaction that were previously distorted or ignored.¹⁵ The biological realities of pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and menopause were experiences that bound women together.¹⁶ This has given women a particular past that cannot be presumed to mirror the portion of male reality that most historians have chosen to highlight. Furthermore, it was suggested by some historians that women’s sense of time was different from that of men. ‘Timely action’ could be turning up to help a neighbour deliver a child.¹⁷ Margaret Conrad also argued that place had specific meaning for women and that there were home, kin and community spaces, to which women gave meaning and in which they exerted influence.¹⁸

Along with the women’s culture life-course approach, the ideology of the separate spheres has been of considerable influence to Maritime women’s historians. Morton and Guildford have described the separate spheres as a ‘powerful prescriptive ideology, elevated to the level of common sense during the industrial and bourgeois revolutions of the 19th century’.¹⁹ In the mid-19th century a ‘cult of domesticity’ that emphasised the home as the natural place of women was an in the main urban, often religiously grounded, middle class movement, but its influence extended far beyond these urban and social bounds. Many strove to conform to the cult of domesticity, even though few attained the incubated, nurturing homes that they would have liked.²⁰ The sentiments which the cult of domesticity

expressed were so widespread that even in rural Nova Scotia sermons and oral histories described the home as women's 'natural' and proper place.

Also of potential use to historical geographers, work by women's historians has revealed the importance of women's work to both urban and rural economies.²¹ Marjorie Griffin Cohen and Joan Jensen have explored the economic side of women's domestic production that contributed to the 19th century family farm economy.²² Griffin Cohen has demonstrated that in Ontario the market did not govern the bulk of productive activity or labour. Furthermore, she argues that 19th century non-market activity was much more than an adjunct to market activity. Without women's non-market oriented production, the staples economy, in which resources were exported from the periphery back to the core, would not have been able to exist.²³

Just at the time, however, that feminist historical geographers were seeking frameworks for their research and analyses, there was a call to move beyond the universalising and celebratory life-course approach of women's history and beyond the binary spheres and to ask new, more sophisticated questions that rejected the biological determination of sex roles in favour of the social construction of gender relations.²⁴ Despite the spheres framework's tendency to over-generalise, and a failure to give enough recognition to the gaps between ideology and reality, in a plea for historicism, Guildford and Morton suggest that 'to ignore separate spheres ideology because it is contradictory, frustrating or unsatisfactory means to avoid grappling with the agenda set by the men and women of that time'.²⁵

Borrowing critically and re-engaging with the life-course and separate spheres frameworks, this article locates one category of women in mid-19th century Pictou County, Nova Scotia, and considers how the experience of widowhood worked in a patriarchal society. It weaves an alternative historical geography of Pictou County that places widows in the spotlight. Childhood, 'adolescence', womanhood and widowhood were the four major life phases for women in mid-19th century Nova Scotia. Each possessed conceptual meaning and was associated with very rigid patterns of behaviour. Childhood was a time of beginnings and learning one's place. Adolescence, as it was increasingly being perceived in the 19th century, was a time of growing up and moving away from home.²⁶ Womanhood meant being a mother and worker, ideally in the space of the home, with a spouse. Widowhood, unique as a phase of life in that it could happen to any married woman, regardless of age, was nevertheless associated with old age, the loss of a husband, and often dependency on a son or a daughter. Importantly, these life phases not only represented women's changing life relationships, but also their changing spatial location. The first section of this paper sets the context of Pictou County, sketching its broad historical geography in a way that enables an analysis of women. The paper then turns to an in-depth analysis of the construction of widowhood, exploring themes of freedom, folklore, and legality versus reality.

Setting the context

In 1871 Nova Scotia had a population of 387,800 people; it was the second smallest of the four original provinces of Canada.²⁷ In north central Nova Scotia, Pictou county had eight per cent of Nova Scotia's population, with 32,114 people. Most of the population of Pictou lived on farms. In 1850 farming accounted for 63% of the labour force.²⁸ Twenty years later the census placed 5154 people in the agricultural class, 2611 in the industrial, 697 in the commercial, 452 in the domestic, 346 in the professional, and left 692 unassigned.²⁹ The Pictou Town census district was the most heavily populated with 3462 people. The newer town of New Glasgow and its district had two and a half thousand people.

It was followed very closely by the established farming area of Middle River, and then the industrial Albion Mines area. The least populous district was in the far south of the county, New Lairg, with only 590 people.

