

## *Death in the Queen City: Clara Ford on Trial, 1895* By Parick Brode

Barrington Walker

Volume 99, Number 1, Spring 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065806ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065806ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this review

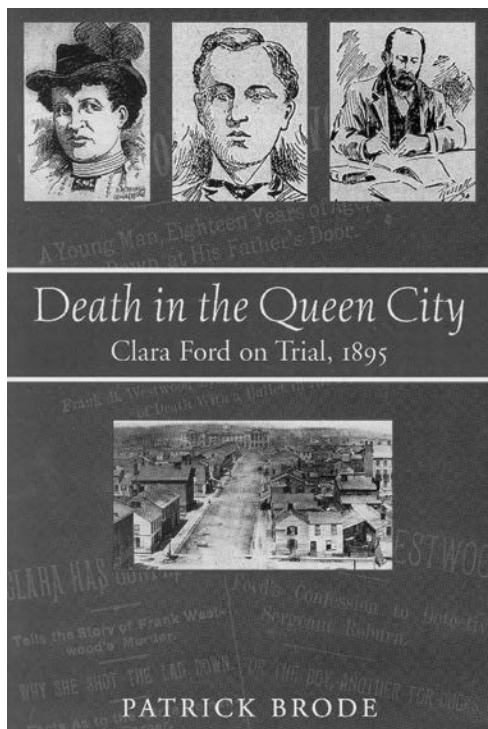
Walker, B. (2007). Review of [*Death in the Queen City: Clara Ford on Trial, 1895* By Parick Brode]. *Ontario History*, 99(1), 124–125.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065806ar>

## Death in the Queen City: Clara Ford on Trial, 1895

By Parick Brode. Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2005. xii+ 183pp. \$22.95 soft-cover. ISBN 1-897045-00.

*Death in the Queen City* recounts the spectacular nineteenth-century trial of Clara Ford, an African Canadian woman who was charged with the murder of Frank Westwood, a member of Toronto's wealthy elite, during the 1890s. Dressed as a man, Ford murdered Westwood in cold blood in the doorway of his posh Parkdale estate. Brode gives us a meticulously detailed yet lively account of this sensational case, beginning the tale with Westwood's violent death and following with the initial investigation into the murder, the inquest, Clara Ford's confession, her arrest and trial and, finally, her controversial acquittal.

The strength of *Death in the Queen City* lies in two key areas. First, Brode's thorough knowledge of the law is readily apparent. He is a lawyer and he effortlessly guides readers through legal terrain, carefully identifying key terms and concepts for the layperson. Secondly, Brode has produced a well-researched book, resting on a deep familiarity with primary material and an adequate base of secondary sources. He ably situates the Ford case in its rich context, the physical geography of Toronto and the city's prevalent social attitudes and customs. He paints a vivid picture of an emerging metropolis on the cusp of modernity and yet puritanical, where zealous municipal reformers relentlessly pursued vice. Within this setting lay Toronto's small Black community: spatially concentrated and economically marginalized, yet forming a political bloc of sufficient strength to attract the attention of White politicians who courted its votes during Emancipa-



tion Day celebrations.

According to local gossip Ford was either a foundling or the product of an illicit interracial union between a Black servant girl and the son of a "respectable white family." (p. 44) She was raised in poverty by the servant of the wealthy family upon whose doorstep she had been deposited as a child. She was never comfortable with her African ancestry and remained aloof from other members of the community during her childhood; she preferred to identify herself as Spanish. In her adult life, during sojourns in Syracuse, New York, and Chicago, Ford displayed a penchant for living as a man. The limited options for Black women at the beginning of the twentieth century compelled her to pass as a male in the work world and elsewhere, carrying a firearm, donning male clothing and adopting character traits considered masculine by the dominant culture. Clearly Clara

Ford existed outside normative categories of race and gender.

Brode argues that Ford gradually won the sympathies of a public that was enthralled with the gory details of this case. He writes about how she was portrayed as the victim of unfair interrogation in a police sweatbox. Many observers began to believe that there was at least the possibility that Ford had been insulted by Westwood. Such believers understood that murder was her only recourse in a society where men of Westwood's stature were rarely charged with rape. Another factor in Ford's defense arsenal, argues Brode, was the prevalence of ideas about Blacks' inability to control wild impulses born of racial instincts. These factors coalesced to secure Ford's acquittal, based on the principle that underdogs like her were entitled to the chivalrous protection extended to women and others whom male elites deemed less fortunate. Chivalry carried the day even though for the bulk of the trial the Crown was represented by one of the most formidable legal minds of the twentieth century, Britton Bath Osler. He tried without success to prove that Ford was Westwood's spurned lover.

Brode's work is eloquently written and easily accessible, and will appeal to a broad cross-section of readers. *Death in the Queen*

*City* popularizes a little known case in the annals of Canadian legal and social history, and by reading it Canadians will confront such unsettling aspects of our past as racial strife, class conflict and gender conflict. Academic specialists will not find much that is new here, however. The case of Clara Ford is well known among scholars in Canadian legal and social history, thanks to the earlier work of Carolyn Strange, to whom Brode is deeply indebted. His arguments largely defer to her interpretation and analysis. Brode's real contribution is in the several biographical gems he has unearthed about Ford. Her subaltern status, her criminality and her gender ambiguity each pose a significant challenge to historians of Black Canadian women who have traditionally trained their gazes on Ford's far more respectable sisters.

Barrington Walker,  
Queen's University

### **Bibliography:**

Carolyn Strange, "Wounded Womanhood and Dead Men: Chivalry and the Trials of Clara Ford and Carrie Davies," in Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 149-88.

## **The Canadian Niagara Power Company Story**

By Norman Ball. Erin, Ontario: The Boston Mills Press, 2005. 318 pp. \$49.95 hardcover. ISBN 1-55046-462-0.

**T**his book is both a history of a company that no longer exists and a story of an extraordinary work of engineering and architecture whose future is in doubt. Great credit goes to FortisOntario, a young company that has inherited both the Rankine

generating station built at Niagara Falls at the beginning of the twentieth century and the Canadian Niagara Power Company (CNPC) that built it. To commemorate the centenary of the first power out of the station in 1905, FortisOntario commissioned Norman Ball, a respected historian and scholar of matters technological, to produce a handsome illustrated book compiling many facets of local history, techni-