For those living in Pictou County, isolation was not as dramatic as in many parts of Canada. The area in the north of the county, closest to the Northumberland Strait, was settled first. This included the land around Pictou Town, which was extensively settled with established small lots of land at mid-century. Settlement had proceeded along the arteries of the East, West and Middle Rivers, generally shunning the hills which surround the harbour.³⁰ Despite the relatively high density of settlement everywhere except in the southern, more isolated parts of the county, bad weather in winter, as well as the generally poor state of roads, meant that individual farms could be cut off from their neighbours. Roads were dirt tracks, worn-in by horse hooves and cart wheels. Neighbours in the surrounding farms were likely to be relations, or members of the same clan, or an extended family.

Mixed farming was typical of Pictou County. Most farms produced some wool, spring wheat, buckwheat, oats, potatoes and turnips. Milch cows, sheep, swine and cattle roamed and fed in the acres. Apples were the main fruit and musk rats were the animal most trapped for fur. In 1871 Pictou produced more butter and homemade cloth than any other county in Nova Scotia, and was second to Queen's County in the amount of homemade linen produced.³¹

Women's occupations on the farm involved both production and reproduction. The first space of women's work was the kitchen and parlour (if there was one). The immediate land surrounding the house might have contained an herb and vegetable garden, forming a second space. The third area of women's work, radiating outwards from the farmhouse and including the barns, was dairying, which was concerned with the making of butter, cheese and the milking of cows.³² This was the area of women and it only became acceptable for men to encroach on women's outdoor work of dairying when increased industrialization and new technology made it acceptable to do so. Some of women's production was for domestic farm use, while on other farms a surplus might have been sold to the communities of miners.

Women were active in the production of cloth, cheese, butter, candles and soap. Outputs of these goods varied from farm to farm. In Pictou County in 1850, the less productive farms were producing a lower limit of 12 yards of unfulled cloth, whereas an upper limit of around 80 yards was reached by other farms. Most farms produced between 10 and 50 yards of both fulled and unfulled cloth.³³ Handlooms were recorded only occasionally; in 1851 approximately 1 out of 5 homes recorded a handloom and there was little increase by 1860–61. On those farms that produced candles and soap the value of output ranged from 10 to 30 shillings. A cluster of farms produced from 12 to 20 pounds of butter a year, while another cluster produced 50–60 pounds a year. A small number of farms produced as much as 500 pounds a year.³⁴ Cheese production in mid-century Pictou County followed a similar pattern. A cluster of farms produced approximately 20 pounds; another cluster reported 50 pounds; a few 200 pounds. According to the censuses of 1851 and 1861, approximately one third of all households produced no cheese at all.³⁴ Maple sugar began to be recorded in the 1861 census and households reported amounts ranging, in general, from 20 to 100 pounds, with a few as high as 150 pounds.

As well as farming, Pictou County had a significant industrial and commercial side. In 1850 Pictou produced 51.8% of Nova Scotia's coal. The Albion Mines and New Glasgow areas were industrial sites and the lifestyles of the people working and living around the mines followed different time schedules and work patterns to those in the rural areas of Pictou County. Ethnic backgrounds were also different, with proportionately more Irish and English people working in the industrial areas, although people of Scottish origin still made up the majority.³⁵ The segment of the population employed in manufacturing

worked in tobacco manufactures, the pottery factory, the spinning wheel factory, or as employees in dressmaking.³⁶ The variety and number of consumer goods available increased as more businesses opened. The Saturday market in Pictou Town was bustling with business; farmers came with their families from the surrounding area to sell their produce and buy what they needed.

Family size was relatively small in Pictou County, not only due to deaths of children, but also because of fertility levels. In 1871 fertility rates in Nova Scotia were the lowest in Canada. The out-migration of young people from the province and the noted low fertility of women of Scottish background may have contributed to this low fertility.³⁷ The average age of marriage for women in Nova Scotia in 1871 was over 25 years, with a variation from a low of under 24 in the Western Counties of Lunenburg, Shelburne, Annapolis and Kings, to a high of over 28 in the Scottish-settled counties.³⁸ In Pictou County men were on average a few years older than women at marriage. No males in the 1871 census married under 21 years. In comparison 55 females were married before they reached 21.³⁹

In British North America as a whole in 1851 life expectancy at birth was 42 years.⁴⁰ However, from birth to five years of age there were a high number of deaths. Once this risky age had been passed, adults might expect to live into their sixties or seventies. There were two centenarians in Pictou in 1871.²⁹ On average mid-19th century women outlived men in British North America. There were differences in the causes of deaths of women and men. Men did not die during childbirth. However, there were also important similarities in causes of death. Consumption was the most common cause of death and without known cures other diseases such as scarlet fever and sicknesses such as dysentery could be lethal.²⁹

The people of Nova Scotia were predominantly Protestant. Nearly 60% of the population at 1851 and 1871 were Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Congregational or Lutheran.⁴¹ Pictou County was overwhelmingly Presbyterian. In 1871, 39 of the county's 52 churches were Presbyterian. The remainder were Catholic(4), Church of England(4), Baptist(3) and Methodist(2).⁴² Eighty five per cent of the people identified themselves as Presbyterian.⁴³ Access to a church was very easy for people in Pictou, with small settlements having substantial places of worship. The high number of Presbyterians is not surprising considering that 73% of the population of Pictou in 1871 claimed Scottish origins. Scottish immigration to Nova Scotia had begun in 1772, with Pictou County absorbing the largest number of immigrants. The scattered indigenous Micmac people had been numerically and culturally overwhelmed. At mid-century, the Scots made up the largest ethnic group in Nova Scotia.⁴⁴ Irish and English origins were the next most common. Although their origins were mainly in Great Britain, by the mid-century the vast majority of people in Nova Scotia (and Pictou County) had been born in Nova Scotia. In Pictou County, after the majority of Nova Scotia born, as might be expected, the British Isles (especially Scotland) was the highest overseas place of birth. England followed behind, and Ireland was third. New Brunswick and The United States of America were neighbouring places that each contributed small numbers of people.²⁹

Focusing on widows

Reinhart et al. argue that 'widowhood lies at the juncture of three crucial aspects of Victorian life and society; the family as a social institution, the idealization of women, and the caste relationship of men to women'.⁴⁵ Widowhood was the frequent lot of 19th century women. For many it involved emotional turmoil. With the male head of household dead, women entered a time of economic and social uncertainty. Although some were challenged to take charge, forces beyond their control,

as well as societal constraints, ensured that the majority of women remained dependent on family support. Yet, widowhood also created ‘symbolic rebirth’ and Reinhart et al. suggest that it might allow for ‘institutional space, room, for the asexual, cleansed creature to assume enlarged social responsibilities and social power’.⁴⁶

In 1871 Nova Scotia had 10,636 widows, compared with 4102 widowers, in a population of 382,003. **Table 1** shows the ages of the widowed in Pictou County in 1871. The 901 widows and 362 widowers made up four% of the population. There were more widows at each age group than there were widowers, except in the 91–101 age group. Widowhood was unique as a phase of life in that it could happen to any married woman—regardless of age. Unlike childhood, adolescence or adulthood, it was not necessarily held together by biological functions associated with the life-cycle. The loss of a husband was the core defining experience of widowhood. Yet it was nevertheless mostly associated with old age, and often dependency on a son or daughter. Mid-19th century widows were not necessarily grey haired with stooped postures. **Table 1** shows that in 1871 although half of the widows in Pictou County were over 61 years, approximately one third were between 21 and 61 years.

In 1871 25 Pictou County widows were under the age of 31. Coping with widowhood at an early age came as a shock, as was articulated mid-century in a Nova Scotia church paper: ‘At the age of twenty years I was left a widow, with an infant son. The loss of a cherished and beloved husband, fell like an avalanche upon my young and untried heart’.⁴⁷ Another example of unexpected widowhood laments the loss experienced by a widow of her husband at sea. Margaret Dickie Michener wrote in her diary on 28 October 1850: ‘I feel great sympathy for Abigail. She has her three little boys to be with her in her widowhood; they look like their father, only gone a week last Saturday from his home, and now returned a corpse...’.⁴⁸ For young widows, the loss of the patriarch was of prime importance in how they were defined. Older unmarried women formed another group that was in a similar position to, yet also differed from elderly widows. Reinhart et al. comment that ‘widows and widowhood have most often been

Table 1
Ages of the widowed in Pictou County 1871

Age	Sex	Total
16–21	Male	–
	Female	1
21–31	Male	8
	Female	25
31–41	Male	23
	Female	54
41–61	Male	89
	Female	333
61–71	Male	103
	Female	242
71–81	Male	93
	Female	171
81–91	Male	36
	Female	66
91–101	Male	10
	Female	9

Source: Census of Canada 1871, vol. 2, 200. Categories given are taken directly from the summary volume.

included in the larger category of single women, a frame of analysis, however, primarily concerned with spinsters and spinsterhood, thereby somewhat obscuring the distinctive differences between these important social roles for women'.⁴⁹ Indeed, in old age widows and old maids shared many experiences, and were often considered together by others. In 1841 a newspaper read in Pictou County, *The Mechanic and Farmer*, portrayed 'The Old Maid' as a woman who had missed her chances while in her youth, though she was once courted. There is an interesting twist, in that her lot in old age is a 'calm' life full of friends. This prompts a tension between whether she missed out in never marrying or took a path which led to contentment in old age. The tranquillity and newly found peace in old age in the last verse is similar to what was ideologically written about widows. Widows too might find old age a time of calmness and contemplation:

The old maid
 She sighs alone! no lover comes,
 To woo her with his winning tongue;
 They seem to shun her very face—
 It was not so when she was young.

Then she was courted by the gay,
 And in her praise fine songs were sung;
 Their memory only lingers now—
 Alas! she is no longer young.

Gems rich and rare were given her then,
 And flowers—were wreath'd her curls among;
 No flowers—no gems are given her now,
 Because she is no longer young!

But now how calm her life doth glide,
 For friendship's bonds are o'er her flung,
 And pleasure dances in her eye,
 Although she is no longer young!⁵⁰

Widows, folklore, and strange happenings

Ideologically, as well as freedom, old age could imply a time of acquired wisdom. For elderly women, many of them widows, this knowledge was frequently expressed in homeopathic practices and supernatural activities. In Pictou, 'Highland powers' believed to have been brought from the Highlands of Scotland, fuelled superstition through a belief that old customs and superstitions were brought from across the sea.⁵¹ The Scots in Pictou County were firm believers in second sight, and particularly susceptible to the suggestion of ghosts. An interviewer of an old Pictonian noted in the interview of her subject that 'she has preserved her faculties remarkably well, and about two years ago got her 'second sight', so that now she can read and write without glasses'.⁵² In all of the cases of stories and unexplained forces in Pictou County, old women were held responsible for the strange happenings. The beliefs lasted over much of the 19th century. An old woman was blamed when a boat sank in Pictou Harbour in 1803.

According to popular account she had sunk the boat as revenge to a farmer who had shot at her while she was sucking milk from the teats of cows.⁵³

Old women were also supposed to be able to predict events. Predictions were not always positive. 'Mother Coo' an elderly lady was said to have predicted The Foord Pit explosion of 1862. She told fortunes with cards and did teacup readings.⁵⁴ She later predicted another disaster at Springhill.⁵⁵ In West River it was held that 'witchcraft was literally in the air.' Damage to flocks and herds, diseases and suffering could be blamed upon the presence of witchcraft.⁵⁶ There was a double innuendo to the powers of women. On one hand they were the actions of 'witches' and associated with the negative connotations of evil, disgruntled old women. While, on the other, they were useful and knowledgeable and drawing upon wisdom and supernatural powers accumulated from a life of learning. Whether good or bad, the unexplainable element downplayed the good and accented the bad. Stories ridiculed any real powers. Where women were recognised as being wise, it was a feature to be wary of.

The predictions of women were ridiculed to deny them any credibility. This is so in the memory of Doctor McGregor, of Pictou County. A woman came to see him when he was ill and chanted the words; 'if you live you live and if you die you die.' The minister had a sore throat, but he laughed so hard when he heard the woman's words that he burst the abscess which was causing him the trouble. Further, on another occasion Doctor McGregor was out very late at night. A tall figure clothed in white and apparently hanging in mid-air appeared before him. This, however, was not the manifestation of Highland Scottish superstitions of ghosts, witches and occult appearances, but it was only a 'poor, insane woman' who had wrapped a sheet about her and taken up her position on a stump.⁵⁷

Old women were recognised for their knowledge concerning gendered-feminine health and well-being that was associated with the prevailing ideology of a 'cult of domesticity.' A woman commenting on longevity states that 'Mrs Sinclair (recalling the 1830s) is now 87 years of age and her health and agility attest to the fact that hard work never hurt anyone'.⁵⁸ In many cases the home remedies were a practical way of coping with discomfort. Molasses boiled with onions in it was a reputed remedy for a cold.⁵⁹ 'Nanny tea' was made from boiled sheep manure and was reputed to help with measles. Another medicine was made from tansy flowers.⁶⁰ Then there was princes' pine for kidneys, and weeds for dyes. The use of herbs and roots was 'a practical way of curing ailments'.⁶¹ In reality, women were also interested in matters other than those which they were allotted. For example, although a woman in Lunenburg meticulously planted her garden, she also had an ongoing interest in boats, steamships, and trains. As well as her fascination with technological innovations, juxtaposed is her planting in tune with the earth and her fascination with gold and silver watches.⁶²

Freedom or cast-off?

Without a husband widows were potentially free to explore new opportunities. A quote from the comedy section of *The Mechanic and Farmer* indicates the contradictory position which widows found themselves in: 'Widows are singular creatures; they resemble green wood, which while it is burning on one side, is weeping on the other'.⁶³ On one side, they were potentially free to 'burn' and perform a senior position in their family. On the other, they were in mourning for their loss, and the legislative reality was of dependency. A sense of freedom can be detected in contemporary interpretations of the lives of some widows in Pictou County. It was said that for Mrs Hicks, a widow for three years who had six children, 'new faces and academic challenges seem to have lightened the burden of widowhood

considerably. She returned to her various duties in Hantsport and, in 1856, she married Robert McCulloch'.⁶⁴ However, in this case, although Mrs Hicks was successfully independent, she is considered more successful because she 'completed' herself by re-marrying, and hence moved back into the accepted norm of society.

For all of the images of potential freedom, it was easier and more acceptable for women to remain as close as possible to a patriarchal family unit. This was especially so for younger widows. Attempts at managing as a single-parent in Nova Scotia illuminate the difficulties. When Annie Rogers Butler was left a widow with two small children, her husband lost at sea, she ran a nursery school. In 1891 she accepted the position of matron at the Halifax Protestant Orphans' Home. However, this optimistic, independent situation was stopped by Annie retiring from her post as soon as the children were old enough to support themselves.⁶⁵ Working was only to be adopted when it was necessary. If a widow moved to a position where she was able to be supported by a new husband, there was no longer any need for her to work. Nor was it generally considered appropriate for married women of the time to be in paid employment.⁶⁶

Table 2 shows the ages of the widowed and the married in Pictou County and Nova Scotia. Re-marriage was common in Nova Scotia for both widows and widowers. Only in the 81–91 age group did widows exceed the number of married people. Widowers were less common than the married men of this age group. Among those who had lost their spouse in Pictou County, men remarried more often than women. Men were more likely to marry considerably younger women, than women were to marry a younger man, and older men were more likely to remarry than older women.

Reasons for re-marriage were complex. Notions of romantic love and individual circumstances are difficult to weigh up with wider social processes. Generalising beyond the individual level it appears that despite the potential for new opportunity, upon the death of a husband widows faced 'a real domestic calamity.' In her work on women in 19th century rural Ontario, Rosemary Ball saw no role for a wise woman widow in old age. Instead she gloomily portrayed sons and daughters who had inherited farms getting their mothers as part of the settlement.⁶⁷ According to the provisions made in wills, women legally became boarders in their own homes, under the guardianship of their male children, just as they had been dependants of their husbands and of their fathers before that. Domesticity and dependence were

Table 2
Ages of the widowed and of the married compared. Pictou County and Nova Scotia 1871

Age	Pictou County				Nova Scotia			
	Married		Widowed		Married		Widowed	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
16–21	–	590	–	1	99	1521	2	20
21–31	590	1067	8	25	10,259	16,636	180	533
31–41	1124	1224	23	54	16,137	16,000	411	
41–61	1860	1714	89	333	20,000	19,601	1163	3919
61–71	654	355	103	242	6551	3819	996	2321
71–81	254	102	93	171	2627	1143	893	1887
81–91	38	8	36	66	464	148	397	707
91–101	4	–	10	9	32	8	53	93

Source: Census of Canada 1871, vol. 2, 182 and 200. Categories given are taken directly from the summary volume.

seen as the essential state of women in rural, 19th century Ontario. It amounted, according to Frances Stewart, who was a 19th century woman, to a lifetime of never being 'allowed to think or act' and in the end widowhood left her 'bewildered, weak, and confused'.⁶⁷

Widows, wills and dependency

In a century of changing legal rights for women, Nova Scotia widows were legally able to own property, but inheritance practices meant that males exerted considerable control over their wives, even after their own deaths.⁶⁸ Although they recognised that a woman's situation would be different without a husband, the intention of men's wills appears to have been an attempt to have wives maintain the same position towards property that they had previously held while the husband was living.⁶⁹ Even if a woman was given control over property or possessions, especially property, in the majority of mid-19th century wills in Nova Scotia she was not allowed to choose her beneficiaries. The husbands had already decided who would maintain the farm after the widow, who was to 'hold' the property. Griffin Cohen backs up these findings and states that 'frequently the wife was given the use of the property for her lifetime, with instructions for further inheritance clearly laid out.' She also argues that this practice became less frequent towards the end of the 19th century.⁷⁰

Few wills in mid-century Pictou County made provisions for the burial of the wife, whereas the husband's burial was often set out in detail. One of the exceptions is the will of Angus McLeod of New Lairg, in which he states that he wants a 'decent Christian burial at the termination of his wife's days upon earth, the same to be raised for her without any manner of trouble or labour of my estate'.⁷¹ Men's failure to see beyond their own burials may not have been malicious or even uncaring, but according to a patriarchal ordering of things, indicates that they assumed that their wives would follow them into the same family plot. This assumption illustrates that men certainly appear to have been articulating that they wanted their wives to be loyal to them after they were dead. One sixth of the wills which Rosemary Ball looked at for Canada tried to perpetuate a widow's loyalty and fidelity to the departed husband.⁷²

Hence, mid-19th century widows were still under the influence of their deceased husbands. In Pictou County most farms were occupied by one family, which sometimes was extended to include elderly widows. Elderly people were accommodated on the family farm, either in a room in the farmhouse, or in a house of their own. An analysis of wills suggests that patriarchs had an average of five living children at the time they prepared their will.⁷³ Husbands generally attempted to ensure that when they died, their wife and daughters would be cared for. The 1861 will of William Fraser of West River serves as a typical example of how a mid-century Pictou farmer left his estate. Fraser left his farm to his two sons, who in return had to support and maintain their mother and sister 'as long as she (the sister) remained unmarried and remains on the premises performing the usual amount of labour that is generally expected of females living in a farm house'.⁷⁴ Many wills were conditional upon children providing for their mothers. In 1860 Thomas McPherson of Fisher's Grant bequeathed all of his property to his wife, with the provision that it be passed on to his son after the death of the mother only if the son undertook to live with his mother. Should he not do so, 'she is to have the privilege of giving it to whom she pleases'.⁷⁵

The recording of exact amounts of provisions, space and passage rights for widows within the family homestead is observed by a wide range of historians. Carolyn Merchant notes in her New England research that 'a widow received dower rights one third of the real estate for use during her remaining life and one third of the household goods forever' and that 'some widows' dowers spelled out provisions,

space and passage rights within the homestead'.⁷⁶ Likewise, Rosemary Ball notes that in 19th century Ontario, 'wills frequently itemised the minimal goods and services with which widows were to be provided: firewood; a carriage to transport her to church on Sunday; one new dress each year; laundry facilities; some pocket money; the bedstead, mattress, bureau, and rocking chair that had formed her dowry'.⁷² With a similar legal system to Nova Scotia, of colonial New Zealand, Jim McAloon refers to the 'subjection of widows,' when documenting the example of a husband leaving his wife 'a small annuity and the furniture in any two bedrooms and the drawing room'.⁷⁷

Frequently, wills in Pictou County stipulated that the rights given to women lapsed if the woman changed her marital status. Donald McKenzie of Three Brooks, Cariboo left his 'beloved wife' everything for the duration of her life, if she would rear, support, clothe and educate their son and not mortgage the land. McKenzie appeared aware that there was the possibility that his wife might remarry when he stipulated that: 'in the event of my widow marrying again before our son Donald McKenzie has attained the age of twenty one years and in the event of her and her husband continuing to reside on the said lands our son Donald gets one third of the land.' If his wife were to leave with a new husband, then the son was to get everything.⁷⁸ As Brian Osborne has pointed out, 'the paternalism of the age often resulted in the patriarch attempting to extend his influence over the conduct and behaviour of his family even beyond the grave'.⁷⁹

Not surprisingly, the wills of farmers show that land was the chief inheritance. Due to the patriarchal passing down of land, women were not as permanently attached to one place as men. As soon as women married they normally left the land on which they had been brought up and transferred to the family of another man. Hence, for widows, a change in marital status was often accompanied by a change in spatial location. For example, a certain Mrs Beckwith, of mid-19th century King's County, married, remarried after her first husband's death, and then after her second husband's death, once again a widow, she lived in various places; at Colonel Belcher's in Canning, Doctor Sheffield's in Saint John, and most of her time was spent with Mrs W. J. Higgins of Wolfville, a sister of her first husband.

However, in the towns where land holdings were smaller, wills were different. Although they still had a house and perhaps a business to pass on, town dwellers were free from the complications of the passing on of the farm. In the towns of Pictou County, women were more frequently being left significant property and possessions. For example, William Reid, a shoemaker in Pictou Town left his 'beloved wife' all of his personal property, 'together with all and singular my Real Estate of whatsoever kind and wheresoever situated'.⁸⁰ In the urban areas there also appears to have been less of a distinction between what was left to girls, and what was left to boys. It was also more common to leave everything to the wife, and let her divide it amongst the children. To the contrary, in rural areas daughters were often left 'one cow and five sheep each,' while sons received a half of the farm.⁸¹ However, the less prosperous the farm, often the smaller the distinctions between girls and boys. Only slightly biasing by gender, Nicholas P. Olding of Merigomish left bedding to his oldest daughter and apparel to his oldest son, with the rest of the children to 'share and share alike'.⁸²

Indicative of the dependent situation that elderly widows found themselves in, children were often charged with looking after their mother, and not vice versa. Most mid-century wills detailed what should be provided for widows. Women generally received the interior possessions of a house, bedsteads, blankets, furniture and private, indoor, moveable objects. Outdoor objects left to women were usually sheep or milch cows useful in aiding women's work. Men were left land or money, outdoor, public symbols, often less tangible and less moveable than the items left to women.

The most telling of provisions in wills was the dictate that women move locations upon the death of their husband. A common example was when a will left a woman 'her choice of a room in the house'

with certain goods to be left for her ‘during her virtuous widowhood.’ In 1856 James Berrie of Six Mile Brook states in his will that his ‘beloved wife’ Mary is to be provided yearly with three bushels of wheat, oat meal, fifteen bushels of potatoes, the use of one milch cow, ten pounds of sugar, wool, and half of the house to use.⁸³ It was common for wills to stipulate the space in a house and on the property which should be kept for widows. James Cameron of Merigomish stated that his wife was to ‘have the garden as long as she lives’.⁸⁴ If the daughter remained unmarried she was to receive the mother’s rooms and the garden. Hugh McIntosh of East River left his wife Isabella the kitchen and the back room adjoining it. She was also to have the use of half of the cellar and a piece of land for a garden, eight bushels of wheat, thirty of oats, forty of potatoes, two of barley, three milch cows, twelve sheep and one pig. As well, she was to get the use of the horse when her son did not need it.⁸⁵

The use of the horse was very important to the mobility of a widow, and appears to have been overlooked in the vast majority of wills when food provisions were being so clearly set out. Elderly women had to rely on help to be able to move around. This was recognised partially in the provision of the use of an animal or carriage, even at times stipulated not to interfere with peak seasons. In the will of Charles McKay of Rogers Hill the wife was to get ‘use of a horse and carriage as often as she may reasonably require’.⁸⁶

Few mid-19th century Pictou women left wills. The ones that exist are often markedly different from those written by men. Possessions and money were more often left to friends or benevolent church causes. This indicates that it was the wealthiest women who needed to make wills. The ‘widow of Malcolm McLeod’ left ‘to my friend Margaret McLeod wife of William McCall the estate and property which I own or may own at the time of my death both real and personal...’. She goes on to stipulate clearly that: ‘the said Margaret McLeod shall hold the said property to her separate use and without any interference of her said husband. And I make and appoint the said Margaret McLeod my sole executive of this my last will and testament’.⁸⁷ Kitty Whitefield of Kirkwood divided her money in her will between two people, and then left money to Saint James’s Church in Pictou. She stated that the money was ‘to be yearly applied in beautifying and keeping ‘imperfecticides’, the burying ground, surrounding and belonging to that church.’ Money was also given to the Ladies’ Benevolent Society and to the Masonic Lodge, ‘of which my dear husband was a brother.’ The money was to be spent on a handsome cushion and Bible in memory of him, ‘on the title page his name and date of death is to be illuminated.’ One hundred pounds was also given to Frances, wife of Walter Wade living near Philadelphia ‘in remembrance of a happy friendship’.⁸⁸

Widows and the law

Without a patriarch, widows could fall upon hard times. This is reflected in the prominence of widows in court records, where they appear at the extremes of society; either very wealthy, or very poor. They were often destitute, with dependent children, and had often broken the law in an attempt to maintain their living space, or simply to survive. Not a widow, but in almost the same situation (as a deserted woman who was married, but does not know whether her husband is now alive or dead), Mrs Mason was convicted of selling intoxicating liquor, with no license.⁸⁹

Disputes over rights to land brought widows into conflict with contending occupiers of property, as well as with the law. In the case of Mary Ann MacKay versus George Murray in 1861, in the West Branch River John, Ann MacKay, a widow and mother was accused of trespassing on the land on which

she was living. She had a small house on three or four acres, which she had inhabited with other female adults from her family. In her own defence, she stated that; ‘my mother is seventy nine years old. I am 35 years old. One of my sisters is a widow. She has one child—I have two children—I am a single woman’.⁹⁰ The women claimed that they had been forced off the land after George Murray threatened to destroy their house. MacKay claims to have approached Murray about staying on the land. ‘I went to Left (presumably Murray) once when he was in bed to protect us—he said I will take care of your mother—but I do not know what will become of you before morning’.⁹⁰ The women were threatened and eventually driven off their land because they could not prove title. The women’s vulnerable situation was not accommodated by the law.

Inadequacies in wills could contribute to trouble over the occupancy of houses. Briget Murdoch, of Pictou, a widow, was taken to court for illegally holding possession of a house after the termination of her tenancy. The new landlord was her brother-in-law, James Murdoch, who had come into the house through his brother, Briget Murdoch’s late husband. In her testimony, Briget asked for part of the house, the kitchen, to live in. A witness, James Johnston, testified that he had always understood that ‘she was to have the house, or that he (brother-in-law) was to provide for her another place’.⁹¹ James Murdoch had no such intentions to fulfil any family obligations. The law was a last resort and it was with the family institution that power really rested. Briget Murdoch had three children to care for and nowhere to live. Without the support of family there was nowhere for her to turn. She claims to have ‘never received one copper for the release of my dower’.⁹¹ Briget appears to have signed papers to sell the house, although she claimed that she had not done so.

Some widows coped with homelessness by squatting in places which had once belonged to their husbands, or where they had been ordered to leave. According to a book of recollections by Jane MacKay Rutherford, her great grandmother MacKenzie was left with six or seven children when her husband died of appendicitis. With no husband, no money, no land and so many children her solution was to squat.⁹²

Well, she simply squatted—squatted on any land that was not claimed, got some sort of dwelling on it, and did the best she could. When someone claimed the land, she just moved on and squatted again. By moving and squatting she made do. Somehow she got her family fed and educated.⁹²

Conclusion

This article has made visible another dimension of the historical geography of the Maritimes. It has centred one group of women in order to locate and explore an alternative scale at which a historical geography that includes women can be written. For women, widowhood was a distinct time of change and uncertainty. In a patriarchal system, without the support of a husband, widowhood involved the change of fitting in to a new relationship with the family, and sometimes moving home. Where widows did remain in the ‘family home’ their domain shrank, and they might be allotted an individual room, a cow, or a piece of furniture. Without the support of a male head of household, widows were dependent upon the goodwill of their families to provide for them. Men’s wills attempted to regulate widow’s behaviour, as well as ensure that families would care for widows. For young widows, widowhood was a potentially liberating position, but strong constraints, both practical and ideological meant that the young

widowed in Pictou County did not remain single. The high rates of marriage were as high for men who lost a spouse, indicating the great ideological and practical importance placed upon the institution of the family for both men and women. Attitudes towards old widows and old maids were ambiguous, with women being seen as both knowledgeable and ridiculous. In the later years of their lives widows were given a role which ideologically could cast them as wise. However, they were also ridiculed and much of their wisdom was discredited through labelling it as supernatural, when often it was built from years of experiences and observations. In a strongly patriarchal age, where women's life-courses were considered to be natural widowhood usually spelled difficulty. For elderly widows, failing health and dependency could mean ending life being treated like a child.

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